


Academic Coaching in Modern Online Education

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Chapter 1

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This chapter provides an in-depth summary of the transformative potential of using Academic Coaches in higher education, compared to teaching assistants, from a professor's perspective. As a university professor, this author offers extraordinary insight into the world of Academic Coaching through their experience working with Academic Coaches from Instructional Connections, LLC. Instructional Connections, LLC provides instructional support services to colleges and universities that offer online courses and degree programs by providing Academic Coaches. The narrative focuses on the Academic Coach-Professor and the Academic Coach-Student relationships. She explains the role Academic Coaches play in improving and enhancing the online learning experience. The author offers a compelling case for using Academic Coaches in higher education based on first-hand experience working with Academic Coaches and achieving notable academic results. The benefits and drawbacks are examined for using Academic Coaches versus teaching assistants and discusses the key competencies and metrics for success.

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This chapter per the authors is to address the topic of engagement and motivation. In online courses, the interaction of the faculty and coaches with students is critical. The aim of this chapter is to promote a “stellar” experience for the students. The root of best practices in online education is putting the students first. While this can sound daunting, in reality it means addressing some basic principles of teaching

along with the incorporation of faculty immediacy, faculty presence, engagement, and motivation principles. Online students want to know there is a “live” faculty/ coach available to interact with during the course. Online students do not want to feel as if teaching the course to oneself.

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Academic coaches are employed to provide individual interactions with some or all aspects of student’s experience in higher education. Online programs, especially those with accelerated course formats and/or large enrollments, may adopt academic coaches as part of an instructional team, particularly for assessing student work. The focus of this chapter is on the involvement of academic coaches in assessment in online university courses: how they are utilized, how they interact with students and other members of the instructional team, and how reliability and consistency of assessment may be ensured when employing coaches. The results of a student survey, as well as interviews with coaches and faculty who work with coaches, are described. Suggestions for best practices are provided, and include clarifying roles, establishing and maintaining clear communication, ensuring reliable and consistent assessment and feedback, and monitoring and evaluation of coaches as part of an institution’s continuous improvement efforts.

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The practitioners involved in this chapter have lived experience based upon academic coaching, professorship, and leadership. A unique perspective has been established due to the co-collaborative process. Currently, the practitioners are involved as instructional coaches and university professors, and an overview of the faculty-coach relationship is key with how longevity is needed in the instructional coaching and professor rapport with relational capital. Instructional coaches are key to student success, an analysis of literacy coaching and engagement for coaches and long-term universities who are employing coaches for larger classes is described as part of the lived experience case study. Some methods chosen to enhance the collaborative environment with instructional coaches are outlined. The underpinnings of instructional coaching and the importance of support and course enhancements is key in this model while ensuring relational capital with the professor and academic coach. The term instructional coach and academic coach are used interchangeably throughout this chapter.

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The chapter authors will bring insight into the collaborative process, providing the reader with a broader sense of how they can work collaboratively to ensure all students in the online classroom are getting their needs met. To maximize student learning opportunities, it is imperative the preparation and the academic team's purpose align with a student focused mission. Furthermore, the relationship between academic coach and lead instructor can be delicate and fragile. Developing a professional rapport is critical in a creating a trusting collaborative relationship. This chapter will focus on building collaborative rapport between lead faculty and academic coaches. Additionally, the chapter discusses collaboration ideas such as (a) treating academic coaches as equals, (b) obtaining professional input from academic coaches, (c) student engagement opportunities, and (d) best practices for initial meeting. The chapter authors believe a true collaborative partnership begins with a team relationship, thus providing students an engaging and dynamic virtual or online learning experience.

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University, USA

Online public health education is growing rapidly, driven by demand for flexible learning and the need to prepare professionals for complex health challenges. This expansion highlights the importance of innovative teaching models and strong support systems. Faculty design rigorous curricula and integrate new research, while coaches provide individualized support, motivation, and retention. When these roles align, intellectual rigor meets holistic guidance, advancing equity and outcomes. This chapter examines faculty-coach collaboration through constructivist and Community of Inquiry frameworks: faculty build cognitive and teaching presence; coaches foster social presence and engagement. Shared platforms, coordinated interventions, and quality improvement cycles enhance performance and persistence. Evidence shows collaboration yields timely support and clearer paths to success, though challenges of miscommunication, role ambiguity, and institutional barriers persist. Stronger frameworks, development, and recognition of coaching are needed.

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This chapter explores the role of embedded academic coaches in online nursing education, focusing on their impact on student success, engagement, and mentoring relationships. Using Nevada State University's RN-BSN program as a case study, it highlights how academic coaches enhance learning through timely feedback, emotional support, and collaboration with faculty. Faculty perspectives and best practices for communication, relationship-building, and instructional alignment are examined, grounded in the principles of Caring Science. A featured section on The Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying course illustrates how coaches model vulnerability, use heart-centered language, and create emotionally safe spaces for reflection. Through this course, the chapter demonstrates how coaches support transformative learning and help students engage with complex end-of-life care concepts. Analysis of student evaluations from 2020–2024 reveals recurring themes in the student-coach experience, including responsiveness, respect, and meaningful support, along with opportunities for continued growth.

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Karen Vietz, Northern Kentucky University, USA

The purpose of this chapter is to build on the faculty-coach relationship through communication. The aim is to outline how effective communication is the foundation of relationships and is vital for the success of faculty and coach collaboration. As faculty and coaches collaborate effectively, this promotes student learning, satisfaction, and positive outcomes. The chapter outlines best practices for the faculty when communicating with coaches, along with recommended communication strategies for coaches when working with both faculty and students. A dedicated section includes real-world scenarios to illustrate potential communication challenges and provide opportunities to apply the concepts discussed.

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This chapter aims to contribute to the existing body of research on faculty-academic coach collaboration in online education. It begins by exploring the current literature surrounding the concepts of caring, connectedness, and belonging in online learning environments. Following, strategies will be presented for successfully leveraging faculty-academic coach collaboration to cultivate an online teaching and learning environment grounded in human caring and one that promotes student connectedness and belonging. Finally, a case study will be presented that illustrates the real-world application of these strategies by a faculty-academic coach collaborative team in their ongoing journey to design, facilitate, and co-learn in an evolving online interdisciplinary course grounded in caring science.

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This chapter explores student, faculty, and online academic coaches' perceptions of academic coaching in large online courses at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), one of the nation's largest Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs). Our goal was to examine their experiences to gain insights into the effectiveness of academic coaching and identify areas for improvement. The results have implications for institutions looking to enhance student support services and promote student success in online learning environments.

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<i>Michael McDaniel, Louisiana State University, Shreveport, USA</i>	

Academic coaches can serve as guides and mentors to students, helping them develop the skills and strategies necessary to succeed in their academic endeavors. While the benefits of academic coaching are well documented in this volume and elsewhere, there is still much to learn about the most effective ways to utilize coaching resources. This chapter will explore research findings on academic coaching, describe the results from a sample of graduate business students who have experienced

academic coaching, and then describe the results of faculty interviews detailing their experiences and recommended best practices when using academic coaches in multiple disciplines within higher education.

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Lee-Ann Oros, Arkansas State University, USA

Margaret Campbell, Arkansas State University, USA

Hollie Goodson, Arkansas State University, USA

This chapter will examine the best practices and overall expectations of instructors when using academic coaches in an online educational setting. Academic Coaches have a unique role in the success of online learners. According to Allen and Seaman (2017), enrollment in online graduate programs has increased steadily, prompting institutions to implement scalable support models, including the use of academic coaches. A more recent study in 2023 by Champlain College Online revealed that 84% of U.S. adults believe employers are more accepting of online degrees today than before the pandemic because most feel online is more reputable than it was pre-pandemic (Coffey, 2023). According to Peters, Burton, and Rich (2023), the pandemic prompted a reevaluation of academic practices, so universities hired more academic coaches to enhance student success and retention in the face of challenges posed by remote learning and disruptions to traditional educational models.

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Jessica M. Sanchez, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA

As online education grows, instructional teams with academic coaches have become increasingly valuable in higher education. Coaches play crucial roles in fostering student engagement, supporting active learning, and delivering timely feedback, particularly in large online courses. Recent mixed-method research examined effective coach integration into online instructional teams by analyzing faculty characteristics, behaviors, preferences, attitudes, and knowledge. The study identified successful strategies and best practices for faculty-coach collaboration, providing actionable insights for instructors. This research expands our understanding of how team-based

approaches can enhance educational quality in virtual environments, contributing meaningfully to ongoing discussions about online teaching effectiveness and the strategic deployment of academic coaches. The findings suggest that academic coach integration creates more responsive learning environments while distributing instructional responsibilities to maximize student support and outcomes in the online educational environment.

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Foreword

Abegglen et al. (2023) challenged us to consider modes of teaching that are less individualistic; as those authors stated, in our work as faculty teachers, “collegiality has power and value.”

Those authors invited us to think more deeply in the face of an educational environment marked by “complexity and pressing challenges that demand authentic conversations and collective actions.” The talk here is of teaching as an act of co-creation, and a view of instruction that considers the role of academic coaches as partners in the work of faculty. However, the argument does not stop there; they also argued, implicitly and explicitly, that teachers themselves grow and change in part due to these meaningful relationships based on connection and mutual empathy.

A collective approach to instruction challenges us to think about expanded views of what it means to be a faculty member as part of a teaching team. Faculty immediacy and faculty presence count, in the environments discussed in this book. Student engagement and student motivation are critical components for the teaching collective to not only consider but to foster.

There is little doubt that the role of coaches in modern higher education is intertwined with the rapid growth of online learning. As cited in these pages, academic coaching is a booming phenomenon in U.S. higher education today, in part due to a nine-fold increase in online class offerings in the United States between 2000 and 2016, even prior to the pandemic.

To our great advantage, the dynamic and creative online environment typically incorporates an instructional team approach, which helps to meet challenges of high-quality instructional design, as well as larger enrollment in some programs. However, as the authors in this work note, there is an increasingly blurry line between instruction and what is generally termed “student support.” Higher education is rethinking traditional notions of instruction to include both affective support, as well as a range of services, to scaffold both learners and online learners in a complex educational environment. Academic coaches, in this view, are not only part of an instructional team but, rather, a key element in a broader instructional support team.

With this mix of newer philosophies and a broader view of the teaching tasks, it is no surprise that there is a strong need for research involving the multidimensional teams of academics collaborating, co-leading, and co-creating instruction and learning, cast broadly. This book provides a starting research base specifically on the role of the coach.

And it is no surprise that online academic coaching can provide just this mix of teaching collegiality and co-creation, tied to a view of learning that includes content, as well as a holistic and interactive approach to student engagement and motivation. Over the past two decades, research into pedagogical approaches that promote student engagement have been heavily focused in the world of online teaching, where academic coaching has now grown as the application of this progressive philosophy and practice. The growth of online learning has developed and valued the role of instructional design, and we have seen strong growth in the profession of the instructional designer. It is only appropriate that online learning today also now gives us a rich research and applied body of work around academic coaching.

As a profession, we owe a debt of gratitude to Robert Williams, Harriet Watkins and their authorship team here, for starting us down the path of increased understanding of academic coaching. These are important and timeless conversations, collected here for us all to re-think and re-imagine teaching, learning, and the multiple roles that go into a modern instructional collective. After reading this work, you will not be the same teacher, coach, mentor, or learner that you were at the start, which is a lofty goal for any book in our educational sphere.

It is also refreshing to read a work that highlights the role and roles that humans will play in our educational future. In a time when our focus is increasingly taken up by technology and artificial intelligence-centric discussions, Robert, Harriet and their authors ask us to focus on the educational reality at hand: How do we, as educators, utilize technology in our practice and then share that practice with not only our learners but also with the generation of educators who will come after us? I can think of no greater theme for educational discussions today.

Pete Smith

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REFERENCES

Abegglen, S., Burns, T., & Sinfield, S. (2023). *Collaboration in higher education*. Bloomsbury Publishing. DOI: 10.5040/9781350334083

Preface

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the escalating demand for online learning. This shift, accelerated by a desire for flexible education and enrollment scaling necessitates innovative approaches to student support and instructional design. Traditional teaching models, often ill-equipped to handle large enrollments and the unique challenges of digital environments, are being reevaluated. In this evolving context, the embedded academic coach has emerged as a vital, transformative figure, reshaping the roles of faculty and administrators alike. This book, designed for academics and administrators in higher education, provides a comprehensive exploration of the role, value, and best practices of academic coaching. It offers a crucial framework for institutions seeking to not only sustain enrollment and improve retention but also to ensure meaningful and high-quality virtual learning experiences in an increasingly competitive educational market.

This book delves into the multifaceted world of embedded academic coaching, detailing how these professionals serve as more than just support staff; they are active, indispensable partners in the instructional process. By bridging the gap between content delivery and student success, academic coaches enhance instructional effectiveness, foster student engagement, and ultimately contribute to improved academic outcomes. The text addresses both the theoretical underpinnings and the practical applications of this model, presenting evidence-based strategies for implementation. It is a guide for those who wish to understand and leverage the full potential of academic coaches to build a cohesive, supportive, and effective digital learning environment.

The following chapters are organized to provide a holistic view of embedded academic coaching, from its foundational concepts to its practical implementation

and ethical considerations. Each chapter contributes a unique piece to the overall narrative, collectively demonstrating the transformative impact of this model in online higher education.

Chapter 1: The Case for Academic Coaches

This chapter makes a compelling argument for integrating academic coaches into online learning environments. It contrasts academic coaches with traditional teaching assistants, highlighting their distinct professional expertise, rigorous training, and holistic approach to student engagement. Academic coaches are presented as seasoned professionals with advanced degrees and extensive experience, capable of providing personalized support that reduces faculty workload and fosters deep student relationships. In the context of online higher education, where student success and faculty support are paramount, this chapter underscores how academic coaching is a key competency for institutions aiming to improve retention and create meaningful virtual learning experiences. This foundational chapter is essential because it establishes the unique value proposition of academic coaches, distinguishing their role and contributions from more conventional instructional support models.

Chapter 2: The Interplay of Engagement and Motivation

This chapter examines the crucial relationship between engagement and motivation as central drivers of student success in online and hybrid learning. It explores how these concepts, viewed through the lens of self-determination theory, are not isolated but mutually reinforcing, shaping student outcomes through behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. For online higher education, which often struggles with student isolation and digital fatigue, this chapter is critical as it provides practical strategies for educators through the use of academic coaches to foster student agency and persistence. The importance of this chapter lies in its focus on the fundamental psychological drivers of learning, which are often overlooked but are essential for creating a dynamic and effective coaching environment.

Chapter 3: Academic Coaches and Student Assessment

Focusing on the use of academic coaches in assessment, this chapter provides a detailed analysis of their role in online courses, particularly those with large enrollments and accelerated formats. It draws on a mixed-methods study to show that students find coaches timely and helpful in providing feedback and guidance. For online higher education, where timely feedback is a significant challenge, this chapter highlights how coaches can reduce faculty workload and improve the qual-

ity of the student experience. It is a vital component of the book because it provides empirical evidence of the concrete, positive impact of academic coaches on a core educational function: assessment.

Chapter 4: The Professor-Coach Partnership

This chapter delves into the relational dynamics between a university professor and an instructional coach, framing their collaboration as a partnership built on relational capital. It argues that with the increasing demand for online programs, a cohesive relationship between faculty and coaches is crucial for student retention and success. This is particularly relevant in the online environment where rapport can be difficult to establish. The chapter's inclusion is important because it emphasizes that the efficacy of the coaching model is not just about logistics but about human relationships, providing a case study to illustrate how relational support can mitigate student skepticism and ensure a positive learning experience.

Chapter 5: Collaborative Teaching Models

Drawing on principles from special education, this chapter explores the benefits of instructional support synergy between instructors and academic coaches to meet the diverse needs of a growing student population. It proposes that treating coaches as equal partners, based on theoretical frameworks like Relational-Cultural Theory and connectivism, is key to success. In the context of online learning, where diverse student populations require flexible and adaptive instructional support, this chapter is particularly relevant. Its importance lies in providing a theoretical and practical framework for instructors to create more dynamic and collaborative teaching environments, thereby improving student outcomes and professional satisfaction.

Chapter 6: Fostering Synergy in Public Health Education

This chapter examines the critical collaboration between faculty and academic coaches within the context of online public health education. It argues that while faculty are content experts, coaches are vital for student engagement and retention. In a field like public health, where the demands for flexible and innovative learning are high, this chapter provides a framework for building a cohesive educational team. It is essential to the book because it illustrates how the academic coaching model can be applied and customized to a specific, high-demand discipline, showing how a synergistic partnership can lead to deeper student engagement and a broader impact on the field.

Chapter 7: A Model of Caring in Nursing Education

This chapter presents a specific case study from an urban university's school of nursing, detailing a strategic model that integrates academic coaches into its online RN-BSN program. This model, rooted in Jean Watson's theory of human caring, addresses faculty bandwidth limitations and supports a growing student population. In the context of online nursing education, which requires emotionally supportive learning environments, this chapter is highly relevant. It is a crucial inclusion because it provides a proven, scalable model for instructional support, demonstrating how academic coaching can be successfully implemented in a high-stakes, caring-centric discipline.

Chapter 8: The Art of Effective Communication

This chapter addresses the paramount importance of effective communication in online educational environments, specifically that of faculty with academic coaches. It outlines best practices for communication between faculty and coaches, as well as between coaches and students, emphasizing consistency, empathy, and clear expectations. Given that online learners are often adult learners juggling multiple responsibilities, and feelings of disconnection are common, this chapter is indispensable. Its importance lies in providing concrete, actionable strategies for building strong professional and student relationships, which are foundational for collaboration and student success in any digital setting.

Chapter 9: Cultivating Community and Belonging

This chapter explores a faculty-academic coach collaboration model designed to foster a sense of caring, connectedness, and belonging among students in large online classes. Drawing on concepts from caring science and the Community of Inquiry framework, it details strategies for humanizing the online classroom and reducing feelings of anonymity. This chapter is vital to the book's purpose as it addresses one of the most significant challenges of online education: the potential for isolation. It demonstrates how a collaborative partnership can intentionally design and guide social and cognitive processes to build a supportive, caring learning environment.

Chapter 10: Perceptions of students, faculty and academic coaches

This chapter presents the findings of a mixed-methods study on the perceptions of students, faculty, and academic coaches regarding academic coaching in large

online courses. The research, conducted at a Hispanic-serving institution, reveals overwhelmingly positive feedback from all three groups regarding the value and effectiveness of academic coaching. This chapter fits into online higher education by providing crucial empirical evidence that academic coaching is a replicable and effective support service. It is a core component of this book because it offers a multi-perspective view of the coaching model, validating its benefits while also identifying challenges that can inform future implementation.

Chapter 11: Best Practices for Success

This chapter explores the effectiveness of academic coaches through a study of graduate business students and faculty, identifying key institutional and individual best practices. The findings indicate a significant positive relationship between coach-initiated contact and academic performance, and that coaches are most effective at providing feedback and grading. This chapter's relevance to online higher education is profound, as it provides a clear roadmap for universities and professors to enhance coaching programs. Its importance lies in offering concrete, actionable recommendations for optimizing the academic coaching model, ensuring its effectiveness in helping students achieve their academic goals.

Chapter 12: Ethical Responsibilities of Academic Coaches

This chapter delves into the ethical responsibilities and positive character traits expected of highly effective academic coaches, with a specific focus on ethical grading and communication. It emphasizes the importance of objective, unbiased assessments and the ethical use of technology. In the rapidly evolving world of online education, where technology and large-scale assessment are prevalent, this chapter is essential. Its inclusion in this book is critical because it highlights the professional and ethical standards that must be upheld to ensure the integrity of the coaching model and to build trust among students and faculty.

Chapter 13: Faculty Integration and Collaborative Strategies

This chapter addresses a notable gap in existing literature by detailing the specific strategies faculty members use to integrate academic coaches into their online instructional teams. It presents a mixed-methods study that identifies key themes related to collaboration, including coach selection, communication, and grading. The findings highlight the significant benefit of increased faculty time and the primary risk of grading inconsistencies. This chapter is fundamental to the book because it provides a deep dive into the practical realities of faculty-coach collaboration,

offering valuable evidence for developing best practices and quality standards for large-scale online courses.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this book is more than a collection of research and case studies; it is a collaborative guide for reshaping the future of online education. By providing a comprehensive overview of embedded academic coaching, it equips academics and administrators with the knowledge and tools needed to implement a model that enhances student success, improves instructional efficiency, and creates a more connected and caring learning environment.

The contributions to the field are twofold: first, it provides a robust, evidence-based exploration of the academic coaching model that moves beyond anecdotal observations to empirical findings. Additionally, this chapter offers a practical manual for institutional leaders and faculty members on how to successfully integrate and manage these vital partnerships. This book is a call to action, urging institutions to reconsider traditional teaching roles and embrace innovative, collaborative models that will ensure the quality and sustainability of online education for years to come.

Acknowledgment

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Introduction

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in post-secondary education have been studied over the past 50 years, establishing a large body of research into the efficacy, experiences, perceptions of students and faculty, roles, efficiencies in terms of time and costs, and methods of GTAs in traditional and nontraditional programs and courses; however, as distance education technology has become widespread over the past 20 years, there has been a rapid rise in the number of online degree programs, necessitating changes to traditional, in-class teaching. The transition to online learning environments has introduced significant challenges that traditional GTA and coaching models are ill equipped to address. In virtual settings, the lack of physical presence often contributes to student isolation, decreased motivation, and a weakened sense of community.

While conventional GTA frameworks have demonstrated effectiveness in face-to-face contexts, they fall short in meeting the complex demands of online education. Richards and Thompson (2023) highlighted that the direct application of traditional instructional models to online platforms reveals critical shortcomings, particularly in the areas of student engagement monitoring, individualized feedback, and responsiveness to diverse learner needs. Although it is commonly presumed that GTAs possess both content expertise and pedagogical competence within their assigned disciplines (Burke et al., 2005; Zehnder, 2016), many undertake teaching responsibilities with minimal formal training in effective instructional strategies (Austin et al., 2009; Golde & Dore, 2001). This gap is especially problematic in online environments, which require not only foundational teaching skills but also advanced capabilities in personalization, technological fluency, flexible instructional design, and the cultivation of virtual engagement and community.

ONLINE PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

The technological advances that allowed for online distance education opened the door to students who otherwise might not have had the time, means, and ability to seek degrees. With increasingly large student populations, traditional colleges and universities discovered the need for more robust support systems to handle increased faculty workload and to achieve outcomes commensurate with the standards of the traditional classroom. For over 25 years, online program management companies (OPMs) have worked with higher education. Their emergence dates to around 1996 (Kowalewski & Hortman, 2020).

OPMs strategically positioned themselves to help fulfill higher education institutions meet their goals in terms of revenue and efficiencies. As online programs experienced rapid growth, OPMs gave online degrees great mass appeal through marketing and through significantly shortening the timeline to a degree. The central idea was to increase enrollment and matriculate more students through these online programs while providing effective management of online classrooms to ensure high quality, cost-effectiveness, and scalability. This growth also revealed the need to provide wraparound support services. OPM partnerships with traditional higher education have been debated for years (Schwartz, 2025) with both favorable and unfavorable impressions of its usefulness in higher education. Traditional colleges and universities have weighed costs, benefits, accreditation concerns, faculty concerns, and many other issues related to teaching and graduating larger numbers of students—particularly in academic areas serving programs with significant shortages of practitioners in the field. For example, OPMs have focused on institutions that offered online nursing programs during a time when there was a nursing shortage in the United States, finding great success in providing well-educated nurses who met all nursing education standards and practices.

Many traditional universities and solely online institutions took traditional classroom faculty–student ratios and adapted them to online asynchronous learning, negating any cost savings and scalability improvements. The practice of using GTAs is highly scalable, given that one full-time faculty member can teach increasingly large student populations within courses and course sections with multiple teaching assistants serving groups of 25 students or more. Besides the marketing push to garner high enrollments, OPMs initial wraparound services have included instructional design support and academic coaching, which examined traditional GTA roles and adapted them to online platforms and pedagogy. One OPM named GTAs “academic coaches.”

As noted above, traditional GTA responsibilities include teaching curriculum, grading assignments, and answering questions. It is not uncommon to have GTAs teach lower-level academic courses in traditional settings. Academic coaches can

fulfill all traditional GTA roles in an online asynchronous classroom environment, and because coaches are experts in their fields, with degrees and years of experience, they are often asked questions pertaining to job opportunities and practice in their field. Use of an academic coach allows primary faculty to focus on curriculum, teaching, and outcomes in online courses that have higher student volume.

THE ACADEMIC COACH

The academic coaching model was considered an innovative solution to student support because the model embedded previously degreed individuals within the online course itself to support students and assist faculty with common tasks associated with teaching. Over time, many higher education institutions found that the need for academic coaches did not need to be tethered to an OPM along with the costs of these partnership academic programs and services. Program leaders and faculty discovered that faculty need support regardless of the enrollment size of a course.

The core benefits of the academic coaching model are support, flexibility, and cost effectiveness. Rotar (2022) conducted a systematic review of 28 empirical studies on effective support strategies and found that embedding structured support systems was particularly impactful in online courses. In large online courses, students cannot be assisted in a timely manner by a single faculty member.

An important issue in online adjunct role perception is the ability of traditional faculty to make the leap to online pedagogy and learning platforms. Jacobs (2008) found that faculty at traditional universities were reluctant to add online courses to their course load, citing the level of rewards and support, concerns about educational effectiveness and cheating by students, and a college's degree of clarity about its vision as constraints or impediments to teaching online. Using phenomenological research techniques to examine best practices for online teaching, Bailey (2008) outlined nine practices that predominantly came to light in self-reporting of online adjunct faculty: timeliness, organization, relationships, technology, engagement, flexibility, expectations, communication, and the understanding of the differences between traditional and online course delivery. In another study that examined faculty attitudes about the shift from traditional to online delivery, Awalt (2003) posited that online teaching requires "different instructional strategies," along with the knowledge, skills, and tools online faculty required to better understand and thrive in the online delivery platform (pp. 4–8).

Using a qualitative study and the Distance Education Learning Environment Survey, Dolloph (2007) found that student interaction and collaboration were critical components of the psychological environment needed for online courses, and recognized the need to incorporate more interaction and collaboration in future course

design and delivery. Hu and Meyen (2011) used experiential learning qualitative design and a constructiveness theoretical perspective, identifying three primary themes: reasons that faculty transition to online courses, challenges of faculty on online course context, and faculty frustrations with online support mechanisms. Hu and Meyen (2011) suggested future research by recommending giving more attention to online education issues, understanding online student characteristics, studying online instructor needs, and becoming more knowledgeable on the support of online learning and the unique social interactions that take place in online pedagogy.

By embedding human support within these courses, the academic coach builds rapport with students, reduces isolation, and fosters a collaborative online learning environment. This connection helps students make sense of the coursework and facilitates enriching discussions.

Williams (2012), in a groundbreaking study on online GTAs in a nursing course, found that students perceived GTAs as “graders, mediators, jugglers, communicators, explainers and mentors” among other perceived roles (p. 67). Students perceived online GTAs as peers, as opposed to faculty. Because online GTAs were practitioners in the field of nursing, they were perceived by students to be juggling the demands of everyday living and learning that students experienced. This characteristic distinguishes the GTA model from purely academic support roles.

Faculty members can easily be overwhelmed with grading a larger number of assignments and providing quality feedback to each student. Academic coaches assist in handling teaching assistant administrative tasks to allow faculty to focus on curriculum and teaching. Academic coaches provide flexible support at the course level by grading assignments, responding to student inquiries, answering curriculum questions, and relating the course objectives to the program field of study. Moreover, academic coaches reinforce the academic goals and objectives laid out by the instructor of record in each course.

Most traditional colleges and universities require that academic coaches be professionals in a field with a minimum of a master’s degree. They must demonstrate extensive experience in their discipline. They must have proficiency in navigating learning management systems and online learning best practices. Clear communication protocols are in place to ensure that academic coaches adhere to all institutional performance guidelines. Program leaders and faculty often use pre-course conference calls with the instructor of record for syllabus and course expectation review. Academic coaches often participate in weekly faculty check-ins to facilitate ongoing communication on student issues and assignments. Measures are in place to ensure adherence to faculty guidance. Feedback is collected from faculty at the end of each course to ensure ongoing performance improvement.

Academic coaches are recruited nationally with flexibility for regional/niche populations. Coaches who apply for the position undergo a rigorous online screen-

ing process. They are vetted through this process for their ability to communicate effectively, lead others, and provide meaningful and timely feedback. Background checks along with FERPA training, are completed to ensure university accreditation standards.

Once the vetting and training are completed, a potential academic coach is placed within a qualified coach pool. When a request is received from an institution, the resumes of qualified coaches are sent to the institution for the faculty to choose the coach who best meets the qualifications for the discipline they are teaching in. This important step ensures that an academic coach will meet the needs of the students and the faculty member teaching the course.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this book is to provide evidence of the applicability of the embedded academic coach model and the effectiveness of the academic coach model for asynchronous learning in university online programs and courses. This book delves into how the academic coaching model is beneficial—and even essential—to the enhancement of online learning and support, providing a comprehensive framework for universities and their online programs. The benefits of this type of support in online courses, as Armstrong et al. (2021) discussed, are amplified when the added support brings real-world professional experience. Bridging the gap between theory and practice, the professional experience of an academic coach is especially valuable in online settings where direct interaction with the discipline's context might be limited.

The enhanced student engagement, sense of belonging, and improved learning outcomes noted in various studies (e.g., Clements et al., 2022) are facilitated in an especially effective way by a teaching assistant who can offer practical, industry-relevant insights. The “competence” and “content facilitation” that Liu et al. (2022) highlighted as crucial for online teaching are inherently stronger when the teaching assistant (academic coach) has hands-on professional experience in the discipline. The connection between content facilitation and the competence of academic coaches can be understood through their role and function. Academic coaches support faculty by helping students to engage with course content, to deepen their understanding, and to connect learning to real-world applications. Academic coaches manage discussion threads, respond to student inquiries, and assist with grading—activities that help facilitate content delivery and comprehension.

Academic coaches are required to have a minimum of a master’s degree as well as relevant professional experience, ensuring they are competent in their subject areas.

They undergo a rigorous screening and training process, including orientation on learning management systems, online education principles, and role expectations.

The effectiveness of content facilitation is directly tied to the competence of the academic coach. A coach's subject matter expertise and instructional skills enable them to guide students meaningfully, clarify complex topics, and foster academic growth.

Competent academic coaches enhance the learning experience by reinforcing faculty goals and ensuring that students remain engaged, supported, and accountable. In essence, academic coach competence empowers them to facilitate content effectively, which in turn supports student success and retention in online learning environments.

This work aims to expound the multifaceted dimensions of academic coaching and its demonstrable benefits to faculty and students alike. Academic coaching empowers students not only to master disciplinary knowledge and matriculate through their chosen educational programs, but also to cultivate the collaborative proficiencies and practical competencies required for successful engagement within their chosen professional domains. The following chapters will outline the benefits, challenges, and strategies involved in academic coaching in an online program or course in institutions across the country.

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Chapter 1

The Unique Case for the Use of Academic Coaches in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an in-depth summary of the transformative potential of using Academic Coaches in higher education, compared to teaching assistants, from a professor's perspective. As a university professor, this author offers extraordinary insight into the world of Academic Coaching through their experience working with Academic Coaches from Instructional Connections, LLC. Instructional Connections, LLC provides instructional support services to colleges and universities that offer online courses and degree programs by providing Academic Coaches. The narrative focuses on the Academic Coach-Professor and the Academic Coach-Student relationships. She explains the role Academic Coaches play in improving and enhancing the online learning experience. The author offers a compelling case for using Academic Coaches in higher education based on first-hand experience working with Academic Coaches and achieving notable academic results. The benefits and drawbacks are examined for using Academic Coaches versus teaching assistants and discusses the key competencies and metrics for success.

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INTRODUCTION

Online learning in higher education has grown and evolved significantly over the last 10 years. According to Schwartz (2023):

As of 2024, approximately 85% of higher education institutions in the United States offer online courses or full online degree programs. This widespread adoption reflects a significant shift towards virtual learning in response to evolving student needs and technological advancements. Furthermore, about two-thirds of colleges are actively expanding their online offerings to meet increasing student demand and sustain enrollment. (p. 1)

This level of growth emphasizes that the need for personalized, direct interactions with students and faculty is more critical to the learning experience than ever before. Innovations in technology and technology-based learning tools enable students to acquire and retain knowledge through various media. As a result, faculty must discover and implement creative ways to support students to ensure learning objectives are met; students demonstrate the application of the learning concepts and theories, and, more importantly, they are cognizant of and able to accommodate a variety of learning styles and needs.

The popularity of online learning degree programs in higher education continues to grow and prosper. According to Westbrook (2006), “As organizations across the world attempt to maintain a competitive edge in global business and education markets, the demand for online courses is steadily increasing” (p. 471). Faculty and administrators realize it is becoming increasingly challenging to keep students inspired by and attracted to learning online. Therefore, they must discover more sophisticated and innovative ways to keep students engaged and interested in this learning format. Because of this phenomenon, faculty has to rethink their approach to designing, developing, and delivering synchronous and asynchronous online learning courses. Additionally, increasing class sizes, abridged class durations, and the specialized knowledge, skills, and expertise required for academic success in online learning environments are all conditions in which academic coaching engagements can produce notable results. Ideally, the information in this chapter will enable decision-makers and stakeholders in higher education to realize the benefits and value that academic coaches bring to their organizations and faculty.

THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE ACADEMIC COACH

Academic coaches are educational professionals who provide faculty and students in online college and university courses with support and assistance in the virtual

classroom. They are a unique intervention resource that focuses on personal and academic growth in relation to the students' broader goals through both formal and informal support in a variety of settings (Brock, 2008). They are seasoned professionals with more than 10 years of experience working in or with higher education institutions in capacities such as administrators, faculty, teaching assistants, or consultants. These professionals hold master's and doctorate degrees from accredited universities and actively work and teach in their related fields of discipline. Many have published manuscripts. Moreover, they have extensive knowledge and experience with various online learning platforms and technology-based learning tools and approaches.

Academic coaches ensure learning objectives are met and students achieve anticipated course outcomes successfully. They accomplish this by focusing on three key areas regarding students: ensure the learning experience is results-driven and learner-centric, establish a clear connection to the learning theories and concepts, and foster an environment where the learning experience is enjoyable. In addition to focusing on students and their online learning experience, academic coaches lighten the faculty's workload by assuming many of the daily tasks of classroom operation, such as grading assignments, interacting with students, addressing issues of concern, monitoring discussion boards, and other tasks. The academic coach's focus regarding faculty is to meet or exceed the support and assistance expectations outlined by faculty during the academic coaching engagement and apply a teaching philosophy and approach that ensure student success.

Academic coaches are a vital part of the higher education ecosystem. Their support and expertise are invaluable in addressing the critical challenges of the virtual learning experience. Academic scholars purport that the most vital challenges in the online learning environment are the lack of personalized learning support, inadequate student accountability and motivation, the need for confidence building, the need to bridge educational gaps, and insufficient time management skills.

Personalized Learning Support

The learning experience in a virtual classroom setting is challenging compared to that of the traditional classroom setting. In the conventional classroom setting, the instructional format is primarily teacher-centric, and professors benefit from real-time student interactions. Face-to-face, real-time student interaction is significantly diminished in a virtual classroom setting. According to Demski (2012), "Educators have known for some time now that a one-size-fits-all approach does

not rise to the level of student engagement and academic success that schools strive to achieve” (p. 32).

In the online learning environment, students have particular learning styles, needs, and challenges that differ from those in the traditional classroom setting. For example, they may prefer auditory learning versus visual learning. They need social interactions with other students. Time management may be an issue in a self-paced environment. Professors do their best to accommodate and address these concerns. However, in the virtual classroom, they face unique limitations, such as large class sizes and abridged class durations, which impede their ability to provide adequate real-time interactions (generally conducted through Zoom sessions, emails, or phone calls). Additionally, administrative tasks, multiple class sessions, meetings, and other operational tasks further increase professors' workloads.

The role and responsibilities of the academic coach are designed to address this issue. The coaches proactively engage and connect with students from the start of and throughout class. Through their specialized training and experience, they can identify students who will require extra assistance and support and those considered “at risk” because they have fallen behind in completing their assignments. For example, students who are new to the online learning environment (often those who return to school after an extensive hiatus) may require extra assistance and support.

To accommodate these and similar scenarios, the academic coach will work collaboratively with the student to develop a personalized learning plan. The aim of the plan is for the academic coach to ensure students keep on track with their assignments, respond to inquiries, address any issues and concerns, and clarify assignment instructions. The learning plan can be formal or informal, depending on the student's preference. A formal plan may consist of check-in meetings at regular, set intervals (e.g., weekly or biweekly). An informal plan may include ad hoc check-in meetings and gentle reminders that an upcoming assignment is due.

The learning support plan is an excellent tool to proactively and effectively ensure a student's success in class. Experience shows that when students get behind in their studies for more than two weeks in a six-week accelerated graduate or postgraduate class, the likelihood of them catching up on the missing assignments is low. In extreme cases, they may drop out of the class and repeat it at a later time. Additionally, allowing the academic coach to manage the plan reduces the professor's workload by alleviating the need to address significant student inquiries and issues. More importantly, the plan is a student-centric approach that enhances and promotes the quality and frequency of the professor's interaction with students in the virtual learning environment.

Student Accountability and Motivation

In the online learning environment, students are given due dates for various assignments. The student is responsible for submitting assignments on time through the learning management system platform (e.g., Canvas, Moodle, Blackboard, etc.). Completing assignments on time in the virtual learning environment requires students to have strong self-discipline and time management skills because professors generally take a hands-off approach when monitoring assignment submissions, and oversight of this process is minimal. Students are expected to work independently, be accountable for their work, and be self-motivated to complete their assignments. This expectation is especially true for students in graduate and postgraduate programs because the online readiness of these students tends to be higher than students in undergraduate programs.

Although students are expected to be accountable, self-motivated, and committed to their studies, life gets in the way, particularly for working adult learners. Environmental factors such as technical preparation, personal and family support, financial and work concerns, and the freedom to engage in and devote the time and energy necessary to online learning are essential indicators of a student's ability to succeed in the virtual learning environment (Holder, 2007). To address this issue, academic coaches serve as the students' accountability partners, helping them establish realistic goals, track their progress, and provide guidance and support as they navigate challenges and difficulties.

Confidence Building

Confidence building is not new to the list of online learning challenges; however, its surge in prevalence is interesting. One possible explanation for the surge is students want to feel good about themselves. Confidence building is about celebrating the small wins through positive, constructive feedback. According to Paterson et al. (2020), "Feedback is a fundamental factor within the learning process for students" (p. 1).

Both student peers and the professor provide feedback on assignments in the virtual learning environment. Feedback is commonly presented in written form through the learning management system platform. Feedback is essential to student success, especially in the online learning environment, because it allows students "to identify gaps in their learning and improve their self-regulation" (Pineiro Cavalcanti et al., 2019, p. 153).

Professors may find providing detailed feedback on students' assignments daunting and arduous when coupled with their other daily tasks. To minimize the workload burden, academic coaches are assigned tasks such as reviewing assignments and providing student feedback. They have specialized training in developing feedback

that helps students build self-efficacy and confidence in their academic abilities. The academic coaches celebrate students through constructive feedback.

Bridging Educational Gaps

Educational gaps occur when there is a disconnect between what a student is expected to know and what they actually know in terms of the curriculum presented and the learning outcomes. Educational gaps occur for various reasons. Halabieh et al.'s (2022) study revealed the reasons for educational gaps include student preparedness, active learning, relevance, student well-being, outdated teaching methods, and lack of learning discovery (i.e., exploration of concepts and self-directed investigation). Educational gaps can interfere with a student's ability to apply the learning concepts and theories presented in class to real-world scenarios in and out of the workplace. Despite their efforts, higher education institutions continue to experience significant challenges in bridging the gaps (Michel & Traifeh, 2024).

Through constant interactions with students and reviewing their work, academic coaches can identify and address knowledge gaps with timely feedback and persistence as soon as they are recognized to prevent compounding difficulties. When bridging educational gaps, addressing the student's diverse learning needs through enhanced engagement and personalized attention is equally critical.

Holistic Approach

To ensure and foster a positive, productive learning environment and experience, academic coaches take a holistic approach to student engagement. They consider the whole student, including their emotional well-being, stress level, work-life balance, and any challenges that may impact learning outcomes. Combined with active and collaborative learning and technology, this approach creates a more personalized, engaging learning experience.

ACADEMIC COACHES VERSUS TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Academic coaches and teaching assistants play a crucial role in the education process and serve as a valuable resource to students and professors, whether online or in the classroom. This is because they improve and enhance the learning process, particularly online, where the personalized support provided to students can be inconsistent or nonexistent.

One might ask, what is the difference between academic coaches and teaching assistants? Although similar in nature, the roles and professional backgrounds of

academic coaches and teaching assistants are different. Each role brings a unique skill set, experience, and expertise to the learning experience. Therefore, to make an informed decision to use an academic coach as a resource to enhance and support the virtual learning experience, it is crucial to distinguish and understand the differences. It is important to note that the role of the teaching assistant discussed in this narrative is through the framework of the traditional teaching assistant role at an institute of higher education and in a virtual learning environment.

The term academic coach is often used synonymously throughout institutions of higher education to define other types of coaching roles. The similarity in the titles often leads to misunderstandings about the roles. To eliminate any confusion, it is essential to note that the academic coach's role varies significantly from that of other types of coaches in higher education, such as student tutors and career advisors.

To clarify, the role and responsibilities of an academic coach who serves as a tutor are to provide tutoring and support to students in a specific academic developmental area or subject matter. The role and responsibilities of an academic coach who serves as a career advisor are to assist students and faculty in creating and executing professional development plans, aiming to find their ideal careers or enhance their personal growth in preparation for career advancement opportunities. They also aid in increasing retention rates by providing support to academically at-risk students. In contrast to both roles, an academic adviser serves as an administrative resource to students as they progress through their educational journey.

The practice of using teaching assistants in a classroom setting dates back to the 1930s. The original purpose of teaching assistants was to handle student problems. In the late 1940s to early 1950s, the role evolved to focus on academics and helping to manage growing class size issues (Marting, 1987). Online learning began as early as 1960 with computer-based learning networks such as PLATO (Woolley, 2016). In 1986, CALCampus introduced the first complete online curriculum for high school students (CALCampus, n.d.). Soon after, in 1986, the University of Phoenix introduced the first online degree programs (Bañuelos, 2021).

By the late 1990s, online learning had become significantly more popular, and more institutions of higher education began offering online courses and degree programs. The option of learning online was the catalyst for some teaching assistants' transition from brick-and-mortar classrooms to virtual classrooms. Additionally, the transition prompted a paradigm shift from an instructor-centered learning environment to a student-centric learning environment, where students have more responsibility and accountability for their learning.

The crux of the traditional teaching assistant and academic coach roles in colleges and universities is to serve as the keystone between the professor and students. Specific tasks may include:

instructional duties:

- leading and monitoring discussions;
- providing personalized support to students through one-on-one meetings;
- grading assignments, papers, and exams using rubrics provided by professors; and
- offering feedback on assignments to help improve learning outcomes.

administrative support:

- assisting with course management (managing online platforms, organizing materials);
- tracking attendance and class participation in individual and group activities; and
- proctoring exams and manage testing environments.

student support:

- serving as the first point of contact for student questions;
- explaining complex theories and concepts using simple language;
- providing academic mentorship; and
- connecting students with appropriate campus resources when needed.

The professional background of teaching assistants is that they are typically graduate students working in their field of study. The position provides teaching experience for aspiring academics while offering financial support during graduate studies through stipends and sometimes tuition remission. The responsibilities vary significantly based on the institution, department, course type, and professor's preferences. Some teaching assistants have substantial teaching autonomy, while others work under closer supervision.

Teaching assistants and academic coaches share many of the same tasks; however, the most remarkable differences are the academic coach's professional background, specialized training, and relationship-building skills. In this paper, 'the Company' is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the company under study. At the company, academic coaches are seasoned professionals with more than 10 years of working and teaching in their respective degree disciplines. They are assigned coaching engagements specific to their professional and educational discipline areas. For example, a college or university that offers an Organizational Theory course may be assigned an academic coach who works in human resources, is an organizational development consultant, or is a leadership team member in their work organization. This work experience benefits students and professors because the academic coach brings real-world experience to the classroom. When providing feedback to students on assignments, their real-world experience is advantageous to ensure the proper application of knowledge, concepts, and theories learned in class. The benefit to

professors is that the academic coach can assist the professor with validating the class content as relevant and realistic in the workplace.

In higher education, the primary goal is for students to apply the knowledge learned in the classroom to real-world scenarios in the workplace and their communities. Elezi (2021) posited, “The market competitiveness experienced has encouraged [higher education institutions] to become more entrepreneurial in their institutional activities and explore ways of adding value to their educational products and services offered at departmental and institutional levels” (p. 279). One approach higher education institutions can use to add value to their educational products and services is to form partnerships with academic coaches.

In addition to their extensive professional background and work experience, the company requires that their academic coaches participate in an initial and recurrent rigorous mandatory training program before engaging in coaching assignments. The program focuses on the essential specialized skills necessary to support virtual learning. The key elements of the training include relationship building, privacy protection, ethics, education regulatory requirements, communication and conflict resolution, feedback development, classroom logistics, virtual learning platform operation, and the academic coach's role, responsibilities, and expectations. This specialized training ensures academic coaches are experts in their jobs and ensures a path of excellence in the coaching experience.

Relationship building in higher education is critical. The relationship and interactions between the student and the teaching assistant, the student and the academic coach, and the student and the staff are vital to the student's success in class, the overall learning experience, and their motivation for learning and discovery. These relationships and interactions accumulate into students' perceptions of the relationship quality with faculty and staff (Snijders et al., 2018). The perceived overall strength of the relationships is represented in the relationship quality (Bowden, 2011; Snijders et al., 2018). The company and their academic coaches consider interactions with students to be beyond a relationship; it is a partnership. It is viewed as a partnership because it represents a collaborative approach to learning where the academic coach and the student actively contribute to the learning process, moving beyond the traditional hierarchical model. In this context, a partnership means:

- shared responsibility: the academic coach and student take ownership of the learning process
- mutual respect: each party values the contributions and perspectives of the other
- two-way communication: open dialogue replaces one-way transmission of information

- knowledge sharing and collaborating: learning occurs through interaction rather than just delivery

This approach recognizes students as active participants in the learning process rather than passive recipients. Academic coaches provide guidance, structure, and expertise while acknowledging students' voices, lived experiences, and capabilities. This partnership model has gained prominence in contemporary educational practice because it tends to increase engagement, motivation, and deeper learning outcomes.

The relationship between the academic coach and the professor is also critical. The relationship is a collaborative, symbiotic partnership that sets the tone for the entire learning experience. Furthermore, the academic coach and the professor must be in sync. In the coaching engagement, the first interaction is with the professor. The academic coach conducts a pre-course meeting with the professor. The purpose of the meeting is to gain an understanding of the professor's needs and determine how the academic coach can best support the professor and students. In the meeting, the discussion focuses on roles, responsibilities, expectations, classroom logistics, and teaching philosophies.

The partnerships between the student and the academic coach and between the professor and the academic coach are the foundation of the learning experience. The Company virtual coaching model allows the academic coach to build and foster long-term relationships with students and professors. Unlike the traditional teaching assistant model where teaching assistants come and go based on the status of their graduate program or job situation, academic coaches are stable and consistent.

Consistency and maintaining positive student–professor and student–academic coach relationships are pertinent. According to Snijders et al. (2022), recent studies in the field of education have demonstrated that improving and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships between students and teachers is essential (p. 426).

The company coaching model promotes consistency so that academic coaches are familiar with and align with the school's operation, mission, vision, educational programs, and teaching philosophy. Many academic coaches support the same classes, professors, and students as they progress through the graduate programs. Professors may also request a specific academic coach.

In summary, the academic coach's extensive professional background, work experience, specialized training, and exceptional relationship-building skills enable them to make a meaningful, tangible contribution to the virtual learning process and student success. Their professional backgrounds and work experience provide students with the necessary real-world perspective they need when applying the learning concepts outside the classroom. Professors reap the benefits of this experience by validating that the course content is relevant in the workplace. The specialized training provided by the company ensures that academic coaches are well prepared for

coaching engagements and that they provide coaching excellence. The relationships and partnerships between academic coaches, students, and professors are the most critical component of the coaching engagement. The robust partnerships increase students' accountability and motivation, build confidence, bridge education gaps, and enable a holistic approach to supporting students.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING ACADEMIC COACHES AS A RESOURCE

As with any decision, it is imperative to identify and assess the advantages and disadvantages of the situation for which one is making the decision. The same is true when deciding to use an academic coach as a resource to support the virtual learning process in a classroom. So far in this chapter, the academic coach's role and responsibilities were discussed and the traditional teaching assistant role versus the more contemporary academic coach role were compared and contrasted. Based on the information provided, one may wonder if academic coaching engagement is appropriate for themselves and their students.

This section of the chapter presents an assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of using academic coaches as a resource to support the virtual learning process. This assessment focuses on determining whether a coaching engagement is right based on the advantages and disadvantages presented. It is not an assessment to determine which is the better role, the teaching assistant or the academic coach. It is also important to note that the advantages and disadvantages presented are the author's perspective as a university professor and her firsthand experience working with academic coaches regularly in a virtual learning environment in an institution of higher education. Table 1 shows the advantages and disadvantages of using academic coaches to support virtual learning.

Table 1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Academic Coaches to Support Virtual Learning

Advantages	Disadvantages
Seasoned professionals with extensive real-world experience in the workplace.	There are costs associated with using academic coaches.
Provides well-constructed feedback to students.	They are not members of the college or university staff.
Highly approachable and great at establishing relationships with students.	Time constraints can affect grading assignments and availability to students.

continued on following page

Table 1. Continued

Advantages	Disadvantages
Self-starters who work under minimal or no supervision.	There are variations in the knowledge, competency levels, and virtual classroom effectiveness among academic coaches.
Significantly reduces the professor's workload.	There may be an excessive focus on the practical application of the learning material, potentially overshadowing the conceptual and theoretical content provided in the course.
Provides personalized support and attention to students.	Responses to correspondence from students and the professor are sometimes delayed.

The author has worked with academic coaches in the virtual classroom for three years, and the experience has been mainly positive. The author tends to request the same academic coaches from the company because they are familiar with the course, course content, assignments, and her working style and teaching philosophy. Moreover, no learning curve or ramp-up time is required with existing academic coaches. Working with new academic coaches requires extra time to bring them up to speed on the coaching engagement's roles, responsibilities, and expectations. Also, the students will probably be familiar with existing academic coaches because they have worked with them in other program classes.

The advantages of using academic coaches far outweigh the disadvantages. In the author's experience and opinion, the greatest advantage of working with academic coaches is the experience and specialized expertise they bring to the virtual learning environment, which is a culmination of the advantages listed in Table 1. More importantly, they assist students in appropriately applying the concepts and theories learned in class in their workplaces, communities, and leadership practices. The bottom line is using an academic coach as a resource is like having two professors in the virtual classroom to enhance and support students' learning experience.

In contrast, professors should not take the disadvantages of using academic coaches lightly. They are present in every coaching engagement. The positive or negative impact on the learning environment and the coaching engagement depends mainly on the professor's ability to manage the issues. The issues are entirely manageable if they are addressed proactively before the coaching engagement begins or when they surface during the engagement. If not addressed and resolved, the problems can escalate and cause friction in the relationships between the academic coach, the students, and the professor. Not addressing the disadvantages can result in damaging the coaching engagement altogether. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the academic coach will conduct a pre-course meeting with the professor before the class begins. It is during this meeting that the disadvantages are addressed.

CONTRIBUTIONS ACADEMIC COACHES MAKE TO THE VIRTUAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Virtual learning and the virtual learning environment are unique in their meanings. Virtual learning is the educational process by which learning and instruction is delivered online. The Virginia State Department of Education (n.d.) describes virtual learning as “a learning modality in or out of school buildings that uses internet and digital technologies to provide and enhance the learning experience and promote educational outcomes” (p. 1).

The virtual learning environment is the digital learning management platform for educational content. It is the online space where the delivery of instruction takes place using an asynchronous approach that facilitates the delivery of educational content such as learning modules, course materials, discussion boards, assignments, exams, quizzes, etc. “Asynchronous learning may involve students watching prerecorded video lessons, completing assigned tasks, or contributing to online discussion boards” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 164). Practitioners use the terms online learning, virtual learning, internet-based learning, web-based learning, and e-learning interchangeably (Capper, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish their meanings, because academic coaches contribute to each form of learning differently.

This section of the chapter addresses the various pressing questions that professors may have while reading this book and pondering on the decision to use academic coaches in their organizations. These questions may include: Why is this information important? What is in it for us? How can academic coaches make academic life easier for both students and professors? Are academic coaches a good fit for our organization? What impact will a coaching engagement have on our institution's bottom line in terms of costs and savings? The answers to these questions will highlight the value and contributions that academic coaches bring to virtual learning and the virtual learning environment.

The author begins the discussion with the question, Why is this information important? Engaging in an academic coaching partnership is an added expense to a university's budget. Expenses such as this may be perceived as nice-to-have or non-essential. Therefore, building a business case for the partnership, highlighting the return on the investment, may be necessary to justify the expense. The information presented in this chapter is essential for professors and administrators in institutions of higher education who need to build a solid case for using academic coaches to support virtual learning. The information provided is grounded in the lived experience of a university professor who regularly works with academic coaches and has achieved notable results.

Academic coaches' contributions to the virtual learning process and the virtual learning environment are essential as higher education institutions seek creative, innovative ways to enhance and improve the online learning experience for students and professors. The need to improve educational efficiency and accessibility led to the development of virtual learning environments. The academic coach is a unique intervention resource because efficiency is achieved through streamlined administrative processes, automated grading systems, and the smooth integration of multimedia content. These elements optimize teaching workflows and reduce logistical burdens (Means et al., 2014). Additionally, they are seeking ways to streamline the process and reduce the costs of virtual learning to make it more efficient while increasing and improving the personalized support provided to students. The development of virtual learning environments has allowed educators to create more engaging and personalized learning experiences, enabling students to learn at their own pace and receive immediate feedback on their performance (Bond et al., 2018).

It would be remiss not to address the next questions: What is in it for us? How can academic coaches make academic life easier for both students and professors? These questions are vital to the decision-making process. After all, what would be the purpose of entering into a business arrangement that does not serve our needs?

From the student's perspective, academic coaches contribute to virtual learning by providing personalized support that facilitates learning and discovery. Nazempour and Darabi (2023) suggested, "One of the most crucial parts of any learning environment is having a learning style that focuses on individual learning" (p. 457). Academic coaches also help students understand and apply the knowledge learned in class to the workplace. Basham et al. (2016) stated, "By taking into account students' interests and abilities, personalized learning supports students' ability to master the material" (p. 128). By maintaining and nurturing a learning environment that promotes high engagement, academic coaches pave the way for academic excellence.

From the professor's perspective, academic coaches contribute to the virtual learning process in several ways, such as reducing workloads, improving student results, and enhancing instruction effectiveness. The workload of professors in higher education is a formidable ongoing problem, with the pressing demands of instruction responsibilities, administrative tasks, service commitments, research expectations, professional development, and, like many other workers, the need to create a work-life balance. A study conducted by Pace et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of protecting the health and well-being of university professors. The study recommendations include constant monitoring and creating opportunities to use support resources to reduce the workload, because the quality of the university is linked to the professors' well-being.

To address this issue and aid in its resolution, academic coaches handle the more time-consuming tasks, such as providing additional clarification on course

materials, assignments, and the concepts and theories presented in the course. They provide one-on-one support to students who are struggling in the course and monitor overall student progress to identify those who may be at risk and intercede. Finally, they grade assignments and provide detailed, constructive feedback that inspires students to learn and grow. More importantly, reducing the professor's workload allows them to focus on strategic, big-picture tasks and activities that enhance the learning experience instead of getting bogged down with tactical tasks.

Student outcomes are the most critical key academic performance indicators in higher education. Improving student outcomes is probably the most important area where academic coaches make their greatest contribution. Findings from a study conducted by Alzen et al. (2021) revealed that academic coaching programs in institutions of higher education “hold promise for improving key academic indicators such as [grade point average] and retention rates” (p. 543).

From the student's perspective, the outcomes directly impact career opportunities, personal development, and the return on investment for the funds spent on college expenses. Additionally, students who are well educated have a positive impact on society by contributing to the economic and social viability of communities globally. From the lens of the institution, they are responsible and accountable for demonstrating their effectiveness because student outcomes are linked directly to the institution's accreditation and funding.

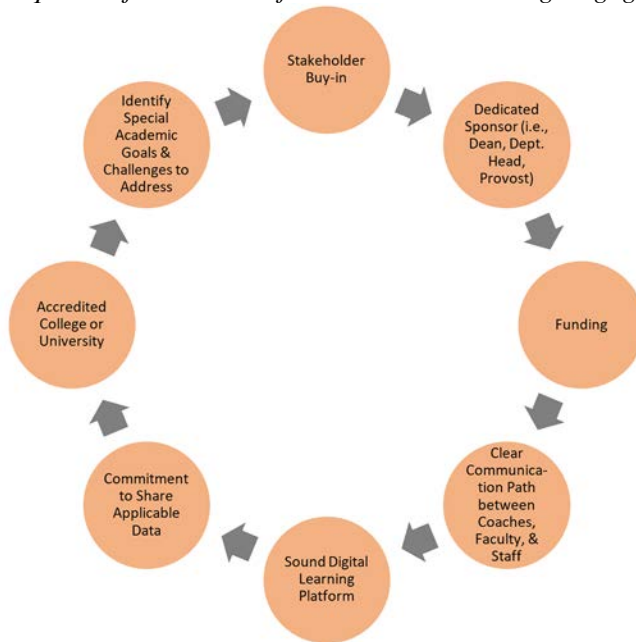
Quite simply, academic coaches contribute to student outcomes by providing personalized support to the professor and to students, whereas otherwise, professors don't have the time and work bandwidth to engage.

The final area where academic coaches contribute to the virtual learning experience is enhanced instruction effectiveness. “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education” (King, 1947). Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010) explained, “Increasing attention is being given to the quality of teaching and learning at the university level across the world, and there is increasing pressure both to ensure effective teaching in universities and to be able to demonstrate that effectiveness” (p. 113). Academic coaches improve teaching effectiveness by helping professors understand common challenges students face. They provide feedback on course materials and learning concepts from the student's perspective and validate the teaching methods and course content based on current job market demands and workplace trends.

After careful consideration of the information presented thus far, the next logical question in the decision-making process is, are academic coaches a good fit for our organization? The author's positive interactions and experience working with academic coaches and the thriving coaching partnership between Eastern Washington University and the company were established on the premise that certain prerequisites

were met before entering into the coaching engagement. If an organization meets, or is willing to meet, the prerequisites indicated in Fig. 1, academic coaches may be a good fit for the institution.

Figure 1. Prerequisites for a Successful Academic Coaching Engagement



Besides the prerequisites outlined in Figure 1, appointing a program coordinator as the main point of contact for the entirety of the engagement is essential.

The next and final question is, what impact will a coaching engagement have on our institution's bottom line in terms of costs and cost savings? This question is the linchpin of the business case for implementing an academic coaching program in an organization. This question will undoubtedly be in the forefront of the minds of the decision-makers and key stakeholders.

Before discussing the details of costs and savings, it is important to note that pricing and contract negotiations with the vendor for the coaching engagement are outside the scope of the professor's realm of responsibility. However, professors should be aware that there is a cost associated with engaging academic coaches. It is common for the learning institution to provide professors with policies, procedures, and guidelines for using academic coaches in the virtual classroom. For instance, at Eastern Washington University, professors may place a request for an academic coach with their department head when the class roster exceeds 30 students. How

and for which classes academic coaches are used are at the discretion of the learning institution.

When thinking about the impact a coaching engagement has on the institution's bottom line, remember that tangible and intangible factors must be considered. The tangible factors are costs that can reduce the bottom line, and the intangible factors are those that provide a return on investment or savings. Tangible cost factors to consider include the use of an academic coach versus a teaching assistant and the cost of engaging an academic coach. Within these cost factors, the professor must decide which option outweighs the other in terms of costs versus expertise based on need. The intangible factors are the success metrics identified at the onset of the coaching engagement during the prerequisite stage of the decision-making process. Success metrics are powerful indicators of return on investment, even though not every metric can be quantified by a dollar amount.

Investing in an academic coaching partnership is a decision that must be made thoughtfully. It should be done by a committee and involve all applicable team members and key stakeholders, as buy-in and support for the program and the decision to engage are imperative. The importance of the decision cannot be understated, as the coaching program must remain in place long enough to fully realize its value and appreciate the return on investment results.

In an effort to locate costs and return on investment information, the author extensively searched the literature only to yield little to no information related to academic coaching engagements in virtual learning environments. The cost information discovered on academic coaching engagements was limited, broad, and generic; however, a small amount of information about the return on investment on coaching engagements exists. During the literature search, an abundance of caution was taken to ensure the information discovered was specifically related to academic coaches (also known as virtual teaching assistants in the virtual environment) and related to an academic coach as a student tutor, an academic coach as a career advisor/retention specialist/mentor, or an academic adviser.

The cost and success metrics information presented are based on the author's experience and knowledge working with academic coaches, information obtained from the company, and the limited information discovered during the literature search. The assumption is that coaching engagement pricing is highly customized and complex depending on the services provided to the learning institution; therefore, pricing information and costs are not shared publicly. Also, the information is presented as a high-level overview of the estimated costs and return on investment. Actual costs and return on investment information vary significantly from vendor to vendor, and each coaching engagement is unique to each learning institution's service needs.

Table 2 shows a breakdown of the estimated costs related to a typical coaching engagement in the virtual learning environment.

Table 2. Academic Coaching Engagement Costs Breakdown

Item	Description	Estimated Costs
Academic Coach Wage	Academic coaches are paid by the vendor company for which they work. Wages may be paid as an annual salary, at an hourly rate, per class, or per student.	\$15,000 to \$30,000 annually \$15 to \$40 per hour \$1,000 to \$2,300 per class \$25 to \$40 per student
Course Materials	Course materials may include textbooks, e-books, software, etc. Course materials are paid for by the institution.	\$40 to \$100 per class

Note. Estimated costs vary based on class size, coach's experience, vendor margins, and the services outlined in the coaching engagement agreement.

Table 3 shows an example of the success metrics that apply in a typical coaching engagement.

Table 3. Success Metrics

Success Metric	Metric Description
Student Satisfaction	This metric measures students' overall satisfaction with the course. The survey questions focus on key areas of the course, such as the course content and materials, assignments, professor and academic coach effectiveness, and more. The data for this metric are collected via an e-survey conducted mid-course.
Student Engagement	This metric measures the total number of times students interact with the academic coach and the purpose of the interaction. Interactions are made via email, the learning platform messaging system, phone, or Zoom. The data for this metric are collected by the academic coach, who keeps track of the various interactions with students.
Learning Impact	This metric measures how well students demonstrate their knowledge and application of the learning concepts and theories presented in the course. The data to support this metric are obtained through feedback provided on assignments and assignment grades.
Continuous Improvement Opportunities	This metric measures the quantity and types of suggestions and recommendations presented to improve any aspect of the course, including professor and academic coach effectiveness. The data to support this metric are collected through various surveys, course evaluations, and direct feedback from students.
Course Effectiveness	This metric measures the overall effectiveness of the course, from student satisfaction to degree program satisfaction. Data to support this metric are collected through an end-of-course evaluation e-survey conducted by the learning institution. This evaluation is independent of any surveys conducted in class by the professor.

Note. Success metrics and return on investment vary from institution to institution based on the academic goals, the challenges that need to be addressed, and the availability of data required to measure the metric.

In building the business case for using academic coaches to support virtual learning and conducting the cost analysis, the differences in academic coaches versus teaching

assistants must be addressed again. Earlier in the chapter, the author discussed the differentiators in the roles of the academic coach and teaching assistant, their job responsibilities and daily tasks, their professional and academic backgrounds, and their levels of expertise working in the virtual learning environment. In the discussion of the roles of academic coaches versus teaching assistants in the context of the cost analysis, the focus of the narrative shifts to value-add versus costs.

The need for and circumstances surrounding the proposed coaching engagement drive the decision to engage an academic coach or teaching assistant. For example, in circumstances where budget constraints or the availability of funding is an issue, a teaching assistant may be a better option because the cost to engage a teaching assistant is lower than that of engaging an academic coach. The downside to this decision is that professional expertise and experience are sacrificed and funding becomes the priority.

In contrast, if the coaching engagement needs a professional with high-level expertise who can provide a robust virtual learning experience, the academic coach is the better option. In either case, the students' best interests and the delivery of an optimal virtual learning experience must always be the north star guiding the decision-making process.

Once the business case is presented to stakeholders for support and buy-in, there will be stakeholders who immediately see the value in engaging academic coaches and will outwardly show their support. There will also be stakeholders expressing their objections and concerns. While demonstrations of support are embraced and appreciated, addressing the objections and concerns is no less significant.

In the author's experience presenting the business case to stakeholders, two common objections and concerns consistently arise during the presentation:

- Teaching assistants and academic coaches are basically the same, so why not go for the low-cost option and use teaching assistants?
- Academic coaches seem overqualified to do this work; do we really need that level of expertise?

These objections are valid and must be addressed straightforwardly and factually to avoid derailing the process. Consequently, if possible, the business case should be presented to stakeholders in person.

A constructive response to the first objection is that, while it may seem that teaching assistants and academic coaches share similar roles and responsibilities, focusing solely on cost overlooks important differences. Both positions handle daily logistical tasks that ensure a smooth virtual learning environment. Still, the decision to engage these roles should be evaluated based on their value and return on investment, rather than just cost.

From this perspective, academic coaches present a better value. They bring extensive experience, expertise, and specialized training in online learning, which contributes to a consistent, high-quality virtual learning experience that is student-centered and focused on achieving results. Education is an investment with long-term implications. Opting for the less expensive option may save money in the short term but could lead to greater costs in missed opportunities.

A constructive response to the second objection is that the academic coaches' qualification should be viewed as an asset, not a liability. Their background, experience, and expertise are assets to the organization and align perfectly with the academic needs of students in higher education. Their qualifications are a bonus because, in effect, there is no learning curve. Furthermore, they are qualified and equipped with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to help higher education institutions achieve their goals regarding virtual learning and address the challenges these institutions encounter in the virtual learning environment.

ACADEMIC COACHES ARE A KEY COMPETENCY FOR ONLINE LEARNING SUCCESS

Key competencies are professional skills, abilities, or knowledge that is paramount to an organization's success. Academic success in online learning environments within institutions of higher education is critical due to the scrutiny sparked by the ongoing debate among learning thought experts regarding the effectiveness of online learning versus traditional classroom learning. For this reason, it is necessary to explain how academic coaches contribute positively to the online learning experience.

Little is known about the history of academic coaching because the profession is relatively new compared to other academic support roles.

Forman and Sanchez (2025) concluded the following:

...little is known about implementing an academic coach team approach to instructions support within online courses. There is an overall scarcity of literature related to online instructional support research. Few published studies address how an instructor might incorporate the skills of an academic coach in the online course. (p. 2)

For this reason, one must rely heavily on experiential information from professors, other academic professionals, and virtual learning thought leaders to entirely understand the role. Ironically, the academic coaching field did not keep pace with the rapid rise of online learning programs in traditional universities, which began around 2008 and continues to surge. The reason is that the role was in a constant state of evolution and transition to determine how best to serve and contribute significant value to the virtual learning community.

A limited volume of literature defines explicitly the role of academic coaches in virtual learning or explains how they are used in coaching engagements. In the literature search, two research articles that discuss the whole coaching experience were discovered. In the first article, Forman and Sanchez (2025) conducted a research study to examine “the attributes, behaviors, preferences, feelings, attitudes, opinions, and knowledge of faculty who use academic coaches for instructional support within the online course” (p. 1). The study findings revealed effective ways to implement academic coaching engagements in online programs at institutions of higher education. The findings also showed that more extensive research was needed to understand how coaching engagement is implemented and compare the strategies used to determine how academic coaches are assigned to online classes (Forman & Sanchez, 2025).

In the second article, Park and Robinson (2022) conducted a research study to examine “how academic coaches, through academic student support, impact graduate student performance in a time-intensive online learning program for pursuing a master’s degree in leadership and human resource development in a research-intensive public university in the Southern United States” (p. 7). Three compelling findings resulted from this study: students’ scores were higher on average due to feedback and comments provided by the academic coaches; students with academic coaches in their online classes outperformed students who did not have an academic coach; and the number of academic coaches assigned to a course did not impact academic performance (Park & Robinson, 2022).

Studies such as these provide compelling insight into the inner workings of academic coaching engagements. This research advances the field of study and knowledge base on academic coaches’ vital role in the virtual learning community. Additionally, the studies validate the contribution academic coaches make to improving and enhancing the virtual learning experience for students and professors. More importantly, the studies provide quantitative data that support and validate academic coaches’ impacts on academic performance and student outcomes.

Effective Strategies for Academic Coaching Engagements

The strategies presented here are based on the author’s firsthand experience with coaching engagements that were effective and successful and those that were not. Furthermore, the strategies are presented from the author’s perspective as a professor working for a traditional university teaching graduate-level online courses in the business degree program. It is important to note that the author has been involved in coaching engagements only through the company. Therefore, her ability to provide insight into the engagement process or compare the coaching experience to other vendors is limited. The author’s perspective is unique because it is from an insider

who actively participates in the coaching engagement process and has a high degree of control over the outcome.

Based on her knowledge and experience with the coaching engagement process, the author offers three simple strategies to ensure and effect successful coaching engagement: select the right academic coach, establish clear, direct communication, and set and align expectations.

Select the Right Academic Coach

Coach selection was one of the themes that emerged during interviews with participants in Forman and Sanchez's (2025) study explored the effective use of academic coaches for support in online courses. The emergence of this theme indicates the importance of coach selection when entering a coaching engagement. When beginning the selection process, it is a good idea to approach this phase of the process with the mindset that the coaching engagement is a partnership between the academic coach and the professor and between the academic coach and the students, as the coach is invested in the success of both the professor and the students.

The process of selecting an academic coach is quite simple. The company's lead coach assigned to the course provides the professor with three resumes for prospective academic coaches. The resumes are prescreened by the lead coach to ensure the prospective coaches' professional backgrounds, work experience, and educational disciplines align with the course description, course objectives, and student outcomes. The professor reviews the resumes and selects the academic coach they believe is the best fit for the class. The qualities and attributes the author looks for when selecting an academic coach are an individual with high interpersonal skills, flexibility, passion for teaching and learning, and an open mind about students' diverse viewpoints, perspectives, and opinions. The author also looks for someone who inspires students through their feedback and interactions, timeliness, and responsiveness in all aspects of the virtual learning experience. If the professor is unsatisfied with the selection of resumes provided, the lead coach will offer additional resumes to review.

All in all, the process works well. The downside is that the professor may not have the opportunity to meet the prospective academic coaches before making a selection. This approach may be by design to prevent professors from going through the painstaking, time-consuming process of interviewing numerous coaching candidates. More importantly, the company does an exceptional job of prequalifying and vetting its prospective academic coaches before contracting with them to perform coaching services. In the three years of consistently using academic coaches from the company, the author has yet to have a less than positive experience. In the extremely rare case where the professor is dissatisfied with the academic coach, the lead coach

will replace the coach as soon as possible. If there are academic coaches that the professor prefers, the lead coach will do their best to accommodate the request.

When an academic coach is assigned to the class, the first order of business is to conduct the pre-course meeting. This meeting is where the professor and academic coach meet for the first time. The pre-course meeting is facilitated by the academic coach. It provides the academic coach and the professor the opportunity to meet one-on-one and discuss the upcoming course. The topics discussed in the meeting include roles and responsibilities, expectations, student outcomes, course overview, teaching styles and philosophies, course logistics, assignments, communication protocol, and more.

Establish Clear, Direct Communication

The need for clear, direct communication during the coaching engagement cannot be overemphasized. Effective communication in virtual learning is central to student success, yet it is one of the most difficult challenges to overcome if not orchestrated properly (Pinheiro Cavalcanti et al., 2019). Communication between the academic coach and the professor and between the academic coach and the students is critical in minimizing misunderstandings, improving efficiencies, and creating accountability. Furthermore, establishing a clear, direct line of communication creates an atmosphere of transparency and trust in the virtual learning environment.

Communication between the academic coach and the professor generally involves discussions about classroom logistics, student engagement and interactions, observations made while grading assignments, issues and concerns, and weekly status updates. The communications can take place through email, phone, or Zoom. Depending on the information being communicated, the frequency of the communications ranges from daily to weekly or biweekly.

Establishing a communication protocol plan is another essential component of ensuring clear, direct communication between the academic coach and professor. The plan's development is a collaborative effort and should ideally be discussed during the pre-course meeting. The plan proposes to determine the best methods and channels for communicating various types of information and frequencies. The plan may also include information about communication schedules. For example, there may be times that are not ideal for communicating (e.g., mealtimes, schoolwork, meetings, family time, etc.).

The types of communication between the academic coach and the students are feedback students are provided on assignments, clarification on course content or assignment instructions, discussions about issues and concerns, and general out-reach support discussions. The academic coach communicates with students daily. When the class begins, the academic coach provides the class with their contact

information and encourages them to reach out. The communication channels include email, phone, learning platform messaging, and Zoom.

The company's policies and procedures on communication require academic coaches to respond to all communications from students and professors within 24 hours of receipt. If the academic coach cannot respond immediately or an inquiry requires further investigation or escalation, the coach will acknowledge the communication by replying that they will get back to them shortly and explain the reason for the delay. For example, a student presents an issue via email that requires the academic coach to discuss the matter with the professor before replying. The coach will acknowledge the student's email and state they will get back to them shortly, as they need to discuss the matter with the professor before providing a definitive response.

Set and Align Expectations

Expectations exist in any business engagement or partnership. Two of the most common expectations in partnerships are the roles and responsibilities each party will assume and expectations about business outcomes and success. These expectations are also the ones that are most often omitted or misunderstood during conversations about collaboration because the topic of expectations makes people uncomfortable. This also holds true in academic coaching engagements.

Expectations within academia are inherently high due to the nature of the industry. For example, students invest considerable time and financial resources to pursue education to advance their personal and professional development. They hope their academic achievements will lead to their desired social and economic status. In higher education, students expect professors, administrators, and support staff to work diligently to ensure students have the tools and learning environment conducive to their success.

Expectations, or lack thereof, can make or break a coaching engagement, especially in virtual learning, where the class durations are abridged and the learning is accelerated. Therefore, setting, discussing, and aligning expectations for the coaching engagement are imperative. Similar to the communications protocol plan, setting expectations for the coaching engagement is a collaborative effort between the professor and the academic coach. The process is necessary because it ensures the partnership's clarity, commitment, and accountability.

Undoubtedly, the professor will have predetermined expectations about the coaching engagements based on their knowledge of the academic coach's role, and the academic coach will have predetermined expectations of the engagement based on the training, policies, and procedures provided by the company. Nonetheless, expectations should be discussed, set, and aligned during the pre-course meeting because the most detrimental cause of the failures of partnerships is secret expect-

tations. ChatGPT defines secret expectations as “unspoken or uncommunicated hopes, desires, or assumptions that someone holds in a relationship, workplace, or any social interaction. These expectations are considered ‘secret’ because they are not explicitly shared with others, yet the person still hopes or assumes others will meet them” (OpenAI, 2025).

The pre-course meeting addresses expectations that align specifically with supporting virtual learning. These expectations aim to ensure the students and the professor are fully supported by the academic coach and that the learning experience is positive, productive, and enjoyable for all. The expectations the academic coach will address in the pre-course meeting include establishing baseline expectations for the academic coach's role and responsibilities, communication protocol, and expectations for grading assignments and student engagement.

The professor may include additional expectations as applicable. Once the expectations are discussed, set, and aligned with the virtual learning experience, the academic coach will follow up with the professor weekly or biweekly to ensure all expectations are met.

BEST PRACTICES FOR ENSURING A SUCCESSFUL, MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL COACHING PARTNERSHIP

The author’s experience working with academic coaches over the past three years has allowed her to greatly appreciate their role and the service they provide. Coaching engagements are a luxury that should not be taken for granted. Moreover, although the author’s experience is limited to working with academic coaches from the company, she would be hard-pressed to find a more outstanding partnership. Her experience working with diverse coaches in various online courses has been exceptional. The success of these coaching engagements has increased to the point where the academic coaches are an extension of the author’s organization. Over time, the author learned how to optimize and maximize the support provided by academic coaches. Additionally, the author learned how to trust the coaching process and relinquish some of the control she so vehemently held onto in the virtual classroom. As the author reflected on the knowledge and key takeaways gained from coaching engagements enjoyed over the years, she discovered four pivotal best practices she now applies to every coaching partnership: be “one” with the academic coach; communicate, communicate, communicate; resist the urge to micromanage; and be open to feedback.

Be “One” With the Academic Coach

In the yoga community, there is a popular principle of being “one” with self. This principle suggests that yoga helps individuals become one with themselves in terms of body, mind, and spirit (Ranjan, 2024). The same principle can be applied to the coaching engagement. The coaching engagement is a partnership between the academic coach and the professor. Essentially, this duo’s mission and purpose is to work together as one for the betterment of virtual learning and to provide students with the best learning experience possible.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!

As mentioned in this chapter, communicating and having a communication plan are imperative to virtual learning. The abridged class durations and accelerated learning bring unique communication challenges to virtual learning. For this reason, communication between the academic coach, the professor, and the students must happen early and often. From the professor’s perspective, constant communication is vital because minor issues and concerns can quickly escalate to significant ones if not communicated and addressed promptly. The abridged class duration leaves little room for corrective action or mitigation. From the students’ perspective, the virtual learning environment can cause some students to feel isolated or disconnected (Bembich, 2022). Therefore, the academic coach and the professor must maintain constant contact with students.

Resist the Urge to Micromanage

The author admits she struggles with this best practice because it feels personal. All educators want the best for their students. Some take the notion further by believing they know what is best for their students and that only they can provide it. So why are educators reluctant to delegate tasks in the classroom? This question was posed to ChatGPT. The ChatGPT-generated text indicated “responsibility and accountability” as one of the reasons educators are reluctant to delegate, with the explanation being, “Teachers are responsible and accountable for student outcomes and classroom management. By delegating tasks, they believe they lose control over the quality and direction of the lesson” (OpenAI, 2025). The author chose this reason because it aligns with her experience and feelings. Academic coaches are highly trained, highly skilled academic professionals who are capable and competent to handle any classroom task assigned to them with the utmost quality and care. Moreover, some academic coaches are also professors who teach in virtual learning settings at institutes of higher education.

Be Open to Feedback

Academic coaches bring unique insight and perspective to virtual learning. Their professional background, training, and coaching experience enable them to view learning through the various lenses of educators, students, and practitioners actively working in their fields of study. Because of this multi-view perspective, they can determine the course content, assignments, and instructional approach in ways the professor cannot because they are often too close or attached to the course. Academic coaches can also connect with students by sharing valuable information about how they feel about the course. Moreover, as working practitioners, they can provide feedback on the validity and relevancy of the course content. Therefore, it is highly advantageous to the virtual learning process to listen to and embrace their feedback, whether solicited or unsolicited.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the author discussed the importance of academic coaches as a vital component of virtual learning programs in institutions of higher education. The three key takeaways from the chapter are: (1) the importance of building a business case for engaging in an academic coaching partnership, (2) the advantages and disadvantages of using academic coaches, and (3) the vital role academic coaches play in supporting students and professors and improving and enhancing the online learning experience. These insights provide professors and administrators with strategies and best practices to ensure successful coaching engagements, equipping them with the foundational knowledge necessary to facilitate and navigate these engagements effectively. Moreover, these insights help educators in higher education understand the value of academic coaches to their organization and faculty, enabling them to connect with the larger theme of this book.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Coach: An academic coach is a highly trained educational professional who supports students and faculty in institutions of higher education with the online learning process.

Institutions of Higher Education: College or universities that offers students online and on-ground courses in pursuit of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees and various certificate programs.

Lead Coach: The lead coach coordinates and manages the academic coach engagement process.

Learning Management System (LMS): The learning management system is a technology platform that manages the delivery of learning content and manages student progress.


Online Learning: Online learning is the process by which learning content is delivered to students online or digitally, in either a synchronous or asynchronous environment.

Teaching Assistants: Assist faculty with daily operations and tasks in both online and on-ground classroom environments.

Chapter 2


Academic Coaches and Student Success Through Engagement and Motivation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter per the authors is to address the topic of engagement and motivation. In online courses, the interaction of the faculty and coaches with students is critical. The aim of this chapter is to promote a “stellar” experience for the students. The root of best practices in online education is putting the students first. While this can sound daunting, in reality it means addressing some basic principles of teaching along with the incorporation of faculty immediacy, faculty presence, engagement, and motivation principles. Online students want to know there is a “live” faculty/coach available to interact with during the course. Online students do not want to feel as if teaching the course to oneself.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to address the topic of engagement and motivation. In online courses, the interaction of the faculty and coaches with students is critical. The aim of this chapter is to promote a “stellar” experience for the students. The root of best practices in online education is putting the students first. While this can sound daunting, in reality it means addressing some basic principles of teaching along with the incorporation of faculty immediacy, faculty presence, engagement, and motivation principles. Online students want to know there is a “live” faculty/coach available to interact with during the course. Online students do not want to feel as if teaching the course to oneself.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

Designing online courses with elements of engagement and motivation can help students feel connected with faculty. Engagement in the context of online learning can be defined as “actively participating, interacting, and collaborating with students, faculty, course content, and members of the community” (Angelino & Natvig, 2009, p. 3). Elements of student engagement and motivation that help students feel connected with faculty and coaches include course orientation, prompt response to student messages, timely feedback on student assignments, frequent course updates posted, regular communication from faculty via announcement or email reminders followed by a question and answer forum, pre-recorded material for review at one’s own pace, the ability to ask questions in a synchronous setting, and diversity of course resources (Elshami et al., 2022).

Muir et al. (2022) conducted a qualitative study with students about various interactive online pedagogical approaches to promote student engagement. Findings revealed that case studies, engaging activities (i.e. games with peers), content presentation via multimedia, online videos (i.e. TEDtalks, other videos), and discussion forums with peers and faculty enhanced meaningful learning and engagement.

Hensley et al. (2021) conducted a descriptive cross-sectional study examining nursing student engagement and satisfaction in online programs. The study included nursing students enrolled in Registered Nurse (RN) to Baccalaureate Student Nursing (BSN), Master of Science in Nursing (MSN), Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) among six accredited universities located in the United States. Hensley et al. (2021) found performance engagement (course outcomes) showed highest engagement, then emotional, followed by skills and participation (interaction with other students). Overall highest engagement was PhD students, lowest was RN-to-BSN students followed closely by Doctor of Nursing Practice

(DNP) students. Eight best practices for enhancing engagement and motivation in online nursing education identified included faculty providing orientation video or synchronous session; offering a table with weekly requirements; communicating and maintaining response times; communicating sense of caring; communicating and maintaining clear expectations; incorporating rubrics and clear guidelines for assignments; communicating regularly; and participating in professional development to engage students (Hensley et al., 2021).

Per Hensley et al. (2021), communication with and availability of faculty was critical to satisfaction and satisfaction was strongly associated with engagement. Performance engagement was the highest reported engagement while least important was participation (interaction with other students). Additionally, Dahmaini et al. (2024) emphasized building strong relationships between faculty and students through enhanced communication can lead to a more vibrant encouraging and stimulating learning arena.

Hampton et al. (2023) reviewed Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles of good practice in teaching and illustrated applicability for today's nursing online education delivery. An additional purpose of the review of good practice in teaching was to share examples of teaching methods used by faculty to promote engagement in online education courses during the pandemic and suggest two new best practices. The original seven best practices in education (Koeckeritz et al., 2002) which remain evidence-based guidelines today include: (a) encourage contact between students and faculty, (b) develop reciprocity and cooperation among students, (c) use active learning techniques, (d) give prompt feedback, (e) emphasize time on task, (f) communicate high expectations, and (g) respect diverse talents and ways of learning. The two new best practices recommended by Hampton et al. (2023) include: incorporate assignment flexibility to meet student learning preferences, and apply learning to real-life situations. Faculty using evidence-based guidelines in the online learning environment is essential to encourage student involvement and motivation.

Student engagement in online courses can enhance students' academic performance and decrease the sense of isolation. Engaged students are more likely to connect with the course and take responsibility for their learning (Lu, 2020). Karaoglan Yilmaz and Yilmaz (2021) conducted an experimental design research examining the effect of using learning analytics (LA) based feedback as a metacognitive tool on students' motivation. The experimental group received feedback on the weekly LA results while the control did not receive feedback. Findings indicated that offering metacognitive feedback support to students increased motivation.

Sahni (2023) assessed student engagement and academic performance in the online learning environment using an exploratory research method. Data was collected from a variety of sources such as learning management system logs, self-

administered questionnaires from students, and interviews with faculty. Findings revealed a positive relationship (direct connection) between student engagement and academic performance. Sahni (2023) further shared that key items contributing to student engagement are the teaching methods, strategies, and interventions by faculty. Faculty and universities should be mindful about adapting teaching pedagogies to the online environment to meet diverse needs of students.

Motivation

Engaged students connected with a course and involved in the learning process can enhance motivation. Vania et al. (2022) examined if online-formed peer relationship (online friendships) affected academic motivation during online learning. Findings indicated participants had a high quality of peer relationships and academic motivation with peer relationships significantly predicting students' academic motivation. Academic motivation was defined as a psychological dimension that played a crucial factor in learning and development, especially in the online learning venue. Additionally, academic motivation referred to the momentum that underpinned individual behavior related to persistence, learning, and academic performance. Using the self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (1985), motivation was divided into three types: intrinsic motivation (feelings of pleasure and satisfaction obtained from the activity itself), extrinsic motivation (engage in activities for the sake of rewards or to avoid punishment), and amotivation (do not feel motivated because do not perceive a contingency between actions and the results obtained). When students were motivated and involved in the learning process, students seemed to internalize the content more effectively (Vania, 2022).

Mendoza et al. (2023) conducted a study that examined the impact of need-supportive task instruction on students' situational intrinsic motivation in an online language learning task. Also explored was whether the intrinsic motivation on the task would positively predict task performance directly or indirectly through self-assessment practice. Overall results indicated need-supportive statements embedded in task instructions generated increased intrinsic motivation on an online task.

Li et al. (2022) examined the influence of teaching motivations on student engagement in an online learning environment. Several findings were revealed. Student engagement significantly positively correlated with autonomy-supportive teaching motivations, perceived autonomy, perceived competence & perceived relatedness. Student engagement significantly negatively correlated with controlling teaching motivations. Autonomy-supportive teaching motivations positively affect student engagement and intrinsic motivation. Controlling teaching motivations positively impacted extrinsic motivation but no significant impact on student engagement.

More research is needed to identify and capitalize on students' inner motivational resources.

Naciri et al. (2021) explored health science students' perceptions, acceptance, motivation, and engagement with e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students had an equal or higher motivation for exclusive e-learning. Factors that improved engagement were psychological motivation, peer collaboration, cognitive problem solving, interaction with instructors, community support, and learning management.

Engagement

Engagement is defined as “the behavioral intensity and emotional quality of a person’s active involvement during a task” (Reeve et al., 2004, p.147). Engagement is the driving force of academic efficacy (Sharif Nia et al., 2023). Engagement consists of three domains: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. For student to have high levels of learning satisfaction, engagement needs to occur in behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains (Sharif Nia et al., 2023).

Rajabalee and Santaly (2021) conducted a study examining the relationship between student satisfaction and engagement in an online course. Student feedback was analyzed and revealed a significant positive correlation between satisfaction and engagement.

Chan et al. (2021) identified a significant positive relationship was found between the Online Student Engagement (OSE) score and perceived learning satisfaction. A one unit increase in perceived learning satisfaction was associated with a 17.2 times likelihood of higher learner engagement (Chan et al., 2021).

Hensley et al. (2021) conducted a study where undergraduate and graduate students from six universities completed the Online Student Engagement Scale consisting of four factors: skills (cognitive effort), emotional (value placed on learning), participation (dialogue & interaction with students), and performance (test scores & grades). Performance engagement was the highest reported engagement while the least important was participation (interaction with other students).

Heflin et al. (2021) conducted a study about how a diversity of online engagement tasks may be best to help students learn. Faculty need to teach students how to be successful in online courses where independence, engagement and effort positively influence learning. Students equate engagement with time devoted to course work (Heflin et al., 2021).

Lin et al. (2021) examined influencing factors of student engagement in an online learning environment. Educational, social, and technological factors significantly improved superficial learning engagement. Educational factors significantly improved students' deep learning engagement, while social and technological factors did not significantly improve students' deep engagement. Deep engagement was

improved when the learning environment allowed the activity to be implemented. Social (interaction with other students) and technological (usability of learning environment) only improved superficial engagement of students (Lin et al, 2021).

Qureshi et al. (2021) explored the impact of social factors on higher education student's performance through collaborative learning and engagement. The study by Qureshi et al. (2021) looked at the ability of social factors for developing collaborative learning and engagement, and whether collaborative learning and engagement mediated a link between social factors and student's learning performance. Constructivism theory was utilized to observe the student's learning behavior. Data was collected through questionnaires from 398 university students.

Findings evaluated through structural equation modeling (SEM), showed that social factors (i.e. interaction with peers and teachers, social presence, and usage of social media) positively impacted active collaborative learning and student involvement, thereby affecting student learning performance (Qureshi et al., 2021). The findings from Qureshi et al. (2021) study showed:

- Interacting with peers significantly impacted active collaborative learning.
- Interacting with instructors significantly impacted active collaborative learning.
- Social presence significantly impacted active collaborative learning.
- Using social media significantly impacted active collaborative learning.
- Active collaborative learning significantly impacted student's engagement.
- Student engagement significantly impacted learning performance.
- Active collaborative learning mediated the relation among social factors (i.e. interaction with peers, student-instructor interaction, social presence, social media use) and students' engagement.
- Student engagement mediated the relationship among social factors, active collaborative learning, and learning performance.

As online learning is becoming more prevalent in education, students could easily collaborate with peers and faculty through social media and exchange information along with ideas which develop learning. One could conclude that overall collaborative learning and engagement with influence of social factors could improve students learning (Qureshi et al., 2021).

Serembus et al. (2019) studied the relationship between student engagement and outcomes for online Master of Science in nursing students. Engagement variables identified were: number of times students accessed the course; minutes spent within the course, interactions within course, and number of submissions within the course. Interactions and submissions had highest impact on final grade (Serembus et al., 2019).

Li et al. (2022) examined the influence of teaching motivations on student engagement in an online learning environment in China. The focus of the study was to apply self-determination theory to investigate the factors that influence student engagement in the online learning environment. There was emphasis of self-determination theory on using instructional tasks to invoke students' intrinsic motivations as the critical step in facilitating high-quality engagement. Student engagement significantly positively correlated with autonomy-supportive teaching motivations, perceived autonomy, perceived competence and perceived relatedness. Autonomy supportive teaching is learner centered, motivates intrinsically, and give learners right to self-choice in way to study. Autonomy-supportive teaching motivations positively affect student engagement & intrinsic motivation (Li et al., 2022).

Components of Engagement

Redmond et al. (2018) identifies three main components of engagement: behavioral, emotional and cognitive. Two additional constituencies of engagement (social and collaborative) are added for online learning. These five engagement factors are interrelated and interconnected to each other and critical for active learner engagement and impact engagement in online learning (Redmond et.al., 2018).

Behavioral engagement is related to the active participation of the learner in academic activities. The learner completes all academic activities, does the work and keeps the rules. Collaborative engagement is the development of different relationships and networks that support learning, including collaboration with peers and instructors. Emotional engagement refers to learner's emotional reaction to learning, his/her feelings or attitudes towards learning. Social engagement refers to students' social investment in the collegiate experience. Social engagement includes participation in academic, as well as non-academic activities, which occur outside the virtual classroom, such as recreation or social functions, along with discussions of a social nature. Cognitive engagement is the active process of learning and related to what students do and think to promote learning (Redmond et.al., 2018).

Per Hampton et al. (2023), student engagement in online learning includes six behaviors: thoughts and feelings about the experience; interactions with peers to complete work; problem solving; communication with faculty; supportive associations with course colleagues to go about the work of the course; and involvement in activities and assignments for the course. Online student engagement also consists of four dimensions: to include skills (activities that lead to academic achievement such as studying); emotional involvement (applying course concepts to one's own life); participation or interaction (involvement in course activities); and performance (outcomes or course success).

Indicators of Student Engagement and Motivation

Halverson et al. (2019) offered a review of research on learner engagement, proposed a set of indicators of engagement and showed the importance of those indicators to engagement in blended settings. Emotional and cognitive engagement are most fundamental expressions of learner engagement. Most elemental indicators of engagement show whether learners are investing mental and emotional energy in the learning process (Halverson et al, 2019).

Halverson et al. (2019) goes on to explain that some elemental indicators of engagement involve cognitive engagement, quality factors, positive emotional engagement, and negative emotional engagement. Cognitive engagement – quantity factors are attention, effort and persistence, and time on task. Quality factors include cognitive and metacognitive strategy use, deep concentration or absorption, and individual interest or curiosity. Positive emotional engagement factors are situational interest or enjoyment, happiness and confidence. Negative emotional engagement factors include enervated emotion (tiredness, sadness, boredom), alienated emotion (frustrations, anger), and pressured participation (anxiety). Cognitive and emotional engagement are key factors essential to understanding learner engagement. Cognitive engagement is indicated in attention, effort and persistence, time on task, cognitive and metacognitive strategy use, absorption, and curiosity; emotional engagement through interest, happiness, confidence, and the absence of boredom, frustration, and anxiety (Halverson et al., 2019).

Liu et al. (2022) examined influences of environmental perception on individual cognitive engagement in online learning: The mediating effect of self-efficacy. Liu et al. (2022) explored answers to the following questions: In online learning, how do student self-factors, teacher factors, peer factors, and technological factors impact individual cognitive engagement?

Does self-efficacy have a mediating effect on student's environmental perception on individual cognitive engagement?

Findings included the following: Student self-factors had significant positive promotion on individual cognitive engagement (stronger self-control=stronger learning motivation); teacher factors had significant positive promotion on individual cognitive engagement (experience sharing, emotional exchange, learning skill communication); peer factors had no significant positive promotion effect on individual cognitive engagement; and technological factors had significant positive promotion on individual cognitive engagement (can concentrate on learning screens more and strengthen perceptual knowledge). Self-efficacy had a mediating effect in the significantly positive promotion of environmental perception on individual cognitive engagement [can strengthen the cognitive engagement of learners] (Liu et al., 2022).

Factors of Learning

Full engagement requires meaningful interactions between student and internal/external factors of learning. Lin et al. (2021) explored influencing factors of learners' cognitive engagement in an online learning environment. The Pedagogical Affordance-Social Affordance-Technical Affordance (PST) model was used to design a questionnaire to investigate the influencing factors of learners' cognitive engagement in an online learning environment. A technically supported effective learning environment is equipped with educational (characteristic of learning environment that determines whether a learning activity can be implemented), social (the learning environment perceived by learners can promote social interaction of students), and technological (usability of a learning environment) affordances. Educational, social, and technological affordances significantly improved superficial learning engagement. Educational affordance significantly improved learners' deep engagement, while social and technological affordances did not significantly improve learner's deep engagement. Deep engagement was improved when the learning environment allowed the activity to be implemented. Social (interaction with other students) and technological (usability of learning environment) only improved superficial engagement of learners (Lin et al., 2021).

Engagement of Adult Learners

Knowles (1980, 2005) described six core principles of adult learning theory which included (a) learners' need to know, (b) self-concept, (c) prior experience, (d) readiness to learn, (e) learning orientation, and (f) motivation to learn. Adult engagement in learning would more likely occur if learning were directly applied to an individual's life. When learning is purposeful, and there is a desire to know, learners' engagement could be enhanced. Immediacy of application and relevance of knowledge may positively impact the learner's quest to acquire more information.

Ornelles et al. (2019) discussed how student engagement was enhanced through course instructional design and faculty facilitation. Knowledge of theory and research in adult learning and student engagement based on the work of Knowles (1980) offered the foundation for understanding teaching and learning to develop a framework. The framework of critical components for engagement of adult online learners can be used to inform development of online course assignments and activities that maximize student engagement and learning (Ornelles et al., 2019).

Characteristics of Online Students

Characteristics of an online student can vary widely depending on individual traits, motivations, and circumstances. However, there are several key characteristics that tend to be common among successful online learners. Key characteristics common among most online students include: effective self-discipline, time management skills, motivation and initiative, communication skills, technological proficiency, adaptability and resilience, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, collaboration and networking, independent learning skills, and commitment to academic integrity (Bergdahl, 2022; Brown et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2023; Kerr, 2006; Lu, 2020). Overall, successful online students demonstrate a combination of self-motivation, organization, communication skills, adaptability, and a commitment to continuous learning. These characteristics contribute to students' ability to thrive in virtual learning environments and achieve academic success.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BEHAVIORALLY, AFFECTIVELY AND COGNITIVELY ENGAGED STUDENTS.

Bergdahl (2022) identified students who are behaviorally engaged usually display proactive use of digital technologies to support learning. Cognitively engaged students require digital technologies to enhance cognitive abilities and find it easy to concentrate when working digitally. Emotionally engaged students rely on digital technologies and find creating and doing homework with digital technologies satisfactory. Socially engaged students are satisfied with online feedback and perceive that digital technologies enable inclusion, participation and belonging (Bergdahl, 2022).

Characteristics of Students who are Disengaged

Students who are disengaged may do so due to financial strains; work and study workloads; mental, emotional and physical health issues; unfamiliar course expectations; discordant family expectations; problems navigating university systems and cultures; and issues related to self-directed learning and time management (Bergdahl, 2022; Lawrence et al., 2019). Additionally, some characteristics of students who disengage include not attending class, not communicating with peers and faculty, turning assignments in late, and/or not participating or limited participation in discussion forums (Bergdahl, 2022; Lawrence et al., 2019). Bergdahl (2022) also indicated behaviorally disengaged students may display unauthorized use of digital technologies. Cognitively disengaged students may experience information overflow and get easily distracted. Emotionally disengaged students may use digital technol-

ogies to escape feelings of boredom. Socially disengaged students feel isolated and left to manage digital technologies alone (Bergdahl, 2022).

How to Support Students When They are Disengaged

When students become disengaged in an online course, it is critical for faculty/coach to implement strategies that can help re-engage and foster a positive learning experience. Mooney (2025) states teaching in higher education is complex and necessitates creating an even more inclusive and engaging environment when students become disengaged. Research indicates three elements crucial to building and maintaining student engagement include establishing trust, setting expectations, and capturing student interest. These three elements are influential strategies for strengthening connection and motivation in the learning environment starting on the initial day of class (Curzan & Damour, 2000; Davis, 1993; Lucas, 2006; McKeachie, 2002).

Per Mooney (2025), the first day of class can be a moment to ignite curiosity, build collaboration, and encourage mutual engagement throughout the semester. A more impactful approach to the first day of class can begin with the focus on hearing students' thoughts. In addition to review of course policies and classroom expectations, faculty can ask students questions to initiate mutual engagement such as: "What do you think about this plan? How might we improve it together?" (Mooney, 2025, para 4). The pedagogical move to mutual engagement enhances shared responsibility and corresponds with scholarship advocating for student-centered participatory strategies to classroom oversight (Brooks, 1987; Feldmann, 2001; Gonzalez & Lopez, 2001).

In summary, there may be several effective strategies to support disengaged students in an online course based on the work of Curzan & Damour (2000), Davis (1993), Lucas (2006), McKeachie (2002), and Mooney (2025). Some of these effective strategies to support disengaged students may include identifying the root cause of disengagement, providing clear expectations and guidelines through course orientation and clear communication, enhancing course materials and activities through varying content, promoting active learning and interaction through engagement activities (discussion forums, group projects, case studies, or debates that require active participation, and peer collaboration activities) and encouraging students to share thoughts and questions; personalizing experiences by offering individual support; facilitating communication and accessibility through open channels of communication (regular communication through announcements, emails, and discussion forums, encouraging students to reach out with questions or concerns, and respond promptly to inquiries); using technology effectively (i.e. user-friendly learning management system and digital tools); encouraging goal setting

and progress monitoring; offering support services; promoting a positive learning environment; monitoring and intervening early; as well as seeking feedback and adjusting strategies. Using effective strategies to support disengaged students such as those outlined by Curzan & Damour (2000), Davis (1993), Lucas (2006), McKeachie (2002), and Mooney (2025) may increase positive engagement, motivation, and effective online learning.

Components of Positive Engagement in Online Courses

Primary components of positive engagement in online courses are related to faculty engagement. The faculty engagement aspects of faculty/coach presence, and faculty/coach immediacy and caring are key contributors to positive engagement in online courses.

Faculty Engagement

Faculty/Coach Presence

The relationship between faculty presence and student motivation in an online context is crucial for fostering a positive and engaging learning environment. Some key elements of the relationship between faculty presence and student motivation in an online setting may include: sensing faculty availability, impacting student engagement, establishing a learning community, motivating through feedback and encouragement, setting expectations and goals, role modeling and inspiring, promoting autonomy and responsibility, and building trust and rapport (Heflin & Macaluso, 2021; Huber et al., 2023; Sitzman, 2016; Sitzman & Watson, 2017; Wright et al., 2023; Zajac, 2025; Zajac & Lane, 2020).

Faculty presence in the online learning environment may significantly contribute to student motivation by building a sense of support, engagement, community, and accountability. When faculty actively engage with students, provide meaningful feedback, and create a positive learning atmosphere, faculty may enhance students' motivation to learn, participate, and succeed academically (Heflin & Macaluso, 2021; Huber et al., 2023; Sitzman, 2016; Sitzman & Watson, 2017; Wright et al., 2023; Zajac, 2025; Zajac & Lane, 2020).

Faculty can influence student motivation through online presence in several ways. Some top behaviors of faculty online presence that can positively promote student motivation include: clear communication of expectations, prompt and constructive feedback, engagement and interaction, use of multimedia and interactive content, accessibility and approachability, encouragement of critical thinking and creativity, sharing real-life relevance, setting clear achievable goals, celebrating student

successes, and role modeling life-long learning. Incorporating top behaviors of faculty online presence can create a supportive and engaging learning environment that promotes student motivation and academic success (Heflin & Macaluso, 2021; Huber et al., 2023; Sitzman, 2016; Sitzman & Watson, 2017; Wright et al., 2023; Zajac, 2025; Zajac & Lane, 2020).

Faculty/Coach Immediacy and Caring

Faculty immediacy is defined as the faculty's verbal and nonverbal behaviors that decrease the perceived psychological distance between faculty and students (Anderson, 1979; Freitas et al., 1998; Mehrabian, 1969; Mehrabian, 1971). Per Heflin and Macaluso (2021), faculty immediacy and caring behaviors refer to the ways in which faculty demonstrate approachability, warmth, and concern for students' learning and well-being. Faculty immediacy and caring behaviors are important in both face-to-face and online teaching environments because of significant contribution to student engagement, motivation, and overall academic success. Heflin and Macaluso (2021) conducted a study to assess the level to which students engage and learn from online courses. Students completed a survey to gain perceptions of learning and engaging in online courses and face-to-face courses. Equal number of students agreed and disagreed that online courses resulted in learning the same amount of information gleaned in face-to-face courses. Findings also indicated that students were more engaged and used more effort in online courses than face-to-face courses (Heflin & Macaluso, 2021).

Some immediacy behaviors may include active presence online, prompt feedback, consistent and clear communication, use of student name, active listening, encouraging participation, and accessibility. Caring behaviors may include establishing a personal connection, displaying empathy and support, personalizing feedback, being flexible and understanding, celebrating achievements, using a respectful tone, and promoting well-being.

Sitzman (2016) examined what student cues prompt online faculty to offer caring interventions. Fifty-six online faculty from 10 states and 20 academic institutions completed an online survey. The online survey requested information about student cues that prompt caring interventions, what interventions faculty offer in response to the student cues, and how students respond to the interventions. Six student cues categories emerged: academic struggle, appeals for help, concerning behaviors, withdrawal, personal problems, and positive events. The three faculty intervention responses categories identified were reaching out, concrete academic support, and intentional caring comportment. Student responses to caring interventions consisted of three categories: gratitude, finding their voice, and academic improvement.

Zajac and Lane (2020) conducted a study using mixed-method design in relation to student perceptions of faculty presence and caring in accelerated online courses. Students were invited to rank in order 10 phrases linked to faculty characteristics in an online environment. The 10 phrases included: provides timely communication, offers academic support, presents an empathetic presence, provides balanced feedback, reflects content expertise, facilitates interaction with students, inquiries about students' difficulties, displays a tone of appreciation, promotes student engagement, and promotes freedom of expression. The three highest ranked faculty characteristics were timely communication, offers academic support, and presents an empathetic presence.

Wright et al. (2023) conducted a scoping review that explored peer-reviewed scholarship related to the features of online learning in postsecondary contexts. Four specific themes related to online courses in higher education emerged from the scoping review of 38 articles. The four themes identified in the review were design, faculty facilitation, student engagement, and quality assessment. Most of the articles focused on the design ($n = 15$; 39.5%) and faculty facilitation ($n = 12$; 31.6%) in higher education online courses (Wright et al., 2023).

The facilitation theme encompassed faculty presence aspects (Wright et al., 2023). Baker (2010) and Hodges and Cowan (2012) explored characteristics of faculty presence by collecting perspectives of the elements of quality faculty presence via implementation of surveys to undergraduate students. Results of Baker's (2010) survey indicated that comparatively, faculty presence and immediacy was high in synchronous online learning environments and faculty presence and immediacy was low in asynchronous online learning environments (Baker, 2010; Wright et al., 2023). Four instrumental aspects of quality faculty presence identified from Hodges and Cowan's (2012) survey were timely responses, clear communication and instruction, faculty availability, and the design and layout of the course (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Wright et al., 2023). Overall, nine (23.7%) of the included articles in Wright et al. (2023) work "discussed student engagement and participation in online classrooms in higher education, specifically, students' experiences with information and communication technology (ICT) tools, course organization and expectations, and general interactions with the course, including interactions with faculty and students" (Wright et al., 2023, p. 58).

A number of common elements connected to faculty presence and student engagement in high-quality online courses in higher education representing perception of caring were identified. Some of the common elements included faculty being available; providing clear directions, timely responses, frequent postings, and meaningful feedback; expanding invitation for student participation and collaboration; and intertwining faculty intellectual understanding, as well as social and teaching presence into the online learning environment (Wright, et al., 2023).

Huber et al. (2023) conducted a mixed method study exploring graduate student perceptions of nursing faculty immediacy-caring actions for accelerated online courses. Graduate students completed the 30-item Online Faculty Caring, Presence, and Immediacy Behaviors Survey. The highest ranked behaviors included timely communication, offers academic support, and presents an empathetic presence. Five qualitative themes identified included: high value of audio and visual cues; faculty willingness to communicate; meaningful, timely, and respectful faculty feedback; faculty compassionate support and understanding; and lack of faculty “being there.”

Sitzman & Watson (2017) shared guidance for conveying and sustaining caring in online learning environments. Strategies for faculty on how to create a caring professional manner include:

- Convey the belief that students will be successful in the online setting.
- Recount online challenges and solutions so students know they are not alone in their experiences.
- Give weekly praise and encouragement to individuals and/or groups for work that is well done.
- Express enthusiasm for online teaching and learning.
- Enable and enthusiastically engage in multiple forms of digital world communication to create space for the miracles of significant connection, coaching, and mentoring to unfold among all participants engaged in the teaching/learning process.
- Acknowledge awareness of shared humanity—discuss challenges and triumphs by verbalizing awareness and understanding of shared human frailties and experiences.

Sitzman & Watson (2017) discussed that being aware of strategies to support online caring is useful. However, identifying the right words to incorporate in day to day interactions can be difficult. Sitzman & Watson (2017) offer some examples of helpful words to use in everyday interactions to enhance digital caring. Some exemplars to convey full presence may include: “I am here for you; My thoughts are with you; I am working online all day today-call/email/text if you need me” (Sitzman & Watson, 2017, p. 80-81). Some exemplars to ask for clarification include: “How are you feeling about...; Please talk to me about what you envision for this project/assignment/situation; Is everything okay” (Sitzman & Watson, 2017, p. 82-83). Some exemplars to propose flexible solutions include: I am inviting input from everyone regarding how to make the project/assignment/rubric/ test questions(s)/ instructions clearer. Please let me know your thoughts” (Sitzman & Watson, 2017, p. 82-83). Some exemplars to convey shared humanity may include: “We are in this together; I will do my best for you as we work through this together; I can share

with you what works for me if you are interested” (Sitzman & Watson, 2017, p. 80-81). Some exemplars to convey attending to the individual include: “I want you to be successful; You are important to me; Your work is valuable to me” (Sitzman & Watson, 2017, p. 82-83).

Conveying humanity and attending to the individual demonstrate care and compassion which may offer students motivation and sense of purpose (Sitzman & Watson, 2017; Zajac, 2025). Zajac (2025) identified faculty incorporation of caring and being present in the online environment establishes a base for nurse educator practice. Students exude compassion for each other when feel cared for by faculty (Zajac, 2025). When online students perceive faculty caring, there is increased academic perform and chance of success (Zajac, 2025).

A couple of quotes by Sitzman (2016) and Sitzman & Watson (2017) resonate faculty immediacy and caring. “When we take time to offer a simple kind word as an authentic nonverbal gesture of concern and caring, we become a gift to the world” (Sitzman & Watson, 2017, p. 87). “Genuine caring in online courses can be effectively shared through mindful attention, lovingkindness, compassionate awareness, courteousness, mercy, and appreciation for the humanity of self and others” (Sitzman, 2016, p. 70). Genuine faculty immediacy and caring behaviors can lead to increased student motivation. Increased student motivation can lead to positive engagement in online courses. Faculty can further enhance positive interaction in online courses by incorporating engagement best practices.

ENGAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES

Engagement best practices to enhance the student online learning experience are many. Select engagement best practices will be discussed. The key engagement best practices described center on conceptual models, best teaching practices, effective engagement strategies for coaches, and faculty caring and immediacy behaviors.

Conceptual Models for Engagement of an Online Learner

Conceptual models for online learning support faculty in designing high-impact and significant e-learning experiences to engage the online student. There are several conceptual models for engagement of online learners. For this chapter, five conceptual models are mentioned.

A historical conceptual model for online learning entitled Model for Engagement was developed by Angelino and Natvig (2009). Model for Engagement offers various experiences where student-instructor, student-student, student-content, and student-community engagement can occur. The Model for Engagement consists of

four strategic areas: recruitment, coursework, post coursework, and alumni. The Model for Engagement can help faculty better understand student needs and design more effective teaching strategies to foster an enhanced engaged online learning experience.

Puentedura (2009, 2020) developed a conceptual model called Substitution-Augmentation-Modification-Redefinition (SAMR). The SAMR model was created to introduce technology in education. The SAMR model describes the use of technology in learning tasks, from the simplest (substitution) to the most complex and innovative (redefinition). The SAMR model considers substitution and augmentation as methods to improve learning tasks, while modifications and redefinitions allow for transformation. The SAMR model values students and is interested in how students' learning process are impacted by technology integration. The SAMR conceptual model offers a holistic approach to teaching with technology through focusing on faculty and students' interaction with technology-enhanced teaching and learning activities.

The Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate (ADDIE) instructional design model (Branson et al., 1975) is commonly used in the creation of instructional courses. The ADDIE model provides faculty with useful and clearly defined five stages (analyze, design, develop, implement, and evaluate) to create effective implementation of instruction. Additionally, the ADDIE model is student-centered rather than teacher-centered and offers a consistent approach of instruction to increase active interaction with students. Enhanced interaction between faculty and students may promote positive engagement.

The ASSURE model was introduced by Heinich, et al. (1989). The "A" stands for Analyze Learner, the first "S" is inferred as Objectives and State Standards; the second "S" for Selecting Media, Strategies, Materials, and Technology; the "U" for Utilizing Materials, Media, and Technology; the "R" stands for Required Learner Participation; and the "E" is appropriated for Revise and Evaluate. The ASSURE model is widely used in online learning (Lei, 2023). The ASSURE model is one instructional design model that has the aim to generate more effective teaching and learning which may lead to improved engagement between the faculty online student.

The 6P4C conceptual model was introduced by Byrne (2023). The 6P4C conceptual model incorporates instructional design and delivery considerations through a practical set of guiding questions and heuristics. The 6P4C model helps guide faculty through the vast options of web-based applications, digital tools and learning platforms while also helping to humanize e-learning through the 4C's; deliberate fostering of civility, communication, collaboration and community-building. These connective principles interweave the six key design and delivery considerations the 6P's which include: the participants (learners), platforms used for teaching/learning, a well-developed teaching plan, safe spaces for intellectual play, engaging and

inclusive presentations and regular checking of the pulse of learners and the tools being used. The 6P4C model builds on similar guiding frameworks of the SAMR, ADDIE and ASSURE models (Byrne, 2023).

In summary, the five conceptual models discussed employ various methods to engage the online learner. While the five conceptual models display different approaches to connect with the online learner, there is a consistent goal of aiming to humanize electronic learning (e-learning). Humanizing online learning by promoting civility, communication, collaboration, and community building (Byrne, 2023) lays the foundation for constructing best teaching practices.

Best Teaching Practices in a Face/Face Course to Apply to Online Course

In historical literature and still current today, Koeckeritz et al. (2002) reviewed seven principles of good practice and shared examples of application for online education in nursing. The seven principles of good practice included: encourage student-faculty contact, encourage cooperation among students, encourage active learning, give prompt feedback, emphasize time on task, communicate high expectations, and respect diverse talents and ways of learning. Some examples of application of the best teaching practices/principles are as follows: Have students/faculty introduce themselves within first few weeks; provide warm environment to encourage student participation; indicate available office hours and expectations regarding response to emails and submitted assignments; set tone of mutual respect; keep students informed via announcements; group students for discussions; set clear expectations for interactivity in the course along with rationale; publish units of study to allow students to work ahead; send reminders of assignment due dates; set clear written expectations for attendance and participation; let students know consequences of cheating; and use a variety of teaching tools and strategies to address diverse learning styles (Koeckeritz et al., 2002). Incorporation of the seven principles of good practice in online nursing education can increase student and faculty engagement.

Coach Engagement

Effective coach engagement can facilitate student success. Effective coach engagement can be enhanced with support of faculty, particularly course lead faculty. Faculty can support coaches by building a trusting relationship, being a mentor, and providing resources.

Engagement Strategies for Coaches

Broussard and White-Jefferson (2018) describe how one large nursing program utilized academic coaches to facilitate student success in an online Registered Nurse to Bachelor of Science Nursing (RN-to-BSN) program. Faculty were resource for coaches and students. Faculty met with coaches during virtual meetings at least two times a week to identify expectations such as importance of responding to student questions in a timely manner to enhance engagement. For student and coach success, it is important to begin engagement immediately at the beginning of the course.

How to Support Coach's Engagement

White-Jefferson et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative exploratory methodology to gain insight on the use of academic coaches in online nursing courses. Four themes identified and applicable to supporting coach's engagement included review overall expectations; provide onboarding and orientation; offer academic coach oversight; and incorporate best practices to operationalize the role of academic coaches. Faculty can support coach's engagement by establishing rapport and trust, active listening, building personal connections, setting SMART goals, establishing action plans, providing structured support, having regular meetings, offering feedback and guidance, sharing resources, teaching effective study skills, encouraging critical thinking, participate in self-advocacy, promote motivation and confidence, offer positive reinforcement, offer encouragement, offer visualizations and affirmation, utilize technology and tools, use virtual platforms, promote accountability, establish accountability partnerships, participate in progress tracking, and encourage reflection and growth (White-Jefferson et al., 2020).

Steps to Take When a Coach is not Engaged Within a Course

Helpful tips to employ when a coach is not engaged include: Assess the situation, document the issues, communicate directly, seek clarification, explore alternative communication channels, and consult course guidelines. If the aforementioned tips are not effective, notify course coordinator or department head. If concern still not addressed, request replacement, explore other resources, and reflect and adjust.

CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS IF THE LEAD FACULTY IS NOT FULFILLING THE LEADERSHIP ROLE.

Crucial conversations to employ if lead faculty is not fulling the leadership role include section faculty/coaches sharing concerns with lead faculty, collaborative (section faculty/coach, program/school/college director) creation of course lead faculty duties with evaluation, and development of lead faculty seeking out professional faculty development opportunities.

Successful student engagement is dependent upon an effective lead faculty. Per Freitas Junior et al. (2021), lead faculty roles can include resource provider, instructional specialist, curriculum specialist, classroom supporter, learning facilitator, mentor, school leader, and catalyst for change and learner.

Faculty/Coach Immediacy Strategies

Student Perceptions of Faculty Immediacy in Online Courses

Huber et al. (2023) conducted a study examining graduate nursing students' perception of faculty immediacy behaviors in a seven-week online course using the Online Faculty Caring, Presence, and Immediacy Behaviors Survey. Two of five identified themes related to student perception of faculty immediacy focused on communication. One theme was faculty willingness to communicate and offer meaningful, timely, and respectful faculty feedback. A second theme was willingness of faculty to communicate via written (email), zoom or phone calls. Students valued faculty who took initiative to communicate clear expectations and meaningful feedback (Huber et al., 2023).

Hoffman et al. (2023) examined seven semesters of data from an undergraduate asynchronous course that employed a competency-based approach and incorporated three types of assignments: initial, deadline-driven, and no-deadline. Five significant predictors of final course grade included: immediacy of engagement with the initial lesson, immediacy of engagement with the deadline-driven lessons, regularity of engagement with the deadline-driven lessons, frequency of engagement with no-deadline lessons, and immediacy of engagement with no-deadline lessons (Hoffman et al., 2023).

STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS FOR INTEGRATING CARING AND IMMEDIACY BEHAVIORS INTO ONLINE COURSES

Wilson et al. (2021) identified eight best practices to assist with integrating caring and immediacy behaviors into online courses. The eight best practices included: orientation video or synchronous session; table with weekly requirements; communicate response times for instructor and student and maintain the response times; communicate sense of caring; communicate clear expectations and maintain clear expectations; incorporate rubrics and clear guidelines for assignments; communicate regularly; and provide professional development for online instructors to engage students. Communication with and availability of instructors is critical to satisfaction and satisfaction is strongly associated with engagement (Wilson et al., 2021).

Maximize Meaningful Interactions with Students and Coaches

Strategies to promote student engagement behaviorally, affectively and cognitively can maximize meaningful interactions with students and coaches. When students become disengaged in an online course, it is crucial for faculty to implement strategies that can help re-engage students and foster a positive learning experience. Brown et al. (2022) and Lawrence et al. (2019) discussed use of nudging principles to increase student engagement in their courses. Strategies to promote student engagement could include identify the root cause of the disengagement, provide clear expectations and guidelines, enhance course materials and activities (i.e. incorporate multimedia), promote active learning and interaction (i.e. discussion forums, group projects, case studies, and such), personalize learning experiences (i.e. personalized feedback on assignments), facilitate open communication and accessibility, use technology effectively (i.e. user friendly platforms), encourage goal setting and progress monitoring, offer support services (i.e. Informational Technology (IT), counseling, tutoring, and such), promote a positive and inclusive learning environment, monitor for early disengagement warning signs and intervene early, and seek feedback and adjust strategies.

Helping Students Build Community Within a Course

Being truly engaged includes emotions, feelings and finding value in the experience, which can help build a community within a course. Borup et al. (2020) discussed the Academic Communities of Engagement (ACE) framework which identified a student's ability to engage affectively, behaviorally, and cognitively in an online course independently or with two types of support: course community and personal community. Student engagement is relationship building in an online

class. Student engagement activities such as student generated questions and discussion boards can help students build community within a course. Martin and Borup (2022) built on the ACE framework by integrating scholarship from educational technology with scholarship from educational psychology and the learning sciences to reconceptualize online learner engagement that considers critical dimensions of learner engagement and environmental factors.

Juan (2021) examined whether student generated questions could improve students' engagement in an online nursing course. Undergraduate students in one university from two different nursing leadership courses participated. There was a control and intervention group. Student generated question activities were implemented in four weeks of the sixteen-week course in the intervention group. Data was obtained from the learning management system intervention. Students in the intervention group had higher mean scores during the weeks the student generated assignments were required. The use of student generated questions increased student engagement. Scott et al. (2021) found that students felt discussions encouraged engagement and presence of faculty and peers. To foster engagement and build community, discussion boards should be created in an insightful manner to encourage discussion between students (Scott et al., 2021).

Luo et al. (2023) compared the influence of different instructor humor styles on students' online learning engagement and to explore the mediating role of academic emotions in the relationship between instructor humor styles and online learning engagement using the Teacher Humor Scale, Academic Emotions Questionnaire, and Learning Engagement Questionnaire. Course-related humor had direct effect on behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Course-related humor can increase engagement (Luo et al., 2023).

Faculty presence can also help build community. Tiedt et al. (2021) examined the effect of online course length on nurse educator students' perceptions of the learning experience and to examine the development of a community of inquiry in an eight-week versus sixteen-week online graduate nursing course. Twenty-seven graduate students at one university taking the same course (one eight-weeks and one sixteen weeks) in different semesters taught by same instructor completed the Community of Inquiry Questionnaire which consisted of three subscales: social presence (connection to other students), cognitive presence (cognitive & intellectual engagement), and teaching presence (teacher behavior). Positive teaching presence activities can include holding class meetings, having an introduce self-discussion, sending emails just to check on student, and including peer to peer activities. Students reported higher teacher presence in the eight-week course (Tiedt et al., 2021).

Luo et al. (2023) identified academic emotions are associated with learning, teaching, and achievement in an educational environment. Positive academic emotions can lead to pleasure and hope while negative academic emotions can lead to worry

and anxiety. Positive academic emotions promote learning engagement whereas negative emotions inhibit engagement (Luo et al. 2023).

Use of Technology to Promote Engagement and Faculty Immediacy

Use of technology to promote engagement and faculty immediacy may include activities using video and/or audio, activities promoting immediate response from students, and assignments promoting interaction with students. Handel et al. (2022) examined the use of webcam and impact on student engagement in synchronous online learning. Students having webcams turned on had more opportunities for greater interaction, timely and constructive feedback, real-time collaborative learning, and creating a stronger element of community leading to increased interactions.

Watson et al. (2023) conducted a mixed method study to determine student and faculty perceptions of the effectiveness of various online teaching modalities and to determine which modalities may be useful in improving educational experiences of students in the traditional classroom setting. Students and faculty from two universities completed a survey and then some students and faculty completed focus groups. Some useful modalities considered most effective identified by students to promote engagement and faculty immediacy included pre-recorded lectures, question and answer sessions, response activities (Kahoot, and such), and small group collaborations if self-selected. Faculty identified optimization of technology, collaborative nature of online/virtual learning experiences, and impact on class performance (Watson et al., 2023).

Ahshan et al. (2021) implemented a framework for active student engagement for online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The design of the developed framework combined a balance of adjusted teaching pedagogy, educational technologies (i.e. Google Meet, Jamboard, Google Chat, Breakout room, and such), and an e-learning management system (i.e. Moodle). A questionnaire was incorporated to gain student perspective on the framework in terms of active student engagement. Findings indicated that the e-learning management system was effective in implementing active student engagement opportunities. Additionally, the framework provided student-student interactions, student-faculty interactions, and ensured social presence,

The combined utilized technologies, synchronous teaching, and active learning activities in the developed framework was effective for interactive learning.

In review, some best practices to engage the online learner include: (a) use conceptual models to design high-impact and significant e-learning experiences such as Model for Engagement (Angelino & Natvig, 2009), SAMR model (Puentedura, 2009, 2020), ADDIE instructional design model (Branson et al., 1975), ASSURE

model (Heinich, et al., 1989), and 6P4C model (Byrne, 2023); (b) incorporate best teaching practices such as Koeckeritz's et al. (2002) seven principles of good practice: encourage student-faculty contact, encourage cooperation among students, encourage active learning, give prompt feedback, emphasize time on task, communicate high expectations, and respect diverse talents and ways of learning; (c) utilize effective engagement strategies for coaches such as faculty being a resource for coaches, reviewing overall expectations; providing onboarding and orientation; offering academic coach oversight; support coach's engagement (i.e. establish trust, build personal connection, actively listen, set goals, provide structured support, offer encouragement, and such), stay attuned to unengaged coach and offer support and strategies to re-engage; (d) integrate faculty caring and immediacy behaviors in online courses; (e) maximize meaningful interactions with students and coaches; (f) help students build community within a course; and (g) use technology to promote engagement and faculty immediacy.

In conclusion... At the heart of effective student engagement and motivation lies faculty/coach immediacy and caring. Faculty/coach immediacy and caring centers on the student, which aligns with the foundation of best practices in online education of putting students first. When students feel engaged and cared for, students are motivated to learn.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Motivation: Academic motivation is defined as the momentum that underpins individual behavior related to persistence, learning, and academic performance. A psychological dimension that plays a crucial factor in learning and development, especially in the online learning venue (Vania et al., 2022)

Best Practice: A procedure that has been shown by research and experience to produce optimal results and that is established or proposed as a standard suitable for widespread adoption (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Faculty Immediacy: The faculty’s verbal and nonverbal behaviors that decrease the perceived psychological distance between faculty and students (Anderson, 1979; Freitas et al., 1998; Mehrabian, 1969; Mehrabian, 1971).

Faculty Immediacy and Caring Behaviors: Faculty immediacy and caring behaviors refer to the ways in which faculty demonstrate approachability, warmth, and concern for students’ learning and well-being (Heflin and Macaluso, 2021).

Faculty Presence: Faculty actively engage with students, provide meaningful feedback, and create a positive learning atmosphere to build a sense of support, engagement, community, and accountability. (Heflin & Macaluso, 2021; Huber et al., 2023; Sitzman, 2016; Sitzman & Watson, 2017; Wright et al., 2023; Zajac, 2025; Zajac & Lane, 2020).


Student Disengagement: Students withdraw or detach from “actively participating, interacting, and collaborating with students, faculty, course content, and members of the community” (Angelino & Natvig, 2009, p. 3).

Student Engagement: Engagement in the context of online learning can be defined as “actively participating, interacting, and collaborating with students, faculty, course content, and members of the community” (Angelino & Natvig, 2009, p. 3).

Chapter 3

Assessing Student Work Using Academic Coaches

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ABSTRACT

Academic coaches are employed to provide individual interactions with some or all aspects of student's experience in higher education. Online programs, especially those with accelerated course formats and/or large enrollments, may adopt academic coaches as part of an instructional team, particularly for assessing student work. The focus of this chapter is on the involvement of academic coaches in assessment in online university courses: how they are utilized, how they interact with students and other members of the instructional team, and how reliability and consistency of assessment may be ensured when employing coaches. The results of a student survey, as well as interviews with coaches and faculty who work with coaches, are described. Suggestions for best practices are provided, and include clarifying roles, establishing and maintaining clear communication, ensuring reliable and consistent assessment and feedback, and monitoring and evaluation of coaches as part of an institution's continuous improvement efforts.

INTRODUCTION TO ACADEMIC COACHES IN ASSESSMENT: RESPONDING TO EVOLVING DEMANDS

Academic coaches occupy a unique position adjacent to but distinct from counselors, mentors, tutors, and advisors in higher education (Alzen et al., 2021; Deiorio et al., 2016; Sepulveda, 2017). Coaches are distinguished by their overriding focus: developing students' academic skills through individualized interactions. Even so,

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the roles and responsibilities of academic coaches may vary somewhat between institutions or providers of coaching services. For example, the academic coach may be a full-time employee of the institution who manages a small caseload of students over time by building relationships with them, helping them develop academic and life skills, guiding them through goal-setting and action planning, and encouraging reflection and follow-up (Sepulveda, 2017). Coaches in this role may work specifically with students at risk of attrition (Lehan & Babcock, 2020; Sepulveda, 2017). On the other hand, an academic coach may be dedicated to one or more specific courses in which their role is similar to that of a teaching assistant (Cipher et al., 2017), albeit with greater authority as a subject matter expert (SME) (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). A coach in this specialized role may have their primary employment elsewhere, and/or could be associated with multiple institutions simultaneously (Broussard & White-Jefferson, 2018).

Academic coaching is a relatively recent innovation that debuted in higher education in 2000 when one vendor began offering services to help boost student retention (Bettinger & Baker, 2011). Since then, coaches have been increasingly employed by institutions of higher education, especially those growing their online programs (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). Thus, the expansion of online higher education drives the rise of academic coaching.

In the U.S., higher education institutions have seen strong enrollment growth in online programs, even as overall enrollment has declined, and non-completion is a great concern (Lederman, 2019a; Lederman, 2019b). This is illustrated by a survey of administrators from colleges and universities across the U.S. (Garrett et al., 2023). Of the 317 respondents, 81% reported that their institution's enrollment of traditional undergraduates (under 25 years old) in face-to-face courses either remained the same or fell between fall 2021 and fall 2022, while 56% stated that enrollment in fully online or hybrid courses rose during the same period.

At the same time that online enrollments are growing, there is increased adoption of an accelerated or intensive format, with courses spanning much less time than is tradition. For example, a course traditionally offered over a 15-week semester might be accelerated to seven intensive weeks. The same content is covered but in a compressed timeframe.

Accelerated courses pre-date online learning and enable students to achieve the same learning outcomes as those enrolled in traditional formats in a shorter timeframe, making accelerated courses particularly attractive to adult learners (Daniel, 2000; Scott, 2003). Students in accelerated courses have been found to have positive perceptions of confidence and motivation for learning (Lee & Horsfall, 2010). When the same instructors deliver courses in both traditional and accelerated formats, student ratings of instruction in accelerated courses are not significantly different

from those in traditional ones; moreover, student course ratings are significantly higher for the accelerated format (Kucsera & Zimmaro, 2010).

This chapter examines academic coaches mainly in the context of assessment, specifically in online college and university courses. Accelerated courses are particularly interesting due to their increasing prevalence and unique challenges, the most salient of which is workload. Workload has been cited as a significant issue for both students and faculty in accelerated courses, and assessments are noted as an area for potential modification for the accelerated format (Lee & Horsfall, 2010). Faster feedback is linked to greater student confidence in learning the material, and yet, the shorter session length means that feedback on assessments must occur rapidly, which requires careful planning. Providing feedback quickly can be challenging for faculty, especially those with large course enrollments and substantial grading (Lee & Horsfall, 2010).

An academic coach may liaise between the faculty of record and their students (Cipher et al., 2018). Coaches serving in this capacity are often used to assess and provide feedback on student work. These coaches should be subject matter experts (SMEs) and, as such, hold appropriate academic credentials, such as a graduate degree (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022).

Many contributions to assessment are possible, depending on the type of assessment and the role assigned to the coach (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). For example, in discussion boards, coaches may actively facilitate meaningful discussions, promote reflection and stimulate further exploration of topics, evaluate the quality of student contributions, and provide guidance to improve students' communication and critical thinking skills. If the course involves writing, performances, etc., that are graded with rubrics, coaches may communicate with faculty to ensure consistency and fairness in the assessment process and with students to help them interpret rubric criteria. Coaches may offer more substantial feedback, helping students to set individualized goals for improvement and foster their metacognitive skills (Howlett et al., 2021).

Summative and formative assessments are essential elements of online higher education (Gikandi et al., 2011). Summative assessments gauge learning at the end of a defined unit and determine whether learning outcomes have been met. In contrast, formative assessments provide iterative feedback to improve learning and instruction. Formative assessment with feedback can effectively instill confidence in online students (Spady & Dunnick, 2022). However, for formative assessment to be effective, feedback must be meaningful and timely (Gikandi et al., 2011). Furthermore, formative feedback is most effective when clearly distinguished from summative assessment (Atkinson et al., 2022)

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF USING ACADEMIC COACHES IN ASSESSMENT

Due to academic coaches' varying roles and responsibilities, it can be challenging to portray the benefits of using them. Different academic coaching models could yield different or achieve similar benefits through different means. Nevertheless, there is a growing collection of evidence in support of using academic coaches in online programs. For instance, coaches who provide guidance and help with academic and related life skills have been demonstrated to boost persistence of online graduate students (Lehan et al., 2018; Lehan & Babcock, 2020).

The type of academic coaching in which trained coaches assess online student work can yield increased satisfaction (Cipher et al., 2018). However, satisfaction levels may vary: Some students may already be primed to feel at least some satisfaction regardless of whether coaches are used. For example, online graduate students with a higher "need for cognition" (the degree to which an individual enjoys and tends to engage in challenging mental tasks) experience greater satisfaction with their program, course, and instructor of record than those with a lower need for cognition (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). Students with a higher need for cognition report greater satisfaction when an academic coach is embedded in the course. This does not achieve statistical significance but suggests that some learners may be primed to derive more satisfaction from interacting with an academic coach than others.

Higher education institutions, particularly public ones, often face limited funding while being incentivized to improve student outcomes such as retention and graduation rates (Ortagus et al., 2020). Thus, an institution's investment in using academic coaches must be considered regarding two important resources: funds and time (White-Jefferson et al., 2020).

Given such limitations, it makes sense for institutions to use academic coaches when their presence is justified. The number of students is a key consideration. For instance, an enrollment of 30 or more students is a cue for an accelerated online registered nurse-to-bachelor of science in nursing (RN-BSN) program to employ coaches from a third-party vendor (White-Jefferson et al., 2020), with coordinating coaches provided for courses of 125 or more (Broussard & White-Jefferson, 2018). These coordinating coaches have extensive program experience and can help on-board and support new coaches. This is a valuable timesaver for faculty who would otherwise be responsible for these tasks.

One of the most significant challenges in using academic coaches for assessment is the time and effort spent coordinating with faculty. Ensuring consistency in assessment and feedback and establishing channels for communication and collaboration are key (Broussard & White-Jefferson, 2018; White-Jefferson et al., 2020). Students

take note and lose confidence in the course when they sense that their professor and academic coach are not “on the same page” (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022).

Coordination involves the faculty giving up some degree of control over their course delivery to the coach, which can be uncomfortable for some (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). This can be addressed by conveying expectations for the coach before the course begins and ensuring that the faculty who will work with coaches have received training on the coaching model that has been adopted. Faculty using academic coaches should be prepared to monitor the coach’s activities and provide feedback as necessary to the coach and, if an external vendor is involved, to that vendor as well.

As the use of academic coaches becomes more commonplace, it is beneficial to develop a common framework of best practices for effectively using them to assess student work in online courses. Such a framework would encompass expectations, training, communication, oversight, and clear role definitions (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). Examining a case study may be instructive in observing where and when best practices may be used.

Academic Coaching at Northern Kentucky University: A Case Study

Northern Kentucky University (NKU) illustrates one institution’s experience employing academic coaches. NKU is a public university with a population of approximately 16,000 students near Cincinnati, Ohio. NKU launched several accelerated online programs beginning in the spring of 2018, with an enrollment of just 174 accelerated online students compared to 966 in traditional online programs. By spring 2024, there were 5,110 accelerated online students, compared to 154 traditional online students (Northern Kentucky University, 2024). Thus, accelerated online enrollment grew by 2,837%, while traditional enrollment declined by 84%. As one would expect, this rapid and dramatic growth in online offerings greatly affected faculty workload.

Concurrently with implementing accelerated online programs, NKU partnered with a third-party provider of qualified academic coaches. Coaches were integrated with courses in selected accelerated online programs. The College of Business (COB) extensively adopted academic coaches, particularly for its Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. The College of Health and Human Services (CHHS) uses coaches for their Bachelor of Science in Health Science (BSHS) degree completion program. Both colleges have used coaches since the beginning of the partnership with the third-party provider. However, they have recently shifted to a different coaching model using university employees, as detailed below.

At an institutional level, having clearly defined roles for academic coaches is paramount. The NKU Online Faculty Advisory Committee (OFAC) examined various faculty roles as part of an effort to address issues of faculty workload and compensation. This discussion was muddied by the finding that different units within the university used different terms to describe faculty roles. The group's work was summarized in an internal report (NKU Online Faculty Advisory Committee, 2021) that delineated faculty roles in creating, maintaining, and delivering courses. This was a significant step towards establishing a common vocabulary that could be understood across units and used in discussing faculty workload. The committee identified five faculty roles: course creator, lead faculty, manager, teacher, and support faculty. These roles are described below and will be used throughout the case study portion of this chapter.

The course creator is the SME responsible for the course's construction. They work with instructional designers to create and/or revise the course, focusing on course design and content, often helping to set expectations for delivery.

The lead faculty member is the SME responsible for directing and maintaining the course and ensuring it is ready for each academic session. This includes ensuring integration with ancillary resources, updating the course, and/or maintaining instructor notes.

The manager role only applies to courses with large enrollments and deals with the quality of course delivery. A manager, who may or may not be a SME, develops course elements to help guide support faculty and communicates with them at the beginning of a session and throughout the course. The manager mediates issues of assessment consistency and grade disputes involving support faculty and evaluates support faculty after each session.

The teacher is the SME who maintains the course design and ensures smooth, high-quality delivery. In courses that do not have a manager, the teacher handles assessment issues and may interact with support faculty if used. If the section is large, the teacher may not have any students exclusively assigned to them; instead, they manage support faculty. Even so, the teacher is considered the faculty of record for their course section.

Support faculty is an umbrella term for teaching assistants, academic coaches, and sometimes adjunct faculty. All support faculty must be SMEs who understand course content and design, but their main role is in course delivery. The support faculty is responsible for grading and communicating with the students as well as the teacher and/or manager. The support faculty does not typically interact directly with the course creator or lead faculty. However, faculty in those roles must be mindful of how support faculty may be employed. There is variation in determining the exact circumstances in which support faculty are used; however, enrollment is the driving factor.

Because academic coaches at NKU are considered support faculty, they have certain limitations. Coaches cannot run a course without supervision and cannot change the course content. Regular communication with the teacher and/or manager is required. However, within the carefully defined role of support faculty, coaches can be invaluable in handling the intensive workload of an accelerated online course. One of the OFAC's recommendations was to ensure adequate support faculty for assessment-heavy courses, particularly those relying on written and/or oral assessment, in which performance feedback is essential for skill improvement.

The OFAC report helped define the academic coach role at NKU. More recently, as a continuation of that endeavor, data were collected from students and faculty possessing firsthand experience with academic coaches. In the summer of 2024, following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, a short survey including both Likert scale and open-response questions was created in Qualtrics and sent to an online student listserv of 11,699 NKU students enrolled in at least one online course at the university. Of these, 249 (2%) responded; screening questions to eliminate anyone ineligible to participate or provide feedback on academic coaches yielded 53 respondents.

Outreach to all colleges that had used or considered using academic coaches yielded four faculty members from two colleges (COB and CHHS) with extensive experience working with academic coaches and/or the coaching program. Each was interviewed separately and asked to describe the roles and responsibilities of coaches, the coach assignment process, how coaches are involved in assessment, the nature and frequency of communications between coaches and faculty and between coaches and students, and the coaching program's effectiveness, benefits, and challenges. Due to the small sample size and to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, individual interviewees are not identified herein.

The Integration of Academic Coaches in Student Assessment at NKU

Across both the COB and CHHS at NKU, coaches are assigned based on course enrollments. A section with a small enrollment might not be assigned a coach, at least not at first. However, if many students enroll and the section grows at the last minute, the situation may change rapidly. Practices vary between programs. Using the MBA as an example, the first 40 students in a section are the faculty member's responsibility. A coach may be used if the enrollment exceeds 70, or the section may be divided. If enrollment reaches 100, the section must be divided per accreditation standards. Although the external provider prefers to be notified of coaching needs six weeks before the course starts, one interviewee noted they were still accommo-

dated when they experienced a large increase in section enrollment shortly before the beginning of the session.

Academic coaches were confirmed to be integrated into the assessment process. NKU student survey respondents were asked which roles coaches fill in their courses. (They could choose more than one option.) The most common response was grader/provides feedback (51%), followed by assistant (44%), co-instructor (28%), tutor (23%), and other (13%). When explicitly asked about assessments (exams, quizzes, discussions, essays, projects, presentations, etc.), 62% of students said that coaches were involved with assessment. Similarly, all the faculty indicated they used coaches primarily for assessment purposes. Faculty uniformly stated that coaches were involved with grading discussion boards; some coaches were also expected to moderate discussion boards. In some instances, coaches were given additional written work to grade, including term papers, course projects, and presentations.

A condition of NKU's partnership with the external, third-party coach provider is adherence to a model in which students within a given course section are assigned a coach. Sometimes, the coach may be assigned a portion of the students in a large section, with the rest reserved for the teacher. In either situation, the coach grades all assessments for their assigned students. If the section has some students assigned to the coach and others to the instructor, the coach grades only their assigned students, and the teacher grades only their group of students. Assessments are not divided between the coach and the teacher. For example, a coach could not grade all the discussion board posts while the teacher graded all the presentations.

Faculty reported that this model led to inconsistencies in grading. Partially for this reason, as well as others discussed below, there has been a shift, particularly since 2023, from using external coaches provided by the vendor to internal coaches employed by the university. This trend is particularly noticeable in the COB. Coaches were originally used in as many as 30% of COB course sections but then declined to around 15-20%, with most coaches used in the MBA program. As of 2024, the MBA uses 65% internal coaches. Practically every course offered by the BSHS program uses coaches. This program has also shifted to mainly internal coaches for the same reasons as the COB.

Internal coaches are preferred by the faculty interviewed because they can be given specific assessments, most commonly discussion boards, to grade for all students while leaving other assessments for the teacher to grade. This is in marked contrast to the external coach model, in which coaches are given students and grade all their work. As one of the teachers explained, the internal coaching approach ensures that the teacher assesses all students' work at some point in the course. In the teacher's view, the internal coach helps them with assessment, whereas the external coach assesses student work.

The student survey addressed the guidance/support provided by coaches and their timeliness. When students were asked how much guidance/support coaches provided during assessments, most indicated that at least some was provided; only 10% selected “none at all.” Affirmative responses ranged from a slight amount (10%) to a moderate amount (43%), a good amount (14%), and a great amount (24%). 81% indicated that coaches provided a moderate to great amount. When asked how timely coaches were in assessing coursework, only 5% of the students responded that they were not timely. Affirmative responses ranged from slightly timely (14%), moderately timely (38%), very timely (24%), to extremely timely (19%). Thus, 81% indicated that coaches were moderately to extremely timely.

Faculty underscored the importance of coaches in achieving timeliness of feedback and responses. Timeliness is especially critical in the MBA program, where each accelerated course lasts only five weeks. As a result, grading and responses to student questions must be quite rapid. Some MBA courses are very large; for example, core courses may enroll 100-150 students. Even upper-level, grading-intensive capstone courses may have enrollments in the neighborhood of 80-90 students. For such courses, coaches play an essential role. The BSHS program has seven-week courses with similar enrollment scenarios and needs rapid assessment feedback. As an interviewee explained regarding the teacher role, “You need support; you can’t grade 70 projects when the turnaround is tight.”

Students were asked how helpful they found coaches in assessing their coursework. Just 10% said they were not helpful at all. Affirmative responses ranged from slightly helpful (14%) to moderately helpful (29%), very helpful (29%), and extremely helpful (19%). Thus, 77% found coaches at least moderately helpful in assessing their coursework. Students were provided an open response format to elaborate on how coaches have impacted their assessment experience in only courses. 23% chose this option to elaborate. Of these, 25% said there was no/minimal impact, 42% cited the feedback as valuable, and 33% emphasized guidance and help with course content/lessons.

Faculty unanimously recognized the benefits of using coaches. Reducing teacher workload in accelerated online courses was cited as a major advantage. Feedback to students is provided more actively with a coach than possible if only the teacher were involved in the course delivery. On the other hand, one teacher pointed out that although using coaches was valuable in reducing workload, the reduction was not as great as one might think due to the time required to prepare the coach (described below). Humanizing the online classroom was also recognized as a coaching benefit. As one teacher explained, a coach conveys to students that “there is a human on the other side” who can help the student achieve learning.

Selecting appropriate individuals to work as coaches is critical to adopting a coaching program. For external NKU coaches, the third-party provider took care

of preliminary vetting, and as a result, the interviewees generally saw the coaches as a good fit in terms of their background and understanding of the discipline and content. However, it was mentioned that the occasional poor fit affects the coach's ability to give substantial feedback on student work. One reason internal coaches have become preferred is that they are not only SMEs but also former students in the courses in which they now work. As a result, the teacher is more likely to have first-hand knowledge of the coach's background and abilities, and the coach has recently experienced the course from the student's point of view. NKU generally employs internal coaches in a staff capacity, so they have already received compliance and FERPA training. The coach position allows these staff members to gain more experience working in an academic environment and earn additional income.

The third-party vendor takes care of essential training for external coaches. Teachers and/or managers are expected to share course-specific information with external coaches once assigned to a course. At least one call between the teacher and coach is mandated at the outset of the course. NKU does not offer a formal training program for internal coaches. However, at least one meeting typically occurs between the coach and their assigned teacher and/or manager before the course begins. Communication typically continues throughout the course through weekly conversations and/or frequent messages through email and/or the learning management system (LMS) communication tools. As a result, training is continuous. Most teachers or managers will monitor the coach's activities to ensure consistency and quality in assessment, feedback, and student interactions.

All NKU faculty interviewed described the same concerns and practices with ensuring consistency and communicating with coaches. In order to ensure consistency in assessment by external coaches, who grade their assigned group of students for every assignment, teachers reported that they regularly needed to review and sometimes adjust the coach's grading. This was cited as a reason for preferring to give specific assignments to internal coaches, dividing the grading if the enrollment justifies having more than one coach assigned to their course. Teachers established practices to increase consistency in feedback with multiple coaches. For example, one teacher from the MBA program described having a large course section with two internal coaches. The coaches only graded certain discussion boards. The teacher created grading rubrics and provided boilerplate comments that could be modified so that the feedback always had a consistent "voice." The coaches met with the teacher once a week via video conference to review grading and grade some discussion posts together. The teacher also provided note pages in each course module that included directions on grading the assessments.

Monitoring coaches is necessary not only to ensure consistent assessment and feedback but also to ensure they know and adhere to course policies. For example, a teacher described a situation in which an external coach had implemented their own

late penalty policy, which did not match the teacher's policy for the course. When the teacher noticed the discrepancy, they were able to provide correction to the coach.

One serious consideration initially brought up in the OFAC report and echoed in faculty interviews was the impact of employing coaches on student evaluations. When a teacher has support faculty in their course, their evaluations have the same questions as those not using support faculty, even though one would reasonably expect that the support faculty would influence student perceptions of the quality of instruction. Interviewees pointed out that when the external coach model is used, the teacher may never grade and give feedback on some or all of their students' assessments. Nevertheless, the teacher will bear the consequences of students' dissatisfaction with the coach's work. Thus, the internal coach model seems more palatable because all students can receive feedback from their teacher and, as a result, can make a more meaningful evaluation of instructional quality. Even so, as the OFAC report pointed out, it may be worthwhile to consider modifying the evaluation form to differentiate between the contributions of the teacher and the support faculty.

In the student survey, students were provided an open response format to elaborate on the challenges or areas where the coaching program could be improved in assessment. Of the 21% who responded, 18% mentioned they had no negative experiences/noted no need for improvement, 9% said every aspect of the program needed improvement, 9% said the grading turnaround could be faster, 9% requested more detailed feedback on assessments, 9% cited a need to restructure the coach-student relationship (how students and coaches are assigned to one another), 18% wanted faster communication with students, and 27% wanted more interactivity with coaches including videos or video conferencing and office hours, and visual aids such as slides and sample assignments.

DISCUSSION: A FRAMEWORK FOR BEST PRACTICES

There are clear benefits to integrating academic coaches into assessments in accelerated online courses. These include reduced teacher workload, timely feedback, and improved student satisfaction. Workload is a great concern, especially in accelerated courses, and assessment is a large portion of that workload (Lee & Horsfall, 2010). Teachers can focus on course content and delivery when coaches are dedicated to assessment tasks. Coaches can focus on quickly providing formative and/or summative feedback. The feedback can be personalized, and the coach is available to further engage with students who need assistance understanding and using the feedback to improve future academic performance (Howlett et al., 2021). Having a coach as a part of a teaching team can enhance student satisfaction (Cipher et al., 2018; Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019) and provide students with the perspective

and support of someone besides the teacher/faculty of record (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022).

Using academic coaches also presents challenges, including defining the coach's role and responsibilities, maintaining consistency, and overcoming faculty reluctance (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). There are different models of academic coaches (Lehan et al., 2018). The same institution—or even the same program—may use multiple models simultaneously. In other words, individuals known as “academic coaches” may function differently in their interactions with assessments and students. It is important to select the model(s) that best fit the needs of the institution, program, and/or course. The potential for inconsistencies in grading, feedback, and the application of course policies means that coaches need training and oversight. Communication should be frequent, and courses must be prepared for coach integration. Not all teachers are willing to collaborate with coaches, and some may resist giving assessment duties to someone else. This may particularly be the case if, as mentioned in the NKU case study, the teacher cannot select which assessment duties may be assigned to the coach or if the teacher is concerned that using a coach may impact their student evaluations of instruction.

A framework in which best practices for using coaches in assessment could be constructed might begin with setting the overall expectations for coaches and the scope and nature of their involvement in assessment (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). Addressing expectations of coaches would include communication frequency and modalities, use of learning and assessment tools, institutional policies and practices, and much more. As demonstrated in our NKU case study, there are different models of using coaches for assessment, each with its own set of expectations. Depending on the model used, a teacher may assign either students or assignments to a coach. In the first instance, the coach always works with their assigned students, assessing all of their coursework. As a result, the coach can build connections with their assigned students through continuous small-group interactions (Cipher et al., 2018). Alternatively, the coach may grade and provide feedback for all students in the course, but only for certain assessments. The teacher can thus reserve certain assignments for themselves. For example, a coach might focus on grading and providing feedback and/or moderation on discussion boards, which are generally formative assessments. The teacher might continue to grade summative assessments such as projects or exams. This approach enables the delivery of formative feedback separately from summative grading (Atkinson et al., 2022).

Integrating academic coaches with assessment requires ongoing communication among coaches, teachers, and students. Indeed, an efficient and organized communication plan has been identified as a best practice in academic coaching programs (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). In constructing a communication plan, it helps to be mindful that coaches may be associated with multiple institutions simultaneously,

similar to many adjunct faculty (Broussard & White-Jefferson, 2018). Their roles and responsibilities may vary from one institution to another; thus, the communication plan assists the coach in maintaining consistency. As described in the case study, individual teachers or managers may develop course-specific communication plans, such as holding regular meetings to review assessment practices together.

Training and professional development are essential to academic coaching endeavors: New coaches need onboarding and subsequent training (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). External coaches provided by a vendor may receive most of their essential training from the vendor, but they still need to learn about the particulars of the courses they are assigned. Internal coaches, such as the recent NKU graduates who have taken the same courses they will be coaching, may have an advantage in training but may still need assistance transitioning to their new role. Regardless of the source of the coaches, it is critical that training and development foster a culture of collaboration between teachers and coaches. The faculty who work with coaches should clearly understand the coaching model that has been adopted so they are well-prepared to work with those assigned to them.

Such considerations lead to another element of coaching best practices: Alignment with institutional/program/course goals. If alleviating faculty workload during rapid enrollment growth is a pressing goal, the most reasonable action may be to seek third-party vendor coaching services, which can easily assign more coaches when enrollments increase. This was the case with NKU, in which the initial dramatic growth of accelerated online programs created a need for coaches to assist with assessment. If the preference is to look within the institution for coaches, as is the case more recently at NKU, then alignment may be achieved with little effort. However, obtaining additional internal coaches at short notice may not always be possible.

Monitoring and evaluation must be included among best practices for integrating coaches into assessment (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). This includes assessing the effectiveness of the coaching program and implementing continuous improvement based on feedback and student outcomes. As revealed by interviews with NKU faculty who have worked closely with academic coaches, monitoring is not always formal; it can be as simple as routinely looking over coach activities in the course. More formal evaluations can also be helpful, and a model is provided by Cipher et al., (2018). Teachers (faculty of record) evaluate their assigned coach(es) at the end of every course. When students complete course evaluations, they are specifically asked about the teaching team, including the teacher and the academic coach. In light of some concerns raised in the NKU OFAC (2021) report and interviews, it may be worth considering expanding upon that model by having at least some questions in which students separately evaluate the teacher of record and the coach.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR ACADEMIC COACHING AND ASSESSMENT

Monitoring and evaluation should be applied to an institution's academic coaching program with the goal of continuous improvement. At NKU, academic coaching was adopted relatively recently in 2018 as part of an overall effort to implement and grow accelerated online programs. As these programs continue to evolve, ongoing study of academic coaching is anticipated.

Many more rich opportunities exist to study academic coaching and assessment practices in online courses. Online students benefit from belonging to a community of inquiry, which includes cognitive, social, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2001). Cognitive presence supports students in building knowledge together through interactive learning activities. Social presence enables peer interactions that promote engagement in learning activities. Teaching presence is employed as the teaching team interacts with students, guiding and assisting them through learning activities.

Ongoing advances in artificial intelligence (AI) technology are disrupting multiple aspects of higher education (Swaak, 2024). It is not unlikely that AI may be employed to support the community of inquiry model. Social robots are autonomous agents that follow social behavior norms as they interact with humans (Gockley et al., 2007). Social robots may be equipped to communicate with students empathetically, respond to social cues (Castellano et al., 2013), and even be given physical or virtual embodiment to establish engagement (Li, 2015; Li et al., 2015). For example, in a pilot program at Morehouse University, AI avatars trained by professors' lectures, course notes, and other material answer course questions (Coffey, 2024).

It will be interesting to see how students respond to AI in online higher education over the next few years. A survey of undergraduates at one U.S. university (Kim et al., 2020) indicated that students are likely to take a favorable view of an AI teaching assistant if they perceive its usefulness and ease of communication. Since that 2020 study, AI has become much more pervasive (Swaak, 2024), so perhaps at least some academic coaches of the near future will be social robots, such as AI avatars. At the very least, those who use a coaching model for assessment would do well to prepare for AI disruption. Interestingly, NKU faculty brought up this very prospect without prompting during interviews. It is possible that AI coaches will be the next stage in evolving digital feedback tools, which can already provide students with automated personalized feedback (Maier & Klotz, 2022). Even so, best practices for integrating human academic coaches into online assessment could likely be adapted for AI coaches.

Human academic coaches would still have much to offer online programs. Non-completion is a longstanding problem in higher education, and online programs are not exempt. Academic coaching is one of several promising interventions (Delnoij

et al., 2020). Human coaches are already employed to build relationships with students over time, providing them with guidance and support in developing skills that will enable them to achieve their long-term academic goals (Delnoij et al., 2020; Lehan & Babcock, 2020; Sepulveda, 2017). Perhaps it would be valuable to consider blending this use of academic coaches with their role as the assessment and feedback arm of a teaching team.

It has been noted that students with a higher need for cognition are more likely to experience satisfaction in their online courses, particularly if academic coaches are used (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). It would be useful to determine how coaches could be involved in cultivating students' need for cognition as part of the assessment and feedback process and if there might be a resulting increase in satisfaction with courses that use academic coaches. There is some indication that this could be the case: A recent meta-analysis of the association between the need for cognition and academic performance indicates that exposure to instructional intervention is a moderator (Liu & Nesbit, 2024). The researchers note that the need for cognition is malleable and could be cultivated by certain teaching strategies, and they speculate that the effect of the need for cognition may be exerted to a greater degree when the learning scenario is less instructor-directed. Perhaps future research will identify ways academic coaches could help maximize students' need for cognition and academic performance.

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Chapter 4


Relational Capital Matters and Produces Longevity: The Faculty–Coach Relationship and Rapport

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ABSTRACT

The practitioners involved in this chapter have lived experience based upon academic coaching, professorship, and leadership. A unique perspective has been established due to the co-collaborative process. Currently, the practitioners are involved as instructional coaches and university professors, and an overview of the faculty-coach relationship is key with how longevity is needed in the instructional coaching and professor rapport with relational capital. Instructional coaches are key to student success, an analysis of literacy coaching and engagement for coaches and long-term universities who are employing coaches for larger classes is described as part of the lived experience case study. Some methods chosen to enhance the collaborative environment with instructional coaches are outlined. The underpinnings of instructional coaching and the importance of support and course enhancements is key in this model while ensuring relational capital with the professor and academic coach. The term instructional coach and academic coach are used interchangeably throughout this chapter.

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INTRODUCTION

Instructional coaches, also known as Academic Coaches, are becoming more prominent in education due to class sizes, grading loads, and the development of new courses and programs. “As a result of the demand for online degrees, enrollment has skyrocketed” causing regional universities to evaluate hiring more instructional coaches (Hernandez & Garcia, pg. 2, 2022). This chapter will detail how relational capital in the choice of instructional coaches and how they collaborate with professors is key to understanding the diverse needs of each program area. The components involved in choosing a good instructional coach that can support and indemnify the coursework for support is multi-faceted based on course expectations and consistency producing longevity for students in the online forums.

The Covid-19 pandemic reality shifted expectations, thus creating more positions for instructional coaches than had been available previously. “Remote learning is expected to occur immediately and to enable flexibility in teaching and learning anywhere and anytime” (Ciampa et al., p. 300, 2023) which is the model for the format of coaching. Screens have overtaken higher education in the online landscape, this can be an impediment or source of growth depending on the student, the professor and the choices being made in higher education. Part of the main concern is that “many teachers in the United States still did not have enough experience, resources, or training to teach and assess literacy remotely” (Ciampa et al., p. 300, 2023). This is a cause of concern for the instructional coach as well if the training is not solidified.

Coaching began in the sports industry to improve athletic performance (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). Initially, coaching was not associated in a positive light, it was disassociated as a negative perception for students (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). Coaching has become more popular, namely in the business world and now in education to move large online programs forward at a pace allotted with instructional support (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). The research and credentials support the program, and the way they are engaged assists students in broadening their horizons related to academic coaches who can assist students’ long term (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022).

The first method as a professor begins to engage in conversation related to an instructional coach is how many students and the level of grading needed for the specific coursework and the university policy related to this implementation. The program is an accelerated online program which allows for the course content to be covered at a quicker pace (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). Accelerated courses are becoming more predominant due to the demand for online learning platforms in higher education. This practitioner-instructional coach duo is determined due to the larger class sizes, grading and support is needed. This description and narrative are

then employed to find the right instructional coach with the academic eligibility qualifications the professor of record is trying to navigate with efficacy.

The constraints of the pandemic caused elements of online learning to grow at faster rates than previously thought possible. This expectation has shuttered some programs, caused others to expand in sudden ways and methods, and produces more innovative procedures to be brought forward such as:

- a. A higher expectation of moving coursework from face to face to online.
- b. With this expectation of moving coursework, instructional coaches become more prevalent in higher education.
- c. Colleges had to rally and evaluate programs and how instructional coaches would support the programs.

With these programs and innovative initiatives higher education established the evaluation of instructional coaches and then the consideration of price points for hiring education coaches for grading and supporting the coursework. This support is key in the consideration of the length of time a coach works with a professor. With the amount of time it takes to grade and consider the coaches' establishment of integral aspects of the coursework, longevity matters. If a professor is having to choose a new instructional coach which entails many factors each semester: filtering through Curriculum Vitae's, establishing inter-rater reliability, train the instructional coach with the establishment of norms and references, the time to re-do this process is overwhelming. Once this is completed the transition begins for the instructional coach and professor, however, this can be an arduous process which causes an issue at times for consistency in the coursework. The purpose and goal is to establish a rapport to produce longevity in the coursework and support.

The professors notating this chapter have benefited from both roles. One professor has selected instructional coaches, while the other has experience both as an instructional coach and in selecting them for course delivery. The cost-saving measures applicable to universities also favor instructional coaching; it's often simpler to select instructional coaches over adjuncts, largely due to the coaches' integral role in course delivery. This correlative approach enables professors to truly engage in course development without 'wasting' the process of training new adjuncts each time. In the study conducted by Hernandez and Garcia (2022) the research questions correlated to the academic credentials for an instructional coach – the establishment of credentials and experiences had a positive impact on the outcomes for students. A single large class with multiple instructional coaches maintains the integrity of course content and expertise because the professor can deliver the content in a way to reach more students with ample support.

RELATIONAL CAPITAL

Some of the larger questions related to instructional coaching is “how do we contextualize coaching in this newly remote environment?” (Ciampa et al., p. 298, 2023). How are professors supported by instructional coaches and how is this likened to literacy and development? (Ciampa et al., 2023). The instructional coaching model is complex, as the coach needs to be an expert in the field or course they are supporting. Terminal degrees for many universities are required to be an instructional coach.

The multifaceted roles of an instructional coach relate to the professor’s sense of practice and what context, year, and semester aligns with their perspective for expectations. A professional dialogue is created as a go between for literacy and coaches (Ciampa et al., 2023). The varied roles are part of the coaching model for professors and teachers (Ciampa et al., 2023). Literacy coaches have varied viewpoints in the K-12 landscape, and coaches and professors experience the same level of trust and future reliance (Ciampa et al., 2023). Trust is the model and format which creates future progress and development. With professors navigating the world of teaching and pulling the coach into the same world, it’s a collaborative effort of delegation, respect, honesty, and consistency.

Improvements are being made to better the coursework, and the professional development needs to be top tier to ensure efficacy in the program. One study incorporates constant comparative analysis with reflections which helps ascertain literacy coaches and elements therein (Ciampa et al., 2023). Some of the methods found related to fostering trusting and collaborative relationships, guiding students to increase student engagement, and how to establish self-directed learning (Ciampa et al., 2023).

The online format and modality “is prevalent since it allows students to log in and work at their own pace while away from work commitments” (Hernandez & Garcia, p. 101, 2022). This format is what is changing to establish and ensure higher education institutions are moving at a faster pace in the realm of education. With this knowledge, it’s imperative for this practitioner to take note of what is happening at the rural, regional universities due to the online learning platforms. Some of the concerns noted related to the following items:

- a. Undergrad programs in education are shuttering or closing in the state and area of the professor and practitioner.
- b. Graduate courses are being used to fulfill alternative certification requirements, often with students who do not have a background in the subject area.
- c. Due to this issue the prevalence of Master’s programs are skyrocketing.

- d. The downside of this is students who are in the Master's programs are not fully equipped to participate in the coursework, and modifications are being made due to this overview.
- e. If students are not able to fully embrace and engage in the coursework – the ramifications cannot be understated.

Knowing how this relates to an analysis of instructional coaching, this practitioner has a certain awareness of the outcomes even if the lead coach or professor is not fully aware.

In the experimental design student initiative related to academic coaches, it has been found that “students who electively engaged in academic coaching at a learning center on-site demonstrated an increase in GPA’s, were more likely to be in good academic standing, and were more likely to be retained in the next semester than students who did not participate” (Lehan, Shriner & Shriner, p. 21, 2020). The number of visits to a learning center also helped and supported these students (Lehan, Shriner & Shriner, 2020). This model has been expanded to include academic coaches, literacy development directors, enhancement of the odds of persistence for students in the online platform (Lehan, Shriner & Shriner, 2020). The divergence of the findings related to future investigations have been analyzing the progress and retention of academic coaches for online programs.

What has been analyzed is the tiered levels of support needed for online students and academic coaches, and it truly depends on the assistance needed for assignments and course requirements. In certain areas such as literacy, development of nursing programs, and a debate regarding the one to one platform, more research is needed (Lehan, Shriner & Shriner, 2020). It has been known to become more effective if “all students who interact with a live academic coach while using the two highest tiers of support either synchronously or asynchronously receive a personalized coaching plan...it includes information about the skills on which they worked, coaching strategies that were used, effectiveness of those strategies with supporting evidence, and steps that the student can take between sessions to continue to learn and achieve” (Lehan, Shriner & Shriner, p. 22, 2020). The personalized plan appears to be engaging and working for students, it truly depends on how often they take advantage of the platform and program. Scholars have coordinated and noted that a student’s personal persistence relates to their ability to maintain and ensure a strong connection with one or more faculty members (Lehan, Shriner & Shriner, 2020). Research has not fully encapsulated the online academic coaching program, and this practitioner notes the field is changing and growing as colleges are deciding between two concepts: more academic coaches to sustain larger class enrollments with current tenure track professors, or more adjunct faculty to teach the coursework and break enrollment down into more manageable class loads.

Relational Capital with Longevity

In *Blink* by Gladwell the concept and theory of relational capital is paramount (2005). The chapter detailing the ‘theory of thin slices’ relates to a marriage and the relationship between two people (Gladwell, p. 29, 2005). Pattern recognition is key “people are in one of two states in a relationship...the first is...positive sentiment override, where positive emotion overrides irritability. It’s like a buffer” (Gladwell, p. 29, 2005). This transitional component can be integrated into the relational capital of academic coaches and professors. Building the initial gap with trust is key to leveraging leadership for higher education students (Gladwell, 2005).

A component of relational capital engages the “age of instant access to information, many of today’s students know much more at an earlier age than their counterparts of a few decades ago, and they are certainly more adept at and motivated to learn new technologies” (Wagner & Kegan, p. 7, 2006). The concern noted for higher education students is there is a full-scale gamete for the implementation of technology – one may find that many students are highly skilled and adept in accessing technology, while on the other hand some students truly struggle with technology and academic coaches may not be information technology experts which may cause some tension at times.

Education organizations “value ‘getting along’ in well-defined chains of command and believe leaders should have the answers...educators are nice people, for the most part, and the majority of us get up...wanting to make a difference” (Wagner & Kegan, p. 13, 2006). Too rarely “do educators identify or solve problems of professional practice together” and this is the concept that needs to be mitigated between academic coaches and professors (Wagner & Kegan, p. 13, 2006). Solving problems of professional practice and not simply going through class announcements is a key indicator of success for an academic coach in the coursework. A few examples of this relate to how the academic coach enhances the philosophical stance of the professor and does not stand against it or having an alternative philosophy that will not help or assist. The professor should be required to engage with the academic coach to engage and encourage the same philosophical stance for the course, but this does not always occur. When this does not take place, it will directly impact the parameters of the course.

Student Perceptions for Relational Capital

The other piece relates to students’ perception of the instructional coaches. Some of the major factors noted in the instructional coaching relationship cause concern and issues when items arise are the lack of quality in academic coaches. This is mitigated based upon the business model chosen to access and hire instructional

coaches. However, student perceptions and retention are key in this model relationship; for the program this practitioner participated in was related to education administration, education law, and education teaching strategies for students. As the instructional coach before becoming a tenure-track professor the burden of proof to ensure retention for students was paramount in mind's eye before agreeing and confirming to be the coach in the coursework.

What was noted is that if a student does not receive a grade they wish based on the rubric and assignments, the student would then complain to the professor and chair of the department. This happened to this instructional coach a few times due to the student perception of instructional coaches as being 'less than' the professor of record. When this took place, relational capital was needed between the instructional coach and professor to establish norms and references for students. For a specific example, the professor of record contacted the instructional coach directly and garnered support before reaching out to the student. The professor let the student know 'I will happily re-grade your assignment, please be aware the instructional coach is usually nicer than I am on grading from the same rubric.' The student then still wanted the secondary grading to continue. The professor graded the assignment, and the student lost twenty extra points, and then opted to take the grade the instructional coach gave in the first place. That support is KEY. If the instructional coach and professor do not have relational capital the relationship and camaraderie in the course falls apart.

Part of the student perception is that faculty members do not have the full capacity and sufficient time to complete the job requirements for tenure track connectivity (Lehan, Shriner & Shriner, 2020). The support services lacking from the online forum is related to the community engagement piece of being able to have a brick and mortar setting with direct student support services (Lehan, Shriner & Shriner, 2020). Student support, when it's lacking, requires other means to be found and ascertained to engage and retain students. Some of the developments that have assisted with this about the rural university model are as follows:

- A. The academic coach model is a unique and direct development of engagement in the online platform.
- B. An academic coach can engage, direct questions, hold zooms or online forums with the applicable technology from the university, and develop a rapport to allow students to engage and maintain high levels and standards in the coursework.

This allots time and opportunities for the development of course expectations with more students involved. Some of the downsides related to this model typify the elements of issues that arise when universities add more students to each course because the academic coaches can help maintain and sustain it. This model can

cause the faculty to feel they are the ‘not being seen’ and not being fully compensated for the growth and expanse in the program. This is not a new concept, but it is becoming more prominent due to the engagement with online higher learning in education. With more student enrollment, more academic coaches are needed thus causing a more cohesive approach to the importance of training and implementing direct support for the coaches.

Class Size

The nature of class sizes is a tenuous challenge for universities. The expertise of a professor in their field as an expert is a tantalizing forum for larger class sizes. There have been classes up to 300 students at larger universities in person, and the professor is teaching while the teacher’s assistant (TA) is grading, meeting with students, analyzing trends in the class for grades, and supporting the professor of record in the course. The model is much the same online with academic coaches, however, the professor must maintain relational capital with the academic coaches to establish a rhythm like the TA has with in person classes. There have been several discussions regarding how a student learns best and with integrity in the online environment. Examining future outcomes directly relates to the grading practices contained therein (Lehan, Shriner & Shriner, 2020). A notation regarding the limitations of academic coaching in the Lehan and Shriner article “it appears as though the association between academic coaching and longer-term student outcomes is more complex than originally thought” (Lehan, Shriner & Shriner, p. 31, 2020). This is apparent in the practitioner and professor perspective based upon the online learning platform.

As the academic coach is preparing and coordinating with the professor, the rural environment of the regional university is notated. Due to the international reach of the program the professor and instructional coach are part of, the typical responses detail a need for multicultural understanding and time zone differences during the coursework. The professor adjusts and integrates ideas into the course, and then the instructional coach blends the components together to support the international concepts. This has been atypical due to the way marketing takes place for the international platform with a rural, regional university system. It is an initial adjustment for the coursework that this program was conducted and analyzed based on the need for academic coaches. The professor has always ensured efficacy in the program, and once the relationship is built the consistency of coaches seems to stabilize with certain professors and courses. This has created a sense of ‘change leaders’ as professors have needed to strive and strengthen their practice due to the need to use academic coaches.

ORGANIZATION AND APPLICATION

The academic coach has their own philosophy of how a course and class should be conducted, and this is an awareness the professor of record in the course needs to consider. Academic coaches are usually highly skilled individuals with terminal degrees of an Ed.D. or Ph.D. in multiple disciplines and areas depending on the course needs. Universities must approve the coaches and ensure they are not debilitating the course by not being fully trained in the subject matter and area. The goal is to establish a meeting rhythm and required check-ins with the professors that are not simply announcements for the course like ‘these grades are due here, the students need to use this rubric for this component, the grading for this element is here’ but to engage in also a leadership component (Wagner & Kegan, 2006).

Part of the leadership component in a course is the development of autonomy and the understanding the instructional coach will need to be structured with grading and feedback to develop the rapport with the students (Wagner & Kegan, 2006). The professor and academic coach need to “engage in collaborative examination of teaching and learning” (Wagner & Kegan, p. 13, 2006).

There is an organizational structure between the academic coach and professor in the coursework – the professor is the lead individual, but the academic coach cannot simply be passive and not engaged to do a great job with the students. The professor can not be passive. When the lead professor in a course is very passive and non-confrontational about grading and best practices, chaos can ensue. When a course is poorly developed or disorganized, student retention suffers. “Leaders must then find ways for these individuals to co-construct solutions to their problems of practice” and they must become more accustomed to their issues in practice (Wagner & Kegan, p. 15, 2006). In the educational environment change moves at a faster pace than in higher education. An example of the internal risks would be a leadership style change and format, and the professor needs to be able to ascertain and see this. Working together can cascade across the academic coaches and community related to the coursework, and this can have a positive impact and effect on the future (Wagner & Kegan, 2006).

The cascading effect for academic coaches as leaders comes from being able to promote “and model a strong normative culture of respect, trust, and accountability for learning” to exemplify what is the best method to align with students in the coursework. When cascading change is needed in a course, the professor created the momentum for changing systems and processes and communicates with the coaches and leads (Wagner & Kegan, 2006). The goal is to not create a challenge that’s “everyone’s responsibility and no one’s fault” which can trigger development of concerns and pacify current responsibilities (Wagner & Kegan, p. 141, 2006).

A foundation of trust must be established to ensure students are taken care of and removed from confrontational scenarios between the coach and professor.

The Steps Towards Instructional Coaching

Through Covid-19 pandemic it became apparent that learning needed to change and shift. In a case study a school leader noted “their needs changed as we moved through lockdown and remote teaching and back to in-person” adapting was necessary and non-negotiable (Williams, p. 2, 2022). There is no “magic formula” for needing to pivot and adapt (Williams, p.2, 2022). Based upon how the pandemic affected education, the online learning platform moving online created a repository for instructional coaches in higher education.

This practitioner found out about instructional coaching through a professor who wanted to engage this specific skillset in his coursework. The application was submitted, and the consideration of what this would entail was considered from multiple viewpoints. Professional development training was completed by the practitioner, and then they were assigned to the professor’s course work. In the initial interview the practitioner was surprised by the model of instructional coaching and what was formally required. A few years ago, it was unheard of to have a business model related to instructional coaching as an option for something one was able to do. After the initial interview was completed, it becomes a cohesive environment for the practitioner with a higher expectation related to fully participating in the coursework and supporting students supported by the lead coach.

As the course begins, the requirements and qualifications of instructional coaching are in full force effect to engage students. If students are not engaged in the course as the instructional coach progresses, the downside of how things can go poorly for students, the professor and the coursework are more prominent. In the initial phase the academic coach needs to “forge relationships that afford new ways of working and talking with one another” and building good relationships with students is key in a professional capacity (Wagner & Kegan, p.141, 2006).

Instructional Coaching to Tenure Track Professor

This practitioner started as an instructional coach at a small regional university in the southern United States. After several courses, the practitioner found themselves attending live zoom classes with the professor to ensure grading efficiency, participated in discussion boards, and answered student emails. Professors were surprised by the live attendance on the zoom classes, and this practitioner realized this was unique, so it needed to be evaluated and considered as a consistent model for integration. This process continued for a couple of years, and then the instruc-

tional coach became a full adjunct for coursework at the university. This allowed for a developmental rapport with colleagues in the university and engaged face to face with faculty and administrators.

Enhancing and teaching well is key for instructional coaches and adjunct faculty in the model of online learning with LMS platforms and higher accessibility mandates in the education landscape. With online learning student development is key and ensuring they feel someone is there for them synchronously in person at all possible. This can be difficult to accomplish but with asynchronous and synchronous classes and communication, it has become more feasible. Feasibility is the key in online learning and coordinating with instructional coaches. This landscape is not changing by any means, so therefore it's time to ensure stability takes place for online learning and engagement.

Some courses need more than two instructional coaches, and depending on grading, inter-rater reliability, and the personality of the professor, this can cause more concerns that need to be mitigated in the course. The professor truly must engage with the coaches and continuously evaluate what is taking place in the course; communication is key to building a collaborative, collegial team relationship. However, a saving moment for the professor is the lead coach for the business liaison which helps and contains details related to the instructional coach. The professor can coordinate directly with the lead coach to mitigate any issues with the instructional coaches in the course, and they are evaluating them as the coursework progresses. The portion of this that's important to note is the realization that this establishes longevity in the coursework due to the organizational structure of the coaching attributes.

Coaching and natural attrition takes place, so longevity is not always possible, in the event of a change or transition in the coach and coursework, the lead coach establishes consistent rapport and engagement. Longevity is the key indicator of long-term student retention and success with coaches and professors. As longevity continues with the same professor, lead coach and academic coaches, the time needed for training and development before each course decreases, and there is no limit to how well this cohesive partnership can be coordinated.

Terminal Degree – Why it Matters

Many of the professor's preferences is to hire the same instructional coach each time the class or course is offered so they become relationally integral to the success of the class and have longevity in the course planning and implementation. Instructional coaches in this scenario are also able to integrate into class discussions, discussion boards, email exchanges, and all other job duties required. The difference

is with relational capital between the instructional coach and the professor of record; it becomes a logistical concern if not handled correctly.

The relational capital and longevity needed are a key component of the juxtaposition between the professor and instructional coach. Some of the elements related to building a strong rapport are as follows:

- a. The initial meeting is held via zoom or on the phone with common ground established for questions and answers.
- b. The professor goes over the syllabus and course calendar in detail, answering questions and identifying methods and processes.
- c. Inter-Rater Reliability is established between the professor and instructional coaches as they are establishing norm-referenced grading based on the rubrics.
- d. Elements that impede progress relate to a lack of communication synopsis between the instructional coaches and professors. This causes a breakdown in grading and collaborative measures.

The perspective of the practitioners writing this chapter is that instructional coaches – when used well – can be a beneficial component of student long term success. Ensuring instructional coaches and university professors communicate well is a key component. When communication is not sound, the ‘story’ that takes place between the coach and professor does not enhance the relationship, and costs student success in the learning objectives. This chapter will detail when things go wrong and add strategies to ensure they are right again.

Terminal degrees are an integral aspect of coaching due to the courses required by professors and the lead coach, depending on the expectations of the university. Graduate students turn in surveys for academic coaches related to “what level of satisfaction did the online graduate students report in working with an academic coach?” (Hernandez & Garcia, p. 103, 2022). This is a paramount question and relates to the longevity of academic coaches as the professors cannot have coaches that bring the format and expectations of the course in a downward spiral. This has taken place with a practitioner when they selected academic coaches. One of the coaches began disregarding due dates and stopped responding to students and the professor, and it was noted by the students and at the end of course surveys were being conducted to ascertain what took place. In this instance, the practitioner-professor had to release the academic coach and choose a new one.

On the other hand, this practitioner has also been part of an academic coaching team at a larger university and with the consistent program needing six to seven coaches it was found that a couple of coaches were not opening the assignments in the LMS system, they were simply typing in grades. The system tracks what takes place to ensure students are receiving the best care back and forth regarding their

consistent assignments. The lead coach was able to assess the situation and make adjustments to allocate for student success long term. Support is imperative and key to the success of the program.

University Training

Many universities have not fully grasped the amount of professional engagement and training needed for this to function well. Virtual teams and teaching are becoming prevalent, and organization models are engaging to respond to this gap in leadership training. Structured education in the online learning environment for students is also a feat needing to be established (Loucks & Ozogul, 2020). Some of the components noted in the study by (Loucks & Ozogul, 2020) is how learning activities blend with ‘collaboration, reflection, and articulation’ while the content area relates to ‘authentic context, authentic activity, expert performance, and multiple perspectives’ whereas learning supports relate to ‘coaching and scaffolding authentic assessments’ which is a model for situated learning – all components blend together much like a Venn Diagram (Loucks & Ozogul, 2020).

Most students who seek online courses are highly proficient in technology. Relating to the concept regarding ‘training the trainer’ and how this is accomplished for tenure track professors while also helping train students in the online environment (Loucks & Ozogul, 2020). Some of the pitfalls academics encounter is a lack of understanding of the buy in needed from students for this to be successful. Students who are used to a face-to-face environment may struggle with the development of enhancements online. This practitioner has noted a gamete of concerns, and more consideration is needed in the initial set up process. This process is better aligned with academic coach support for students in the coursework.

Academic coaches must align within the parameters of the course, but they are able to email and check in on students with more consistency than professors with sixty to several hundred students is able to truly accomplish. If a student is not turning in work, or is failing overall, the academic coach can reach out and provide that virtual leadership to better the experience. This relates to the cascading strategy of instructor led, [with academic coach support,] and the blend of students in a virtual environment supporting each other as well (Loucks & Ozogul, 2020).

Motivation for students is reflected in the leadership coursework assigned to them. At times the students are separated into small group assignments designating ‘leadership’ as a cohesive support component. Students also do not engage if they can tell their academic coach does not fully support them; this is where the lead coach can come in and assist. This tenure track professor has noted this directly with students in coursework between being a professor and academic coach. Some of the case study examples related to students truly feeling less engaged and realizing no

one in the online environment is leading them or checking on them. They usually are not high maintenance or a strong issue, but even adult learners and higher education students want to feel that someone is for them and a support. A couple of case study examples: student A has not been turning in assignments for several weeks and has not responded to repeated emails or LMS messages from the academic coach. Then the academic coach flagged the professor of the course, and the professor made a note for documentation or filled out a student concern report in the event it does not change. The academic coach then attempts to call the student, and can get through to them, and they get back on track. This scenario has been impactful, but it comes from the beginning of the notations on virtual leadership and training.

The mere fact that the academic coach can call a student sets it apart as unique, the platform related to success reaches beyond email and LMS messages. Being able to lead well and contact the student by other means shows a reflective component of care and ethical understanding. The Ethic of Care relates to the expansive component and conceptual understanding related to diversifying the trend for academic coaches (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). Students can hear directly from academic coaches in multiple formats which does help them stay consistent in the coursework long term which is a positive benefit for long term retention.

Virtual leadership can take many forms and mannerisms for academic coaching. The related to leverage leadership on the question and standard level for the way items are presented in the coursework (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). Data and simplicity are the key to the details surrounding academic coaching and the establishment of norms and references for students to feel supported and led well in the online environment (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). As professors are envisioning change and better forms for implementation in the coursework, communication as leaders is key (Wagner & Kegan, 2006).

The professor will need to manage the data for the coursework and how they are “employed creatively, compellingly, and strategically to focus...attention...on the heart of the work” to ensure students engage well in the course (Wagner & Kegan, p. 146, 2006). The professor establishes accountability processes for the academic and instructional coaches in the coursework (Wagner & Kegan, 2006). Without accountability procedures the academic coaches may not fully comply or understand the perception of grading and rubrics in the course. The goal is integration with reciprocity for the professor and coaches with students (Wagner & Kegan, 2006).

Managing Technology and Ethics

Communication is key in establishing productive team relationships in the professor and instructional coach relationship. Before the course begins the initial meeting is used for the introduction of the professor and coaches. During this meeting there

will be some training concerning the roles and expectations of the individuals as well as the expectations of students. Training in grading practices for the instructional coaches is important in providing a common grading format for all students. Once a team-like professor/instructional coach relationship is established during a semester, it is common to see the continued pairing of the same professionals together over the course of time which builds student capacity and confidence in the coursework. Setting course expectations for academic coaches and students can be done simultaneously. The syllabus needs to engage and outline the technology requirements for students in the coursework – academic coaches also must align with the technology requirements for their positions in the university as they are usually third-party contractors.

The academic coaches can teach a student in this regard, but they are not the IT help desk. This is a key component which causes major frustration with academic coaches and students. Since academic coaches in coursework are usually more responsive and available to students due to their contract and requirements, students feel they should be a ‘one stop shop’ in regard to university and technology needs or issues that arise like e-portfolio models and systems. Academic coaches are not fully trained in IT, they are trained with terminal degrees in the manner of assisting the professor in the actual course. This tension to manage has become a larger issue in education and will continue to be so until more analysis is completed on the format of this direction.

The initial expectation for students is for the academic coaches to establish course expectations and part of that is the online and technology components. Some of the concerns to note for students is how the syllabus discusses technology. For instance, a syllabus may read “plan to attend the virtual meetings in quiet places so your background noise doesn’t make it difficult for others to hear...to be considered present during the online [meeting]...webcam must be on the entire time” (Loucks & Ozogul, p. 659, 2020). Students who are not aware of these expectations can become frustrated and take it out on the academic coach instead of the IT helpdesk. This can cause some incapacity concerns for longevity with academic coaches. If they feel the professor is not supporting them as well as their lead coach, they tend to no longer align to development and therefore stop growing and engaging. Communication is key for academic coaches and professors must do what they can to check in and stay abreast of current happenings.

Students may at times need to flag an academic coach and professor to re-establish boundaries and guidelines through a complaint or lodging an ethical dilemma. When this takes place with a student, the professor and academic coach attempt to stay on the same page, and then they are also in communication with the student and lead coach. If the academic coach and professor do not communicate effectively, the lead coach steps in and either changes the schedule or re-integrates both the professor and

academic coach. The concerns arise from this viewpoint when the course has more than three academic coaches within it to mitigate. The lead coach sets expectations and aligns them in a manner befitting the organization and university.

As academic coaches are branching and engaging higher education students, the options are diverse and wide ranging. Professors working with academic coaches are looking for specific data points to ascertain success in the coursework. This can be in multiple formats like grading, rubric alignment and practices, student surveys for academic coaches, and if the higher education course is in a tested subject like the principal preparation program – the test results from students who are performing in classes with academic coaches at the state level is something to consider.

Patterns are being evaluated as professors who work with academic coaches make updates and changes in the coursework (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2018). For example, a professor switched out an academic coach due to the ramifications of student surveys based on data. The surveys came back with low marks regarding that one academic coach, and the realization took place, so change was completed. Students are not the ‘end all be all’ for academic coaches with professors, but it does hold a high weight if a consistent trend is taking place where students are unhappy with the course outcome based on a lack of communication, unclear grading practices, and a removal from the ethic of care for students.

Unclear grading practices can be a data issue that does not allow for end notes or enhancements. If a coach deems an assignment ‘A’ worthy, but the course is shared between several academic coaches, and they deem it ‘B’ worthy – conflict arises. One of the items academic coaches do not always notice is students talk to each other. All the time. Most courses taught online have a GroupMe, Remind me, or separate text threads where the professor is not involved, just the cohort of students. Many professors are not always aware of this phenomenon, and further study is needed to consider the ramifications with alignment and course consistency. If the course is well developed, well aligned, and well communicated, then a GroupMe related to the cohort should not affect anything. However, this practitioner has seen it go poorly when an academic coach is not following through with grading and best practices. Students truly engage in a higher education course they are paying tuition and fees for; one must honor their perspectives regarding what works best for them.

This practitioner and professor have seen students go to the appeals committee and processes when an instructional coach does not grade them effectively, and the professor of record does not mitigate the concern. This has gone poorly for the students, as the academic appeals committee cemented the decision of the professor, however, the academic coach was released from working with the university. This is where the downfall of lack of communication takes place with students in some instances.

RELEVANCE, TIMELINESS AND DIGITAL ACCESS

The professor must engage in leadership and coaching when working with academic coaches as well as student expectations. Relevance is key and the implication residing in this is the best method to retain great academic coaches. Part of the coursework that's mandated is timely and substantive feedback on focused pieces of the course calendar. Academic coaches must submit timely feedback for student work and grading within 72 hours, and e-mails and communication within 24 hours as designated by instructional coach and syllabus policy. This clear establishment supports the professor in ensuring students and graded work are communicated clearly and effectively. There must be a consistent method for grading due to students needing to be coached through the process (Loucks & Ozogul, 2020). Operationalizing the manner and effectiveness of the reach for grading and best practices is the most cohesive manner to support students and stay relevant in the field.

To ensure relevance the professor of record must maintain research-based focus areas and the methods contained therein. The "rapid evolution of digital technologies has revolutionized knowledge product and dissemination" and the active role universities play in this must be disseminated for success (Zhu, Shannon & Ourth, 2025). The goal is to foster critical analysis amongst students, especially since many online learning experiences in higher education have a conglomeration of students from international backgrounds (Zhu, Shannon & Ourth, 2025). Professors need to not only be aware of this but also prepared to establish consistency for students in the course. Without this initial understanding, students may have classroom conversations which can be seen as condescending, which is never the goal or intent. Perception is reality, which is one of the main concerns for students and access as they engage in the coursework with multicultural understandings.

Digital technologies are only ever expanding (Zhu, Shannon & Ourth, 2025). Students must be able to engage in critical thinking skills, with an emphasis on application and synthesis of information (Zhu, Shannon & Ourth, 2025). Academic coaches must have a cultural responsibility to develop the background for students so there is a level during mutual understanding (Zhu, Shannon & Ourth, 2025). Connectivism is needed for academic coaches and professors to truly establish adherence to professional policies and programs (Zhu, Shannon & Ourth, 2025). The transformative nature of leading in the online environment is a cohesive journey for academic coaches and professors.

When Things Go Right

When things go right in the relationship and communication with a coach and professor. This relationship can be a strong tie in a professional manner that enhances

both the coach, professor, and all the students. Taking some stress away from the professor in relation to grading and answering student emails allows a professor to focus on the method and purpose of the class and garners more time for teaching and raising the course to a more excellent level which enhances the university and student success overall. Allowing a professor to move away from the ‘weeds’ of grading enhances creative endeavors and thought processes in a manner that makes the coursework and student success more prevalent. Todd Whitaker in *Shifting the Monkeys* talks about the need for leaders to delegate. In line with his thoughts, as professor, there are certain things in a course and in virtual class meetings that only the individual can do. The professor must spend time on those tasks and delegate to other tasks such as grading and initial discussions with students. The goal and detail given discusses the faculty-coach relationship and ensures that both sides of the story get their full purview. However, this also is an example of when a relationship works well, and the benefits that overcome the adversity that arises.

When Things Go Wrong

Consider the scenario where an instructional coach is selected by the professor; a collaborative meeting is established and completed. During the time the instructional coach is working on sending the welcome letter and beginning the grading process. The professor goes into details related to expectations:

- a. The professor sets aside time for training and inter-rater reliability.
- b. The instructional coach aligns with the grading practices and starts the course.

Then as the first two weeks pass, the instructional coach is non-responsive to students, does not engage with the professor and does not respond back to the instructional coach even after repeated attempts.

When this takes place the instructional coach oversight ‘lead coach’ reaches out to the instructional coach and if no response is received, then the professor meets with the lead coach and re-assigns the grading and coursework to a different coach. The downside for this is that it can happen in the pattern of the semester or accelerated online course, and this can cause an impediment to the likelihood of student retention in the higher education institution the coach is assisting with – student engagement and retention is key in the landscape of evaluating systems and processes for student success. The goal with instructional coach team leads is to hire and equip instructional coaches to grade and assess professors who retain, respond, and refer to the coursework and student expectations.

SUPPORT AND PERFORMANCE

Regarding rapport with the coach and professor, often it goes well, but concerns arise when this goes poorly. It may seem simple to just state that the plan is to remove an instructional coach when something goes wrong – but they have been signed up formally by the university, and are tied to the coursework, thus causing an issue for the professor when one must be removed in the middle of the course. Generally, in the professor/instructional coach dynamic, professors complete all initial grading with professors conducting some secondary grading to ensure inter-rater reliability. Professors also act as a level of appeal when a student questions the grading accuracy of the coach. In the event a coach is removed from the course, the professor may be assuming the duties rather than assign them to a remaining or new coach.

A coach must have support from their lead coach in the instructional environment. A coach is not allotted or allowed to check with professors – they must ask for an instructional coach from the HR department of the university. This is difficult at times as the instructional coach tends to communicate with the professors of the course directly more specifically than their lead coach. The professors also tend to outright ask the instructional coach if they would like to work on that next semester on the coursework. This causes a concern as the instructional coach wants to assist the professor, but they must make sure they do not overstep with the coach requirements, or they may be reassigned. The model is meant to provide stability for the university and coursework, and academic coaches align to the standard.

Professors need coaches to be as consistent as possible – for example, this practitioner has been an instructional coach as well as a university professor. There was a moment this semester when an instructional coach in the coursework of this professor that did not grade for a week and a half. Instructional coaches are informed to make sure they are grading everything within 72 hours, and after a week and a half this professor was contacted by many students in frustration. When reaching out to the instructional coach, the professor did not hear back for a day or two and was about to escalate it to the lead coach. The reason the professor did not do this is because of the rapport and communication of this specific instructional coach – it was incredibly not like this coach to not grade or respond. The instructional coach ended up having a personal emergency and sent word to the professor – communication and integrity made the difference and matters long term in these scenarios.

Components of strategies for universities and coaches to ensure best practices are being incorporated for student success and longevity for coaches and professors. Some of the concepts necessary to identify are as follows: rapport between the coach and professor, support for the coach from the lead coach, support for instructional coaches and professors within a university department, and consistency in coaches to certain courses so ‘re-training’ is not taking place each time. The practitioners

have been instructional coaches, administrators in schools, and are now professors – one with tenure, one on a tenure-track. The experience has allowed them to identify certain concerns for instructional coaches, and what seems to work best in their rural university within a low socio-economic area are invaluable.

rapport between the coach and professor is key in building effective instruction, grading practices and long-term success for students. As a previous coach, some of the methods being used detailed how to engage with students in a positive manner. Higher education is fiercely competitive for student retention so the mannerism and professionalism coaches are using with students must be coached and collaborated with from professors. Some of the most noteworthy lessons come from the professor-coach relationship:

1. Ensuring the coach is trained regarding what the professor expects from grading for students i.e. highlighting papers from students in several colors to discuss and note themes, rubric notes, standards and components.
2. Having the coach participate in double grading inter-rater reliability for efficacy in grading rubrics, and having all coaches for the course do the same. Inter-rater reliability is a component that cannot be skipped or removed even though it's not 'mandated' – in order to train a coach effectively, they must conduct inter-rater reliability grading.

LEADERSHIP IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

Virtual leadership as a professor with academic coaches is not something that was prevalent or previously understood (Azukas, 2022). Learning to lead in a virtual environment with students and a class is a unique conundrum. The Covid-19 pandemic caused the largest education system disruption in history, “impacting 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries” (Azukas, p.1, 2022). School leaders had to become more prepared very quickly, and the same effect took place for teachers in the K-12 landscape. Implementation of new items for hardware, software, infrastructure, leadership capacity, teacher and professor training and development, and the list goes on.

Higher education initially struggled with the learning management system online (LMS), higher education administrators had to evaluate and analyze the programs with the right capacity needed for student learning. The perspective of contextual leadership correlates directly with the situation and realities of the needs for the scenarios presented (Azukas, 2022). Program standards for online programs also had to be integrated, specifically for the NELP (National Educational Leadership Preparation) standards and how they interact within the Master's and Doctoral Level

higher education programs (Azukas, 2022). The Council for the Accreditation of Education Program (CAEP) is also a mandated aligning process for online learning education systems (Azukas, 2022). In this chapter, the professor, academic coach, and practitioner discuss the ramifications of CAEP requirements for the course or program, specifically how those requirements influence grading and program enhancement.

How the CAEP and programs align with the online programs relate to the standards for CAEP and NELP. These expectations are nationally and internationally based on ensuring the quality of the program area for preparing educational teachers and future practitioner leaders. Engaging in a lived experience as a professor and academic coach has established a unique perspective. Students can talk, discuss, and further their educational objectives in a manner which allows for an open and voracious dialogue to ensure students feel a sense of academic freedom.

A skilled workforce is a necessary component of the future of society and the country in which a student resides (Loucks & Ozogul, 2020). Learning to lead and teach in an online environment is a required skillset for any future in academia (Loucks & Ozogul, 2020). Every future tenure-track professor must be able to diversify instruction and blend into an online or hybrid environment. Some of the concepts this tenure track professor has noted are how difficult the initial blending and coordination of face to face to hybrid and then online fully seems to be for colleagues in diverse areas and groups. There does not seem to be one or two areas that struggle more based on initial perceptions – they all have hurdles to overcome regarding this.

Hurdles to overcome can be a stalwart component of the issues related to academic coaching and longevity based on the professor's leadership or the lack thereof. Professors must be above board in choosing academic and instructional coaches but also maintaining a consistent level of saturation scores from students for the end of semester or course surveys. If students are overall complaining, even if the professor works well with the academic and instructional coaches, it still will not be cohesive enough to work and be maintained. This practitioner has seen academic coaches that work well with the professor of the course, and therefore, are more aligned in philosophy but the academic coach is not grading with accuracy or consistency. This can cause a tension that must be mitigated and therefore evaluated.

CONCLUSION

Part of using the same coaches repeatedly is for the consistency in the online higher education environment where longevity truly matters with the professor of record. In the new online and hybrid environment it is key to integrate a cohesive

academic coaching team the professor of record feels comfortable with and this is an engaging method of securing capacity long term. Familiarity helps professors and the coaches. Being able to anticipate what is needed or wanted for the course makes this an attractive model and framework. With strong communication, cohesive leadership, and efficacy in grading and best practices being incorporated – the model of professors working with academic coaches only gets strong and more paramount as students return to higher education to retain and expand their skillset and purposes in society and their overall future with their families and colleagues. Longevity and relational capital are critical assets that must be leveraged to make higher education more responsive and effective.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Coach: A different term for an individual with a terminal degree who supports professors in online and hybrid coursework.

Instructional Coach: An individual with a terminal degree who supports professors in online and hybrid coursework.

Inter-Rater Reliability: Two or three academic coaches grading with the same rubric as the professor or record, and ensuring all are using the rubric effectively.

Lead Coach: The academic coach responsible for the administration and scheduling of the academic coaches who are assigned to university courses.

Longevity: The time frame being incorporated for the instructional coach and professor – this exemplifies a long-term working relationship.


Relational Capital: The relationship having a ‘trust bank’ in a working system with the professor and academic coach.

Tenure Track Professor: An assistant professor who is on the path to associate at a university institution.

Chapter 5

Collaborating to Meet the Diverse Needs of Students in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The chapter authors will bring insight into the collaborative process, providing the reader with a broader sense of how they can work collaboratively to ensure all students in the online classroom are getting their needs met. To maximize student learning opportunities, it is imperative the preparation and the academic team's purpose align with a student focused mission. Furthermore, the relationship between academic coach and lead instructor can be delicate and fragile. Developing a professional rapport is critical in a creating a trusting collaborative relationship. This chapter will focus on building collaborative rapport between lead faculty and academic coaches. Additionally, the chapter discusses collaboration ideas such as (a) treating academic coaches as equals, (b) obtaining professional input from academic coaches, (c) student engagement opportunities, and (d) best practices for

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initial meeting. The chapter authors believe a true collaborative partnership begins with a team relationship, thus providing students an engaging and dynamic virtual or online learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

With the diversity that exists in our world today comes change. Working in institutes of higher education (IHE) there has been a shift in the diversity of the student population and that diversity is growing (Boothe, Lohmann, Donnell, & Hall, 2018; Dell, Dell, & Blackwell, 2015; Rao, Edelen-Smith, & Wailehua, 2014; Smith, 2012). These areas of diversity can include race, religion, ability level, experiential, gender, sexual orientation, age, and geographic (Diversity in the classroom: Teaching, types, and examples, 2023) among others. While this is great, it also means that we need to shift the way we have been teaching to ensure we are meeting all our students' needs.

The chapter authors have worked together for well over five years and have created a truly collaborative working environment. Our partnership is built on mutual respect, open communication, and a clear commitment to advancing knowledge when working with students. Through a shared understanding of each other's strengths, we have created a productive environment that has supported ongoing collaboration and contributed to the development of this chapter. Over the years we have developed a high degree of trust, and a deep appreciation for each other's academic strengths.

As special educators by trade, the chapter authors are trained to collaborate. One way we are taught to collaborate is by co-teaching. Co-teaching began in the field of special education, as part of a movement to educate students with disabilities in the general education classroom. By co-teaching we are able to deliver instruction to a diverse group of students, alongside a general education teacher. While co-teaching has evolved from PK-12 schools and meeting the needs of special education students, in higher education it can focus on mentoring graduate student teachers (Bullard and Felder 2003; Morelock, 2017; Walters and Misra 2013), and avoiding teaching in isolation (Bettencourt and Weldon 2010; Morelock, 2017; Nevin, Thousand, and Villa, 2009). The authors ascertain that the use of academic coaches is most similar to the one teach, one assist co-teaching method. With one teach, one assist, one educator works with the whole group (the faculty member) while the other educator (academic coach) offers additional learning support (Morin, N.D). When we speak of collaboration, co-teaching specifically, it is important to remember that the relationship between academic coach and faculty can be delicate and fragile. Developing a professional rapport is critical as a trusting collaborative relationship is formulated. To maximize student learning opportunities, it is imperative the preparation and the academic team's purpose align with a student focused mission.

Students will benefit from the impact of defined roles and planned classroom instructional goals. Utilizing the Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) framework emphasizes the importance of fostering meaningful connections and provides a foundation for fostering long-lasting, impactful relationships between professors and academic coaches. RCT focuses on building relationships, which is key in the collaborative relationship and defining professional roles of leading online learning at the University level.

This chapter will tie together the ideas of collaboration and co-teaching and of theoretical concepts, such as RCI, constructivism, and connectivism. More importantly, the chapter will focus on ways to build a collaborative rapport between lead faculty and academic coaches. Tying these ideas together, the authors hope you will find ways for lead instructors and academic coaches to work together to meet the diverse student population in the college classrooms, specifically the online classroom. The chapter also focuses on ideas such as (a) treating academic coaches as equals, (b) faculty members obtaining professional input from academic coaches, (c) student engagement opportunities, including mentoring students, (d) best practices for faculty members working with academic coaches for the first time. We believe a true collaborative partnership with instructors and academic coaches begins with a team relationship, thus providing students an engaging and dynamic virtual or online learning experience.

COLLABORATION AND CO-TEACHING

As we mentioned earlier in the chapter, the students entering institutes of higher education (IHE) are more diverse than ever. As special educator's, the authors are well versed in ways of meeting the diverse needs of PK-12 students through the use of collaboration and co-teaching and have taken these ideas into the college classroom. In addition, IHE's having a more diversified student population. According to OCED (2018) we are also responsible for graduating students who are critical thinkers and problem solvers (as cited in Cordie, Brecke, Lin, Wooten, 2020). Collaboration is a broad term encompassing people working together, which is something special educators do on a daily basis. In Igbo & Straker's (2019) article they discuss the first step in collaboration being to find others willing to collaborate. According to Haag et al. (2023), co-teaching has been proposed as a platform for cultivating pedagogical change and has key attributes for successful change strategies in education. Oftentimes, academic coaches are assigned to course sections through transactional processes with coach/course assignments assigned based on academic experience and employment availability. However, personality becomes a major factor in developing strong and effective relationships with faculty. Research has found that

successful co-teaching in PK-12 is dependent upon ongoing relationships (Scruggs et al., 2007; Morelock et al., 2017) and there is no reason this could not be the same at the collegiate level. Additionally, there are challenges to co-teaching in IHEs. These include needing extra planning time, personality differences, and students playing instructor and academic coach against each other, but as you read through the remainder of this chapter you will find ways to overcome these challenges (Ginther et al., 2007; Montebalco, 2021; Rooks, 2022). Oftentimes, academic coaches are assigned to course sections through transactional processes with coach/course assignments assigned based on academic experience and employment availability. However, personality becomes a major factor in developing strong and effective relationships with faculty. Research has found that successful co-teaching in PK-12 is dependent upon ongoing relationships (Scruggs et al., 2007; Morelock et al., 2017) and there is no reason this could not be the same at the collegiate level. Once a pairing of lead professor and academic coach has been made the ability to build a collaborative relationship can begin.

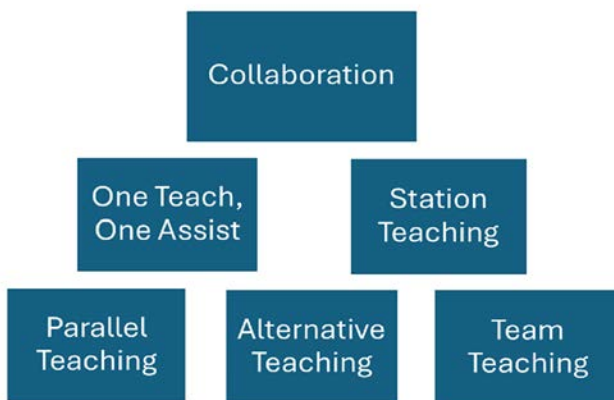
Collaboration can occur in many ways. Co-teachers can share instructional materials, engage in research projects and professional developments together. Co-teaching is commonly seen in PK-12 schools, but is known to be a promising practice in education for a variety of levels and across disciplines (e.g., Bauler & Kang, 2020; Iacono et al., 2021; Ricci & Fingon, 2018; Steele et al., 2021). Co-teaching occurs when two or more professionals deliver substantive instruction to a diverse group of students with mutual ownership and joint accountability in instruction, even though participation level may vary (Cook, 2004). The practice of co-teaching emerged during the 1980's as a way to meet the idea of least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities, which allows for special education and related services to occur in the general education classroom (Bauwens, Hourcade, & Friend, 1989; Friend & Cook, 2010). Research has found that co-teaching is not just effective for students with disabilities, but also for English language learners and gifted and talented (e.g. Bahamonde & Friend, 1999; Bacharach, Heck & Dahlberg, 2008; Friend & Cook, 2010).

Co-teaching in the PK-12 schools can be defined as a general education teacher and a special education teacher or other specialist working together to meet the needs of the students in the classroom, including students with disabilities (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Friend, 2008; Friend & Cook, 2010). It is important to note that co-teaching is not just about differing levels of credentials, being present simultaneously in the classroom, one teacher providing *all* instruction, while the other does nothing (Batur, 2012 as cited in Rooks et al., 2022). After teaching and coaching for more than a decade at the college level, the chapter authors posit that co-teaching also works effectively in IHE's to meet the diverse needs of college students. In higher education we would define co-teaching as two representatives,

well-versed in their specific content area, working together to best meet the diverse needs of their students. It is imperative that when you begin co-teaching that the definition and roles of co-teachers are explicitly discussed (Cordie, Brecke, Lin, Wooten, 2020; Steel et al., 2018). Additionally, when working with your co-teacher (or academic coach) it is important to build a solid foundation for mutual respect and sharing of goals (Friend, 1995; Cordie, Brecke, Lin, Wooten, 2020). Further in the chapter you will find simple ways the chapter authors built their collaborative working relationship as co-teachers

Co-Teaching Models

Whether co-teaching in PK-12 schools or in IHE's there are five well known co-teaching models that can be used. We will discuss all five models briefly, but most of the discussion throughout this chapter will focus on the one teach, one assist model of co-teaching, since that best describes how we, the chapter authors, identify our instructor/academic coach relationship. **Figure 1** provides a breakdown of the co-teaching models as well as provides an example that can be used in the college online classroom.



One Teach, One Assist

The one teach, one assist co-teaching model can be defined as one person providing instruction to all students and a second person assisting students throughout the class (Friend, 2016). As the full-time teacher of record for a college course,

the instructor would be the person providing the daily instruction to the students. Whereas, the academic coach can assist the instructor with other duties, such as grading, responding to discussion threads, answering questions, attending virtual meetings and other duties the instructor and academic coach have agreed upon. The overall goal is to ensure students remain engaged in the course and can access support from both course professionals. This co-teaching method has been noted to be the most commonly used in PK-12 schools (Ackerman et al., 2023; Chatzigeorgiadou & Barouta, 2021; Iacono et al., 2023; Zamkowska, Pilgrim, & Hornby, 2024) and we believe is the easiest to implement in the online college classroom.

Alternative Teaching

Alternative teaching occurs when there are two groups learning. There is usually one large group with regular daily instruction, while the other teacher works with a smaller group on assessments, remediation, pre-teaching, etc (Friend, 2016). In the college classroom this may look like the academic coach providing a guest lecture to the entire class, while the lead instructor uses a breakout room and works with a smaller group to review the process for an action research project to those who still do not have a clear problem statement written. Alternative teaching can assist with building relationships among students and instructors. This method allows for diverse student learning and flexibility of instructional delivery. Park and Robinson (2022) emphasize the importance of students making meaningful connections with university faculty and support staff.

Parallel Teaching

Parallel teaching occurs when two teachers instruct two separate groups. This co-teaching model offers a dual approach to pushing students to understand material from different angles and provides an opportunity to receive personalized support through grouping. These groups can work on the same lesson such as reviewing for a test, or the groups can work on two different activities. An example in a synchronous college class would be having both, the lead instructor and academic coach, meet at the same time via Zoom for content introduction, and then use breakout rooms to teach the content separate ways. Each instructor teaches the content the way they want to or preferably, the way that best fits the needs of their group of students. Students are able to gain information and benefit from the experience and perspective of both professionals. Groups can then switch so that students are learning the content in different ways and perspectives. By utilizing smaller groups for teaching, parallel teaching allows instructors to re-teach, and provide interventions

or additional teaching to those students who are not understanding, which is just another way to meet the diverse needs of your students (Morin, n.d.).

Station Teaching

Station teaching is most familiar in early childhood grades and is seen as students working in small groups, but it can be used in the college classroom also. In the PK-12 schools there is research about the importance of “brain breaks”, which if it is important to younger learners, why would it not be important to older learners. Many college instructors lecture an entire class time without allowing students a break, or only one short break, depending on class-time. With station teaching students switch between groups throughout the class time. These short breaks occur as students are separated into their second and third breakout group. This allows students time to move their bodies and take a short break several times throughout a class period. Additionally, this provides content to be chunked so that students do not become overwhelmed (Stolzer & Rigolosi, n.d.). In station teaching students are put into at least three groups. One group will work with one instructor, another group will work with the other instructor, and a third, maybe more, group will work independently or in small groups on review activities (Friend, 2016). In an online classroom, this would best be used during one or more synchronous classes. The instructor could create three breakout groups set-up in Zoom. One group, led by the academic coach, works with a group on reviewing how to solve algebraic equations using varied instructional materials, while the lead instructor works with a group previewing tomorrow’s content. The independent group is given algebraic equations (as a review) to be solved on the whiteboard. This group works together to answer the questions. Station teaching allows for instructors to differentiate instruction, create flexibility, have students collaborate with each other, and create stations that are varied, all of which is a way to meet diverse needs at the college level (Yukhymenko et al., 2024).

Team Teaching

The co-teaching model that takes the most trust, communication, and planning is team teaching. It also should seem natural, which takes patience, understanding, and time. When both instructors teach to the same group at the same time, *team teaching* is occurring (Friend, 2016). During this type of co-teaching the lead instructor and the academic coach are working together and filling in gaps throughout the teaching. When done correctly, students are receiving two points of view on a certain subject, and it is not clearly noted which person has less experience or is not the actual instructor. You may find this when there are two teachers giving

instruction in a back-and-forth way. It could be that the lead instructor reviews the lesson objective and describes the purpose of writing literary prose. During the lecture, when the academic coach has something to add, they will add their “two cents”. Once this is completed, the academic coach may take over and work with the students on the steps to writing literary prose, while the lead instructor walks around helping students and offering more information or context during the academic coach's lecture time. According to Mowreader's (2023) article, by carefully implementing team teaching, the students benefit by having their diverse needs met, improved learning outcomes, retention rates, and communication.

Benefits of Co-Teaching

Now that you are familiar with co-teaching it is important to understand how co-teaching assists in meeting the diverse needs of our students. According to Weiss (2022) one main benefit of co-teaching is that it does, in fact, help instructors address the varied, diverse needs of their college students (Mowreader, 2023; Yukhymenko et al., 2024; Zach & Afugos, 2024). Many of the benefits discussed below have been found in the research focused on PK-12 schools and not in higher education, however we believe the same can be true for college instructors and academic coaches, as we have witnessed many of these from our personal experiences working together. One such benefit found in both PK-12 schools and IHE's is that co-teaching improves professional satisfaction (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2015; Chatzigeorgiadou & Barouta, 2021). The relationship among teachers, which in turn assists in creating a positive school climate (Caldarella, 2011; Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018). This could be due to working alongside and sharing responsibilities in educating students making instructors less isolated (Kinne, 2016; Zach & Afugos, 2024; Bettencourt & Weldon; 2010; Morelock, 2017). By engaging in a co-teaching relationship it provides the instructor and academic coach the ability to identify strengths and weaknesses in their teaching towards continuous improvement (Bettencourt And Weldon 2010; Morelock, 2017; Chatzigeorgiadou & Barouta, 2021; Zach & Afugos, 2024). Research has found that when two people work together to teach a class, that students learning is enriched because they are being provided an education with multiple and integrated perspectives which have lead to improved student outcomes (e.g., Bryant et al., 2014; Crow & Smith, 2005; Ronfelt et al., 2015; Rooks et al., 2022; Sebald et al., 2023; Steel et al., 2018; Villa et al., 2013; Zach & Afugos, 2024).

THEORETICAL PRACTICE

We have provided information on co-teaching which is a way of teaching that has proven effective, but that is not the only important item in collaborating in the online college classroom. It is important we also explore the educational landscape and define the collaborative value between the professor and the academic coach. This is essential in establishing a clear connection between theory and practice. We will examine three key theoretical frameworks: Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), Connectivism and Social Constructivism/ Constructivism. A purposeful application plan must be developed to align with and support the core principles of each framework. Clearly understanding how these theories move into the action of working collaboratively, we hope it will help in building a strong collaborative relationship.

Relational Cultural Theory

Lewis and Olshansky (2016) describe how creating a culture of inclusiveness and faculty success begins at the intersection of the organizational structure and mentoring programs. Relational Cultural Theory emphasizes people grow through meaningful relationships. When mutual empathy and empowerment are present, individuals feel understood and supported. These strong connections build relational resilience, helping people grow and adapt together all skills needed to build a successful teaching team. In **practice**, building collaborative connections allows for both the professor and academic coach to feel heard and supported when working to provide the best learning opportunity for students. This approach is especially valuable in education, coaching, and leadership, where teamwork fosters learning and well-being.

Connectivism

According to Connectivism, learning is a process of forming connections with people, digital tools, and diverse sources of information (Siemens, 2005). In higher education, collaboration between a professor and academic coach enhances the learning environment by combining subject-matter expertise with personalized academic support. The integration of online technology further supports collaboration, allowing both educators to guide students through interactive, networked learning experiences. This shared approach promotes student success by leveraging diverse perspectives, modeling effective teamwork, and encouraging active, engaged learning in both virtual and in-person settings (Lewis & Olshansky, 2016). In practice, Connectivism supports professors and academic coaches in leveraging digital tools and online networks to enhance learning. It acknowledges knowledge

can reside in non-human forms, such as computers, databases, and digital platforms (Siemens, 2005). By engaging in collaborative decision-making, the academic team guides students in connecting with relevant information and helps students thrive in a digital learning environment while promoting a positive and engaging online learning experience.

Social Constructivism/Constructivism

In higher education, constructivist and social constructivist theories by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky support collaborative and co-teaching models by emphasizing knowledge is actively constructed through professional experience and social interaction among both the professor and academic coach. Piaget's constructivism highlights how students could benefit as learners when the professor and academic coach build understanding through academic exploration and reflection, while Vygotsky's social constructivism stresses the importance of using collaboration, language, and cultural tools in shaping student learning. In co-teaching environments, instructors model collaborative learning, engage in shared dialogue, and work together through shared professional experiences. This approach not only enhances student learning but also fosters a dynamic exchange of ideas among educators, promoting professional growth and shared responsibility (Vygotsky, 1978; Piaget, 1952). In practice, collaboration in a professional learning environment is an active process where both professors and academic coaches construct knowledge through shared experience. By applying Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the academic team can emphasize the importance of peer support in fostering growth within the teaching, learning, and student support process. In a team teaching environment, learning is enhanced through social interaction, where both educators engage in dialogue to deepen understanding of the course content and intended student learning outcomes. Communication and language becomes a vital tool for expressing coursework ideas, providing student feedback, and co-constructing intended learning goals for the course. As both the professor and academic coach contribute their perspectives to the course, this approach supports a richer, more dynamic learning experience grounded in shared understanding and mutual growth (Vygotsky, 1978).

We must consider how the use of theories focuses on how a professor and academic coach benefit from creating a model for meaningful learning experiences in online and blended environments. The three theories above lead us to a Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework summary, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, which provides a model for creating meaningful learning experiences in online and blended environments. It consists of three core elements:

1. Social Presence – the ability of participants to project themselves socially and emotionally, creating a supportive community.
2. Cognitive Presence – the extent to which learners can construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse.
3. Teaching Presence – the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes to support learning outcomes.

In higher education, the CoI framework helps professors and academic coaches collaboratively design and facilitate engaging, learner-centered experiences, encouraging active participation, critical thinking, and a sense of belonging in digital learning spaces (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2011). You have read about the importance of co-teaching to meet diverse student needs and have seen how theory relates directly to the relationship of lead instructor and academic coach, now you will see this information put into practice.

BUILDING COLLABORATIVE RAPPORT

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, we have worked together for over five years and have learned a lot through our time together. We previously have provided background on the how and why of our collaborative relationship, but now we want to share some specific examples of how to build rapport with each other to meet the diverse needs of our students. You may notice, we said “our” students, this is because we feel we have created a true collaborative working relationship. The remainder of this chapter will focus on treating academic coaches as equal partners, lead instructors obtaining feedback and other input from their academic coaches, utilizing student engagement opportunities, and best practices for working together the first time.

Treating Academic Coaches as Equals

Academic Coaches (AC) are considered an extension of faculty, meant to serve as a support to the lead faculty member within a course. ACs follow the guidance and direction of faculty, committed to supporting both students and faculty throughout the duration of the course. Prior to the start of a new course, coaches are required to meet with the lead faculty member to discuss course expectations, including grading responsibilities, course objectives and outcomes, areas of focus, and any other pertinent information needed for the coach to serve in their supportive roles. According to Letchworth et al. (2024), student success in higher education distance learning depends on the support provided by university programs. Faculty have the

unique opportunity to set the tone for the course and by inviting coaches to have a voice and offer insight and perspectives into the different components of the course; coaches are seen as equals. Further, when faculty treat coaches as equals, students are more willing to accept feedback and criticism knowing that the coaches are considered on the same level of expertise as the lead faculty member. For students that question a grade or feedback received, the pre-established rapport and mutual agreement of expectations set by the faculty and coaches provides a consistent approach of expectations that can be easier to reiterate across sections and with different coaches within a single course.

In our experience, students disagreeing with an assignment grade and requesting the lead faculty to review the grade or regrade, is one of the main issues we experienced early on in our collaborative relationship. In the beginning, the lead instructor would go in and regrade the assignment and we found that many times the grade would actually be lower, however there were times that the grade may have increased. We found this was not sustainable and questioned, why are we re-grading assignments? This is not why academic coaches were hired nor the purpose of having an academic coach assigned to a course. As time went on, the lead instructor began communicating with the academic coaches before responding to the regrading request. Many times, this quick conversation helped in understanding the thinking behind the grading and the lead instructor could do a quick review of the assignment and along with the coaches feedback, respond to the student without having to regrade the submission. Additionally, the lead instructor, who only chooses academic coaches with terminal degrees (since it is a master's level program), began talking to the students about the role of the academic coach and emphasizing that they had terminal degrees and had a wealth of information that will help students not only learn the content from the current assignments in question but also learn how to generalize the information and apply them to non-course settings. The lead instructor also mentioned to her students that many times when they ask for their assignments to be reviewed that their grade usually goes down, because the instructor is going to be more particular in all areas of the rubric and hold students accountable more explicitly to each section of the assigned rubric. The lead instructor also makes sure to tell the students how long the coaches have coached with them, as well as information on how we have worked together to make the class better. Between these things, time and trust (working together for several years) the number of regrade requests has diminished immensely, along with, we hope, respect for the coaches. Furthermore, all academic coaches for the courses are required to write an introduction to the class introducing themselves, their experience, and schooling. We will also discuss obtaining input from your academic coaches, this is important to us because the lead instructor truly understands the coaches have just as much knowledge, sometimes more, on certain subjects, which

means we are equal and they should be treated that way. By showing your students that you and your coach are equals during the class, it helps your students show respect to the coaches in return. We also hope they realize the gift they have been afforded by receiving instruction/feedback from two “experts” in the field.

Obtaining Professional Input from Academic Coaches

As the lead faculty member, you may start off by choosing academic coaches blindly, with only a look at their resume. When the first author began working fully online there were definitely learning curves when using the academic coaches because she did not know much about them or for that matter, what they really did. At the beginning, we went through the motions without much conversation, except for the required meetings. After using the same academic coaches a few times, the lead faculty member began reaching out more and thinking about ways to create a more collaborative partnership with the academic coaches. The faculty member author is constantly updating the courses to ensure learning objectives are being met and that course structure in the learning management system (LMS) is clear. Using reflective feedback as a tool to gain insight from coaches prior to the course starting, during the course, and after courses concluded, provided a way for ongoing improvements to be made in real-time, which strengthened courses tremendously (Fluijt et al., 2016). Executing intentional collaboration with faculty and coaches was key to the successful course outcomes.

Academic coaches have at least a master's degree or higher, and are expected to have relevant years of experience within their field of expertise (Instructional Connections, n.d.). Academic coaches are considered an invaluable tool for student success in online courses, far beyond traditional, teaching assistance or graduate assistants. For example, an academic coach may have a primary role at another institute of higher education in a non-instructional capacity as well as serve on committees, editorial review boards, etc. which can provide lead faculty members with unique and nontraditional outside perspectives to the assigned course. Oftentimes within an online course, it can be difficult and challenging for faculty to develop and create new, up-to-date content when teaching a course that is familiar and may have been taught/offered several times in a year. Lead faculty can tap into academic coaches' experiences as a way to keep course content current and relevant.

Coaches and their professional experiences can be considered one of the most beneficial pieces of the collaborative relationship among lead instructors and academic coaches. As the lead instructor it can be intimidating to reach out and ask for input, particularly from an external individual with little background history or relationship. However, we have learned that if you build that solid rapport and treat each other as equals, this can also be the most rewarding part of incorporating coaches

into courses. Courses have changed so much over the past several years due to this. The lead instructor regularly asks the coaches for their input on grading rubrics, assignments and the clarity of the directions, if they feel something is missing or needs changed, and even asking if the order of the content makes sense. At the end of the course the lead instructor will also ask the coaches if they see anything that may need to be added or changed to the overall course. This is important because they are seeing the information differently than we may be seeing our course. We may think we covered all aspects of a specific content area or even the directions make sense to us, however an outsider, who is not in our mind nor wrote the information, can sometimes see things we may have missed. This is true collaboration.

For example, one of the author coaches is now adjuncting for some of the courses she coached in. As the lead instructor, knowing the coach's background was specifically in the course's subject area was a huge help when updating the course. Before the coach took over as adjunct we had many conversations about the textbook, what assignments may need to be changed and how to change them, what updates were needed for each rubric, as well as how we were able to solidify a more solid final project. The course is now fully the adjuncts course and the lead instructor is comfortable with having her make any changes needed. From the coaches perspective, she enjoyed having access to the course before she taught it and knew the expectations of what was wanted in the course. The other way we collaborate is that one of the coaches turned adjunct teaches some sections of the same course the lead instructor also teaches. After each term we get together to discuss what went well, what didn't, and what updates, such as time needed on a specific section or what may need clarified more during our virtual meeting time. This has been a true gift to the author instructor because of the belief that "two heads are better than one" and additionally we are in the throws together.

Student Engagement Opportunities

As more programs and courses shift to distance learning, university administrators and stakeholders are faced with the challenges of student engagement, student success, and student self-efficacy. Student retention is considered a key outcome measure for postsecondary education success, however continues to be one of the biggest challenges for distance education (Alzen et al., 2021). According to the American Association of Community College's 21st Century Initiative, coaching is considered a promising practice for student success (Pechac & Slantcheva-Durst, 2021). With the coach serving as an extension of the lead faculty, coaches have a unique opportunity to connect and relate with students in an informal way that creates a safe space for students to feel heard and to receive support. Letchworth et al. (2024) stress the increased need for support for both online students and online

teaching faculty and one way to provide this two-way support is through the use of academic coaches. Coaches create open platforms for students to interact with each other during courses, such as in discussion assignment forums, where coach feedback can be observed by peers in the course, creating positive motivational feedback and positive emotional stimulation (Bismala et al., 2022). Academic coaching can be used as a strategic intervention to increase student engagement, retention, and success and can be the difference between completing distance education programs of study and those that leave higher education altogether (Alzen et al., 2021). While little research exists specifically in exploring how academic coaches impact retention, there is ample empirical evidence that academic coaches can have a positive effect on students enrolled in distance education programs of study (Alzen et al., 2021; Robinson, 2015).

Another way we keep our students engaged is by providing two different perspectives or even two different explanations on a topic. When the lead instructor first began teaching online she was the only professor teaching all the graduate students. Needless to say students only received one perspective since she was the only one teaching the courses at the time. When we added coaches, students were able to see different perspectives from the coaches in the way of assignment feedback. Today, we have added a second full-time instructor, coaches, and two adjuncts, which provides a more diverse variety of perspectives for students. The students also have learned to respect the coaches because they also know that some of them are adjuncts and may have had them as the lead instructor in different courses. Additionally, as lead instructors we are always asked to write letters of recommendations for our students, but by working collaboratively with academic coaches and students seeing them over and over in their courses, we are opening up the networking opportunities for our students, thus they can now ask them for letters of recommendations, etc. These are just some of the ways we have collaborated together to meet our student needs.

Best Practices for Initial Meeting

What we have noticed after working together for so long is the importance of the initial meeting. Not all lead instructors or academic coaches are as open or even know what to discuss. The author lead instructor, as well as the academic coaches have worked with several other lead instructors and academic coaches and have learned some helpful things that should occur during the first meeting in order to begin your collaborative relationship on the right track. Table 1 provides a list for your review.

Table 1. Tips for First Meeting w/Academic Coaches

1. Find a Mutual Meeting Time: This may occur after the lead instructors work time, however it is important to understand that many academic coaches also have full-time jobs in addition to coaching.
2. Share Course or Classroom Context: Sharing past course syllabi/assignments prior to meeting. This will allow the coach to formulate and prepare questions for the first meeting.
3. Provide Access to Course Materials: Make sure the academic coach has access to all instructional materials and textbooks before the course starts. This will allow them to fully understand the course content and determine how they could best support the course objectives. During your first meeting, be sure to inquire if they have experience with the learning management system and plan to review the contents if necessary.
4. Clarify Grading Roles and Feedback Expectations: Discuss how the grading rubric is to be used for consistency and fairness in assessing each assignment. Clearly define each person's role in the grading process. Establish expectations for type, tone and turnaround time of student feedback. This will ensure your alignment is to clarity, consistency and support of student learning. lead instructors should be open about their expectations; yet also be able to compromise with the academic coaches especially when it comes to grading.
5. Establish Professional Value: The professor should let the coach know, their contribution is valued and set the immediate tone of working together to facilitate this online learning space. Review coaches CVs and discuss relevant experience that can be applied to courses.
6. Establish Communication Norms: Set a time to check- in and follow up with the coach about the progress of the course; this could be scheduled meetings or phone calls to discuss student concerns with grading, failures or students who have not engaged in the course. Having these times scheduled during the first meeting will help to establish a relationship with the coach and keep open communication.

CONCLUSION

By creating a collaborative relationship, built on the concept of a co-teaching team, will develop an instructional partnership that thrives. Having confidence and mutual respect allows for both the professor and the academic coach to thrive as equal contributors in partnerships. The goal is to have long-term collaboration which enhances the educational experience of the student. It is imperative to remember that respect in this important collaborative relationship is reciprocal. Letchworth et al. (2024) stresses the significance of coaches and their passion for seeing students succeed. Student engagement and instructor-student interactions play a critical role in student success in online courses and coaches can fill the gap between faculty and students.

It is important for lead instructors to remember that they still have things they can learn, and by respecting and treating academic coaches as equals it keeps everyone happy, thus the relationship can build as you continue to work together for years to come. Working together for years is the ultimate goal - it makes everyone's life easier because you have learned to trust each other and learn the thinking patterns of your coaches. However, it is important to remember that respect is a two way

road, but as with many things you have to give to receive! This respect and true collaborative relationship we have built has even turned one of the academic coaches into an adjunct for our university, even though we hated losing her as a coach for those courses!

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Coach: A professional who works with students as a supplemental support to help them develop academic skills and strategies, leading to academic success

Collaboration: Two or more people working together towards a common goal.

Connectivism Theory: Emphasizes learning as a process of connecting information sources, highlighting the importance of networks and connections

Co-Teaching: Two people who work with students to meet their needs and the common goal. There are five specific models of co-teaching: (a) alternative teaching, (b) team teaching, (c) one teach, one assist, (d) parallel teaching, and (e) station teaching

Lead Instructor: The instructor or record for the course, usually a faculty member

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT): Individuals grow and develop through relationships with others


Social Constructivism/Constructivism: How individuals actively construct their own knowledge and understanding through social interactions and experiences

Student Engagement: The level and quality of support, encouragement, collaborative learning and communication that a student receives during their academic program of study

Chapter 6


From Collaboration to Impact: Enhancing Faculty and Coach Partnerships in Online Public Health Education

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ABSTRACT

Online public health education is growing rapidly, driven by demand for flexible learning and the need to prepare professionals for complex health challenges. This expansion highlights the importance of innovative teaching models and strong support systems. Faculty design rigorous curricula and integrate new research, while coaches provide individualized support, motivation, and retention. When these roles align, intellectual rigor meets holistic guidance, advancing equity and outcomes. This chapter examines faculty–coach collaboration through constructivist and Community of Inquiry frameworks: faculty build cognitive and teaching presence; coaches foster social presence and engagement. Shared platforms, coordinated interventions, and quality improvement cycles enhance performance and persistence. Evidence shows collaboration yields timely support and clearer paths to success, though challenges of miscommunication, role ambiguity, and institutional barriers persist. Stronger frameworks, development, and recognition of coaching are needed.

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INTRODUCTION

Online education in public health has grown significantly over the past decade, reflecting broader shifts toward flexible, technology-mediated learning in higher education (Banerjee & Firtell, 2017; Hunter et al., 2014; Prescott, 2011). Whether prompted by global health concerns, institutional goals for wider access, or the changing needs of adult learners, online public health programs now serve a more diverse student population. This growth necessitates innovative instructional methods and strong student support systems, both of which depend on effective collaboration between faculty and academic coaches.

As content experts, faculty play a central role in developing academically rigorous curricula and integrating current research and public health practices into instruction (Chen et al., 2008; Osiecki et al., 2022). Academic coaches, by contrast, are essential to promoting student engagement and retention. Acting as mentors and motivators, they guide learners through their academic paths, bridging the gap between content delivery and student achievement (Cipher et al., 2018; Martinez, 2015). When faculty and coaches collaborate effectively, the outcome can be transformative; fostering deeper engagement, stronger performance, and broader impacts on public health practice (Cipher et al., 2018; Tee et al., 2009).

This chapter examines best practices for strengthening partnerships between faculty and academic coaches in online public health education. By analyzing the evolving landscape of online programs, clarifying faculty and coach roles, reviewing theoretical frameworks, and evaluating collaboration strategies, we highlight how purposeful partnerships can improve student learning outcomes and overall program success. Although collaboration is widely acknowledged as essential, many online public health programs still lack clear frameworks for aligning faculty and coach efforts. This chapter addresses this gap by providing practical strategies grounded in established theories and recent research.

THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF ONLINE PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION

Online public health education has expanded significantly in recent years, evolving from a niche format to a mainstream platform for professional and academic advancement. Studies show that distance learning enrollments in higher education have consistently outpaced overall enrollment growth, indicating sustained demand for online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2017). In fields like public health, where rapid responses to global challenges are critical, online platforms allow institutions to update course content quickly and distribute evidence-based practices broadly

(Hodges et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, underscoring the need for flexible, scalable learning solutions that transcend geographic limits (Rose, 2020). As a result, universities have increased investments in virtual classrooms, multimedia tools, and asynchronous learning technologies to expand student access and deliver timely, relevant instruction (Means & Neisler, 2021). These innovations not only increase access but also support inclusivity by accommodating learners with work or family obligations and those in remote areas.

Challenges and Opportunities in Online Teaching and Learning

Despite its many advantages, online education presents notable challenges, chief among them student isolation. The lack of face-to-face interaction can diminish the sense of community and belonging that supports engagement and retention (Hrastinski, 2019). Studies indicate that learners without sufficient social support in virtual environments are more likely to disengage and drop out (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Technology barriers, including unreliable internet and limited digital literacy, intensify these issues and risk deepening existing educational inequities (Dahlstrom et al., 2015). Ensuring quality in online programs also demands innovative approaches, such as backward design and rigorous assessment strategies, to maintain academic standards and support meaningful learning outcomes (Fink, 2013).

At the same time, online learning offers valuable opportunities for public health education. Global cohorts enrich learning by contributing diverse regional, cultural, and professional perspectives, fostering dynamic discussions and idea exchange (Zheng et al., 2020). Interactive tools like virtual simulations and case-based modules enhance experiential learning by replicating real-world public health scenarios, reinforcing theoretical concepts (Chan et al., 2019). Furthermore, online formats support scalability, allowing institutions to increase course offerings, develop specialized certificate tracks, and respond quickly to emerging public health needs. These models also benefit workforce development by enabling professionals to upskill without interrupting their careers (Cook & Dupras, 2017).

The Role of Faculty and Academic Coaches in Supporting Diverse Learners

In this dynamic environment, faculty and academic coaches perform complementary yet distinct roles that together enhance the student experience. Faculty design and deliver courses that accommodate diverse learning preferences, often incorporating problem-based learning and real-world public health cases (Christianson et al., 2021). By curating evidence-based content and using active learning strategies, faculty convey foundational knowledge while helping students build critical think-

ing and collaborative problem-solving skills essential for public health practice (Czerwienski & Ellis, 2020). Academic coaches, meanwhile, serve as consistent, personalized touchpoints who assist students with time management, goal setting, and the application of learning strategies (Robinson & Niemer, 2010). They provide targeted support for non-academic barriers, such as work–life balance or technology issues, while fostering accountability and motivation.

When these roles operate in coordination, online learners benefit from an integrated support system that is rigorous, nurturing, and responsive to individual needs. Faculty may refer students to academic coaches for additional support, while coaches can share feedback with faculty about recurring student challenges, informing instructional design and promoting continuous improvement (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). As a result, students from varied backgrounds, including working professionals and those in underserved regions, gain equitable access to a high-quality public health education that is timely and aligned with the field’s evolving demands. Through this synergy, online public health programs are well-positioned to graduate professionals equipped to tackle current and emerging global health challenges.

Understanding Faculty and Academic Coach Roles in Online Public Health Education

In the rapidly growing field of online education, academic coaches are well-positioned to assist faculty with pedagogical, technological, and student support responsibilities (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). This multifaceted relationship reflects the unique demands of online learning, where flexible scheduling, diverse student populations, and virtual environments require academic rigor alongside personalized support (Moore & Piety, 2022). Faculty typically serve as curriculum architects and stewards of evidence-based teaching, while coaches offer individualized support to help students succeed in settings where physical distance may create social and motivational barriers (Orr & Sonnadara, 2019). Through collaboration, faculty and coaches create a cohesive learning ecosystem that sustains academic standards while promoting student engagement and success.

In online public health courses, such collaboration is especially critical given the evolving nature of global health challenges. Effective instruction demands the timely integration of current topics, such as epidemic preparedness and health policy reform, alongside support systems tailored to diverse professional and personal needs (Baker et al., 2018; Kas-Osoka et al., 2018). By employing clear communication, interactive technologies, and ongoing assessment, faculty maintain course quality, while coaches intervene early to address individual student needs. This team-based model helps establish a digital community of practice, affirming that even online, academic belonging and professional growth can thrive.

The success of this collaboration is illustrated through practical examples. For instance, an online module on infectious disease surveillance is strengthened when a faculty member, informed by recent literature and global case studies, develops assignments simulating real-world outbreak investigations. Concurrently, a coach supports students with structured study plans, motivation during demanding timelines, and peer discussion facilitation to help contextualize complex epidemiological concepts. These complementary efforts prepare students with the knowledge, skills, and resilience needed to excel in virtual classrooms and the broader field of public health.

Faculty Responsibilities

Faculty in online public health programs hold a critical responsibility for designing curricula that reflect current research and emerging trends in epidemiology, health policy, environmental health, and other specialized areas (Caron, 2013; Meredith et al., 2022). Given the evolving nature of public health, they must remain current with new findings and guidelines, integrating timely updates on pandemic responses, social determinants of health, and community health interventions. This often requires revising coursework to include recent peer-reviewed studies or adjusting learning outcomes to meet updated accreditation standards. Through this ongoing curriculum development, faculty ensure students receive a rigorous, evidence-based education aligned with contemporary global health realities.

Instruction and Assessment

Online instruction requires faculty to use various digital tools, such as learning management systems (LMS), video conferencing platforms, discussion forums, and interactive simulations, to deliver content and assess student performance (Meredith et al., 2022). In public health education, these tools help simulate real-world scenarios; for instance, faculty may implement virtual exercises in which students design vaccination campaigns or respond to hypothetical public health crises (Caron, 2013). Faculty also develop assessments that promote critical thinking, including case study analyses and group projects evaluating health interventions across socio-cultural contexts. Whether through synchronous lectures, asynchronous discussions, or gamified quizzes, the objective remains to foster student engagement and mastery of key public health competencies.

Research Integration

An essential aspect of the faculty role is integrating cutting-edge research into the virtual classroom (Amri, 2022). Public health faculty may showcase recent studies on disease dynamics, health equity efforts, or emerging policy frameworks to prompt critical reflection among learners. By incorporating current events and scholarly debates into lesson plans, faculty not only inform students but also nurture inquiry. For example, a module on global health disparities might pair the latest World Health Organization data with journal articles that critique conventional intervention models. This research integration fosters an environment where students question assumptions, assess varying methodologies, and develop a deeper understanding of public health complexities.

Mentorship and Advising

Beyond delivering content, faculty often act as mentors, guiding students through research projects, thesis work, and practicum placements (Pollard & Kumar, 2021; Torres et al., 2021). In online public health programs, mentorship may involve digital office hours, virtual breakout sessions, or individualized feedback on literature reviews and proposals. Students benefit from personalized interactions that clarify academic expectations, refine research interests, and identify career paths, whether with international non-governmental organizations, local health departments, or in doctoral study. By offering intellectual support and fostering scholarly collaboration, faculty promote professional development, helping students translate academic knowledge into practical expertise.

Academic Coach Responsibilities

Coaches play a key role in promoting consistent student participation, particularly in asynchronous discussions and group projects (Barkley, 2010; Garcia, 2024; White-Jefferson et al., 2020). Because online public health courses often enroll geographically dispersed students, from professionals in rural clinics to international learners across time zones, coaches help foster a sense of community through structured engagement strategies. They may conduct weekly check-ins, prompt quieter students to contribute to discussion boards, or form small study groups focused on topics such as health economics or behavioral health promotion. By promoting active involvement, coaches help reduce isolation and ensure diverse perspectives are represented, enriching the overall learning experience.

Student Support

Academic coaches help students clarify course concepts and build effective study habits. Whether organizing virtual review sessions before exams or offering individualized tutoring in biostatistics, coaches provide learners with tools and strategies for success (Park & Robinson, 2021). This targeted support is especially valuable in rigorous public health courses, where students must interpret complex data, conduct policy analysis, or design interventions using epidemiological models. Through clear explanations, accessible materials, and personalized guidance, coaches' close knowledge gaps and promote strong academic performance.

Motivation and Retention Strategies

Online learners often balance professional duties, family responsibilities, and community roles alongside their studies. Acknowledging this, coaches serve as motivational anchors, regularly monitoring students' well-being and academic progress. They employ various retention strategies, including personalized progress tracking, goal-setting consultations, and recognition of milestone achievements (Park & Robinson, 2021). These efforts help students remain focused on academic goals and reduce the risk of attrition and burnout common in demanding fields like public health (Bettinger & Baker, 2014).

At-Risk Intervention

Coaches are well-positioned to detect early signs of academic difficulty or disengagement. By monitoring participation in discussions, tracking assignment submissions, and reviewing quiz or exam results, coaches can quickly identify students needing additional support (Park & Robinson, 2021). For example, if a student repeatedly struggles with epidemiological modeling or misses deadlines, coaches can collaborate with faculty to create personalized study plans or arrange extra office hours. This proactive approach supports immediate academic improvement while fostering resilience, preparing students to meet the evolving challenges of professional public health practice.

Together, the complementary roles of faculty and coaches in online public health education form a powerful alliance that imparts evidence-based knowledge and cultivates essential professional competencies. Faculty ground the learning experience through rigorous curriculum design, expert instruction, and meaningful assessment, while coaches provide practical scaffolding to help students navigate academic challenges, sustain engagement, and build skills in cultural sensitivity and community-based problem solving. This collaboration creates a supportive ecosystem:

faculty establish the foundational learning path, and coaches guide students along it with personalized support and motivational check-ins. As a result, graduates emerge with both strong theoretical grounding and adaptive skills necessary for addressing global health challenges.

To fully leverage the strengths of faculty and academic coaches, clear role delineation is essential. Although each role carries distinct responsibilities, areas of overlap exist, requiring intentional coordination to optimize student support and learning outcomes. As depicted in Table 1, Faculty and Academic Coach Roles, the key responsibilities of each role are defined, with emphasis on areas where collaboration adds value. Identifying these overlaps explicitly enables institutions to enhance communication, reduce redundancy, and ensure cohesive guidance throughout the student’s educational journey.

Table 1. Faculty and Academic Coach Roles

Responsibility	Faculty role	Academic coach role	Potential overlap and coordination
Curriculum design	Designs course content (takes the lead)	Supports content implementation	Coaches may suggest content adjustments based on learner feedback
Student engagement	Delivers course content and leads discussions	Facilitates student participation and engagement	Coaches and faculty coordinate to monitor engagement
Assessment and feedback	Evaluates academic performance	Provides formative support and study strategies	Faculty and coaches coordinate feedback to avoid conflicting guidance
Mentorship and advising	Advises academic pathways and research projects	Advises on non-academic barriers and study strategies	Regular meetings between faculty and coaches ensure holistic student advising

Note. This table illustrates the distinct and overlapping roles of faculty and academic coaches within online public health education, emphasizing areas for effective collaboration and coordination.

THEORETICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR COLLABORATION

Faculty–coach partnerships benefit from clearly linking theoretical frameworks such as Constructivism and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) to practice. Faculty primarily support cognitive and teaching presence by designing intellectually rigorous and engaging learning experiences. Academic coaches cultivate social presence, ensuring learners feel connected, supported, and engaged in the online environment. Explicit alignment of these theoretical elements enhances teaching effectiveness

and learner satisfaction. Establishing an effective learning environment in online public health courses requires deliberate application of evidence-based theoretical and pedagogical models. By integrating frameworks such as Constructivism and CoI, faculty and academic coaches create dynamic, student-centered experiences that reflect the complexities of real-world public health practice (Hellberg & Moll, 2022; Swan et al., 2009). The following sections examine how these models inform curriculum design, student engagement, and ongoing feedback loops, strengthening the connection between content delivery and individualized support. This comprehensive approach helps online programs maintain academic rigor while ensuring learners remain engaged, motivated, and prepared for the demands of their evolving field.

Constructivist and Student-Centered Learning Approaches

In online public health courses, faculty and academic coaches work within a framework shaped by multiple learning theories and pedagogical models. A foundational approach is constructivism, which posits that learners build on prior knowledge to form new understandings (Murphy et al., 2005). Within this framework, instructors and coaches serve as facilitators who design experiential activities, promote self-reflection, and encourage learners to connect theoretical concepts to their professional responsibilities and lived experiences (Knabe, 2004; Murphy et al., 2005). For example, a faculty member might introduce a case study on a community health intervention, prompting students to draw on their public health background and personal insights. Coaches reinforce this process by helping learners relate the intervention to their local contexts, comparing, for instance, urban and rural settings, or adapt it to support their professional goals. By combining rigorous course content with individualized scaffolding, the constructivist method ensures that knowledge remains flexible, context-specific, and enduring.

CoI Framework

Alongside constructivism, the CoI framework provides a robust lens for examining collaborative teaching and coaching. The CoI model outlines three essential elements, cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence, that collectively support effective online learning (Rapchak, 2017). Faculty typically lead cognitive presence by curating academic materials and guiding intellectual discussions, ensuring learners engage with complex public health topics such as epidemiological modeling or policy ethics. Through structured activities and targeted feedback, faculty also establish teaching presence, shaping the virtual environment to promote deeper engagement. Concurrently, coaches enhance social presence by fostering interpersonal connections among learners. They may facilitate peer interaction in

online forums, organize virtual study groups, and encourage authentic participation, reducing feelings of isolation. Through these complementary roles, faculty and coaches support each other's efforts; faculty advance content mastery, while coaches build a sense of community that amplifies learner engagement.

Evidence-Based Strategies for Enhancing Student Success Through Teamwork

A growing body of research highlights the value of integrative strategies in enhancing student success. Bedford et al. (2021) affirmed that clearly defining coaching roles through professional development improves both teaching practices and student outcomes. Research on online and blended learning also shows that timely, consistent feedback from faculty and coaches significantly enhances learner achievement, satisfaction, and persistence (Aylwin, 2019; Bolton, 1999). Shared communication platforms enable faculty and coaches to monitor student participation, allowing for timely interventions and preventing minor challenges from escalating. Collaborative activities, such as group projects and structured discussion boards, aligned with constructivist and CoI principles, promote active engagement, critical thinking, and peer learning (Murphy et al., 2005). This evidence-based, clearly defined approach to faculty-coach collaboration fosters a seamless educational experience: students engage with rigorous, relevant content while receiving the individualized support needed to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world public health competencies.

EMPIRICAL IMPACT OF COACHING: WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

A growing body of work now supports what many instructors have long sensed: structured coaching improves more than morale; it advances academic outcomes. Studies have shown that well-designed academic-coaching programs can increase both persistence and degree attainment in higher education. In the multisite Inside-Track randomized controlled trial, 17 lotteries covering 13,555 undergraduates at eight U.S. institutions, students offered one-to-one coaching were 14% more likely to be enrolled two years after random assignment and 13% more likely to graduate within four years than comparable peers (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Laura & John Arnold Foundation, 2017). Investigators also found that coaching achieved these gains at a lower cost per additional graduate than equivalent increases in financial aid, highlighting its cost-effectiveness as a retention strategy.

Building on this evidence, complementary quasi-experimental studies further support these findings in targeted group formats. At a large U.S. public university,

Canaan and colleagues (2022) employed a difference-in-discontinuity design around an academic probation threshold to assess a mandatory first-year workshop. Participation increased first-year grade-point average by approximately 0.15 standard deviations and reduced the likelihood of dropping out in year one by 8.5 percentage points. The largest gains occurred among lower-income students, who were 12–16 percentage points more likely to earn a degree within six years.

Program-level evidence clarifies which academic coaching design features yield the strongest returns. The accelerated study in associate programs random-assignment evaluation at three City University of New York Community colleges showed how a high-touch, integrated model can transform outcomes. Students assigned to accelerated study in associate programs, which combined monthly one-to-one advising with tutoring, block scheduling, mandatory full-time enrollment, and financial supports for tuition, textbooks, and transportation, nearly doubled their three-year associate-degree completion rate compared to business-as-usual controls (about 40% versus 22%; Scrivener et al., 2015). The program also increased continuous enrollment and credit accumulation by roughly a full semester's worth of credits, with effects persisting through six-year follow-up. These findings suggest that intensive coaching achieves its greatest impact when delivered as part of a tightly coordinated package of academic, financial, and logistical supports rather than as a stand-alone, light-touch intervention (Scrivener et al., 2015).

Taken together, these strands of evidence suggest that institutions aiming to improve student success cost-effectively should fund coaching as a proactive, data-informed service with manageable caseloads, regular one-to-one or small-group engagement, clear referral pathways, and integration into early-alert analytics. Programs meeting these criteria translate theoretical models of self-regulation and social capital into measurable improvements in retention, academic performance, and equity.

Data Informed Academic Coaching

Data-rich ecosystems have the potential to transform academic coaching from an intuition-driven practice into a precision partnership between coaches and faculty. Modern early-alert platforms integrate student information system records, LMS clickstreams, and predictive algorithms to identify risk early enough for a coordinated response. At Georgia State University, for example, an analytics engine monitors over 800 academic and behavioral indicators nightly, generating targeted alerts that led to more than 51,000 coach-led meetings in the most recent year and increased freshman fall-to-spring retention by five percentage points within three years of launch (Georgia State University, 2025). Faculty advisors receive the same alerts, enabling them to reinforce messages in class and refer students promptly to

subject-specific support; an approach credited by the provost's office with reducing excess credit accumulation and accelerating degree completion.

When data are embedded directly into course workflows, the coach–faculty alliance can become even more integrated. Purdue University's Course Signals system analyzes historical grades, demographic profiles, and real-time LMS activity to assign weekly red–yellow–green risk scores to each student. Instructors see the color codes in their gradebook, while coaches receive corresponding dashboards for outreach. Students who encountered Signals in at least one course had a four-year retention rate of 87%, compared with 69% for peers never exposed, a nearly 20-point difference, and they sought help earlier and more frequently (Arnold & Pistilli, 2012).

Predictive recommendation engines also support academic decisions made by coaches and faculty. Austin Peay State University's Degree Compass ranks upcoming courses by a student's likelihood of earning at least a "B" and their alignment with degree requirements. Students who followed the full set of recommended courses earned an average of 10.5 out of 12 attempted credits, compared with 2.5 credits for those who ignored the guidance; the tool also cut the Black–White credit-completion gap by more than half (Denley, 2014). Coaches report that these data provide concrete, discipline-specific talking points, while faculty use cohort-level heat maps to refine curricular scaffolding and office-hour priorities.

Institution-wide analytics platforms are increasingly closing the loop between intervention and impact. The University of Texas at San Antonio uses Civitas Learning dashboards to evaluate the effectiveness of each support program. Analysis revealed that a tutoring redesign increased overall persistence by two percentage points and produced a four to five point gain for males of color, prompting faculty to embed tutors in gateway Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics courses and coaches to prioritize outreach to that subgroup (Civitas Learning, 2024). By combining outcome analytics with disaggregated equity lenses, coaches and instructors can adapt quickly; eliminating low-yield nudges, scaling effective practices, and demonstrating return on investment to institutional leadership.

In sum, data does not replace human judgment; it sharpens it. Predictive scores identify whom to contact, course-recommendation engines suggest what to study next, and impact dashboards show whether an intervention worked, and for whom. When these insights flow seamlessly between academic coaches and faculty, institutions shift from reactive remediation to proactive, evidence-based mentoring that improves retention, narrows achievement gaps, and maximizes each student interaction.

TECHNOLOGY-ENHANCED PARTNERSHIPS: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, LEARNING ANALYTICS, AND IMMERSIVE TOOLS

Universities are investing heavily in digital platforms that offer earlier insights and more personalized learning experiences. When faculty and academic coaches interpret these signals collaboratively, technology becomes an active partner at the advising table rather than a passive monitor. By converting raw analytics into targeted conversations, whether about attendance, assignment submissions, or early-warning scores, advisors can intervene before challenges escalate. This integrated, data-informed approach aligns instructional decisions with each student's changing needs and enhances the effectiveness of every coaching touchpoint.

Real Time Early Alert Systems and Shared Dashboards

Real-time early-alert platforms now integrate the LMS, student information system, and assessment tools so that risk signals appear while there is still time to intervene. Georgia State University's graduation and progression success advising model demonstrates the power of this integration: an algorithm tracking approximately 800 data points, from login frequency to prerequisite grades, runs nightly and has triggered over 90,000 advisor-student meetings in a single year. Since the system's launch, first-year fall-to-spring retention has increased by five percentage points, and four-year graduation rates have risen by seven points (Georgia State University, n.d.-a; Georgia State University, n.d.-b). Smaller colleges are achieving similar results with more streamlined commercial tools. After Arapahoe Community College implemented Education Advisory Board (EAB) Navigate's early-alert workflow, faculty alert submissions rose by 225%, enabling advisors to triage cases within days rather than weeks and contributing to double-digit gains in course pass rates (EAB, 2021).

A strength of newer platforms is that they present the same metrics to different audiences, each at the appropriate level of detail. Students see a simple green-to-red progress bar; instructors can drill down to missed items and time-stamped submissions; and academic coaches view attendance patterns alongside notes from other support units, ensuring every conversation begins with facts rather than assumptions. Purdue University's well-documented Course Signals dashboard, for example, raised four-year retention from 69% to 87% for students who encountered the signal in at least one course (Arnold & Pistilli, 2012). More recently, California State University Northridge introduced Canvas Insights, an open-source plug-in that allows faculty to generate an "inactive-for-two-weeks" list with one click. Academic coaches receive the same feed, enabling seamless handoffs and quicker referrals to

tutoring and mental health services (California State University Northridge, 2025). Because these dashboards refresh daily, students, instructors, and coaches work from a single, up-to-date source of truth, eliminating the version-control issues that once hindered multi-campus advising efforts.

Ethical Guardrails: Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, General Data Protection Regulation, and Beyond

The U.S. Student Privacy Policy Office (SPPO) states that any predictive metric linked to a personally identifiable education record must comply with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, also known as FERPA. Institutions must therefore define a legitimate educational interest before collecting data, restrict variables to those supporting that interest, and maintain an audit trail of all dashboard access (Student Privacy Policy Office, 2024). European institutions face an additional regulatory layer: the General Data Protection Regulation requires a lawful basis for processing, prior impact assessments, and students’ “right to be forgotten” upon request (Regulation [European Union] 2016/679, 2016) (European Parliament & Council, 2016). Institutions are responding with concise learning analytics charters; essentially mini privacy notices written in plain language, that embed opt-out links within the analytics platform itself. The University of Michigan’s Learning Analytics Guiding Principles is a frequently cited model emphasizing transparency, accountability, and student empowerment (University of Michigan, 2017).

Tackling Algorithmic Bias up Front

Accuracy alone is insufficient: models trained on historical performance data can replicate structural inequities if not carefully managed. Commentators from the Educause consortium warn that artificial intelligence (AI) systems “often reflect and reproduce inherent societal biases,” potentially marginalizing the very students they are designed to support (Wargo & Anderson, 2024). A three-step safeguard is emerging in the literature: (1) assemble diverse, multi-year training datasets; (2) conduct term-by-term audits of false-positive and false-negative rates across identity groups; and (3) keep a human in the loop so that advisors treat alerts as conversation starters, not final judgments (Willis et al., 2013). Georgia State University applies this framework by pairing nightly analytics with equity-gap dashboards jointly reviewed by advisors and faculty, a practice credited with a five-percentage-point increase in first-year retention and a reduction in achievement gaps (Georgia State University, n.d.).

Immersive Tools That Close The “Experience Gap”

Early-alert dashboards diagnose risk, but virtual and augmented reality scenarios provide students with a safe space to practice complex skills while generating new data for academic coaches. A Norwegian usability study found that head-mounted virtual reality hospital simulations significantly improved nursing students’ confidence and decision-making (Mørk et al., 2024). At Arizona State University, the “Extended Reality for Good” initiative enables undergraduate community and public health majors to overlay real-time data onto an empty classroom to rehearse heat-wave disaster drills. Interaction logs are integrated into the same platform that tracks quizzes and attendance, allowing faculty and coaches to identify performance gaps not visible in a traditional grade book (Greason, 2023).

Building a Culture of Responsible Innovation

Successful programs treat technology as an evolving partnership rather than a one-time purchase. Cross-functional teams, including information technology security, legal counsel, instructional designers, and student representatives, use dynamic checklists that assess learning value, data footprint, accessibility, and cost before any tool is adopted campus-wide. Pilot studies are published openly, and both software settings and pedagogy are refined between semesters. Case studies from the EAB illustrate how this disciplined approach can scale: after Arapahoe Community College implemented Navigate’s early-alert workflow with mandatory follow-ups, faculty alert submissions rose by 225%, and no-show rates for advising appointments dropped to 7% (EAB, 2021). By integrating strong privacy safeguards, bias audits, immersive practice environments, and a culture of shared governance into a cohesive ecosystem, institutions shift from reactive tutoring to proactive, data-informed mentorship; the kind of holistic support that keeps learners engaged and on track in an increasingly digital world.

BEST PRACTICES FOR EFFECTIVE FACULTY-COACH COLLABORATION

A highly coordinated faculty–coach partnership is essential for delivering a seamless and effective learning experience in online public health programs. From clarifying responsibilities to implementing tailored student support systems, collaboration between these roles promotes academic rigor and individualized guidance (Bedford et al., 2021; Bloomberg, 2020). In addition, Kirkpatrick and Morales (2024) suggested that integrating strong communication channels and evidence-based

engagement strategies can significantly improve learner outcomes. The following best practices outline key strategies and frameworks to help faculty and academic coaches maximize their collective impact, ultimately empowering students to thrive in a dynamic virtual learning environment.

Establishing Clear Communication Channels

Effective faculty–coach collaboration in online public health courses begins with clearly defined communication protocols (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). Guidelines that outline roles, responsibilities, and preferred methods of interaction create a structured environment in which both parties can perform effectively (Matrix, 2016). For example, faculty may share course objectives and syllabi at the start of each term, ensuring that academic coaches understand the intended learning outcomes and course sequencing. Faculty and coaches can also establish recurring check-ins and define escalation procedures for urgent student concerns, such as academic misconduct or personal emergencies.

In many programs, the LMS serves as the central hub for these interactions, offering real-time analytics to track student performance and engagement (Matrix, 2016). When paired with collaborative platforms such as shared drives or project management tools, the LMS enables faculty and coaches to exchange resources, monitor intervention plans, and document communications. This technology-enabled approach not only streamlines administrative processes but also promotes open dialogue, ensuring alignment and minimizing gaps in student support.

Coordinating Student Support Strategies

A proactive, data-informed approach is essential for identifying students at risk of falling behind. Robust analytics, such as assignment completion rates, frequency of discussion forum contributions, and quiz performance, provide faculty and academic coaches with early warning signals that a student may be struggling (Barber & Sharkey, 2012; He et al., 2015; Lauría et al., 2013; Matrix, 2016). Standardized rubrics or checklists can further streamline monitoring, ensuring consistency in how performance indicators are evaluated (Andrade, 2007; Andrade & Boulay, 2003). Once at-risk students are identified, faculty, coaches, and students can co-develop individualized intervention plans that address academic and non-academic barriers. These plans may include additional tutoring, adjusted deadlines, or targeted study resources, all supported by regular check-ins to monitor progress. Through close collaboration on early identification and intervention, faculty and coaches build a safety net that keeps students on track and promotes resilience in the face of academic challenges.

Enhancing Student Engagement in Online Public Health Courses

Maintaining high levels of student motivation and participation is essential in any online learning environment, particularly in the practice-oriented field of public health (Wright et al., 2011). A key strategy involves implementing engaging, authentic learning activities, such as interactive case studies, simulations, and group-based problem-solving tasks, that reflect real-world public health scenarios (Randi & Corno, 2022; Wright et al., 2011). Faculty can design these activities to address timely topics like infectious disease outbreaks or health policy debates, while academic coaches encourage collaboration through online forums or synchronous study sessions. In this way, faculty and coaches foster a vibrant learning community where students exchange ideas, confront challenges collectively, and build critical thinking skills. Academic coaches also reinforce faculty instruction by providing supplemental tutorials on study techniques, time management, or exam preparation (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). This dual support structure ensures students are both academically challenged and personally supported, building confidence and competence in mastering complex public health content.

Integrating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Principles in Faculty–Coach Partnerships

Embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) considerations into faculty–coach collaboration ensures that online public health programs effectively serve a broad range of learners (Burbage et al., 2023; Yassine et al., 2025). Regular demographic and performance analyses can reveal patterns of underrepresentation or achievement gaps, allowing the team to tailor interventions for specific student groups. For example, culturally responsive assignments might highlight health disparities experienced by marginalized communities, validating the lived experiences of a diverse student body.

To support diverse learners, faculty and academic coaches must engage regularly in DEI-focused professional development. Effective strategies include integrating culturally relevant examples into coursework, representing diverse public health leaders, and providing coaching tailored to culturally distinct learning needs. Ongoing training in implicit bias, inclusive language, and cross-cultural communication also benefits both coaches and faculty (O’Connor et al., 2019). Building competence in these areas helps foster a learning environment that respects and draws on students’ unique backgrounds. Incorporating global health examples and welcoming multiple perspectives into classroom discussions further enriches the curriculum, reflecting the global nature of public health. Through intentional, coordinated efforts to prior-

itize DEI, faculty and coaches enhance the educational experience for all learners, creating a more equitable and responsive online program.

Moving from aspiration to action requires strategies that embed DEI into the daily routines of teaching and academic coaching. First, faculty and coaches should begin each term with linguistic asset-mapping: students are invited to inventory the languages, dialects, and rhetorical traditions they use, guiding low-stakes activities such as peer-translation circles, multilingual discussion boards, and neighborhood storytelling projects that highlight cultural knowledge (Lin & Uysal, 2025; WIDA, 2024). Second, faculty–coach pairs should co-create “identity-safe” syllabi and onboarding materials that include affirming cues, multiple demonstration options, acknowledgment of varied life paths, and explicit norms for addressing micro-aggressions; an approach associated with increased belonging, motivation, and persistence (Hernández & Darling-Hammond, 2022). Third, partnerships should examine outcomes through inclusive analytics: grades, engagement logs, and coaching notes are disaggregated by intersecting markers such as race, gender identity, first-generation status, and home language, enabling targeted supports that close gaps early (Almond-Dannenbring et al., 2022). Finally, results should feed into a public equity scorecard jointly maintained by faculty and coaches, reinforcing accountability and ensuring that progress informs future practice; research shows that this level of transparency encourages equity-minded action and expands shared responsibility (Liera et al., 2025).

Emerging evidence further shows that culturally responsive coaching accelerates these gains: when academic coaches receive professional development in asset-based and identity-safe practices, students report higher retention and satisfaction; effects that are strongest for first-generation and racially minoritized learners (Hall et al., 2021; Weinstein, 2025). Taken together, these strategies transform DEI from abstract principles into a daily, data-informed practice in which faculty and academic coaches serve as co-architects of an equitable learning ecosystem.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Establishing and maintaining an effective partnership between faculty and coaches in online public health programs can be both rewarding and complex (Rotar, 2024). While the benefits of streamlined collaboration, such as enhanced student support and improved retention, are widely recognized, practical barriers often emerge within institutional structures and day-to-day operations. Understanding these challenges and identifying viable solutions is key to optimizing the faculty–coach dynamic and ensuring that students receive the focused, high-quality educational experience they need.

Common Barriers

One of the most common obstacles is miscommunication, often caused by unclear responsibilities or inconsistent messaging between faculty and academic coaches (Hare Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013; Sepulveda & Birnbaum, 2022). When students receive conflicting information about course requirements or performance standards, confusion arises, weakening the support network intended to help them succeed. Role ambiguity may also occur when faculty and coaches unintentionally overlap in duties, such as providing parallel feedback on the same assignments, resulting in redundancy or contradictory guidance (Sepulveda & Birnbaum, 2022). This misalignment can undermine learner motivation and reduce the effectiveness of student support interventions.

Beyond role-specific challenges, institutional constraints often further strain collaborative efforts. Limited resources, such as budget cuts or inadequate access to technology, can reduce the capacity to deliver comprehensive support services (Gibson, 2022). Inflexible administrative structures may hinder the implementation of innovative, adaptable practices, while insufficient training opportunities can leave faculty and academic coaches uncertain about best practices and emerging pedagogical strategies (Gibson, 2022). Together, these barriers create conditions in which even the most committed collaboration may struggle to reach its full potential.

Solutions and Institutional Policies

A key step in addressing these challenges is the implementation of standardized collaboration protocols (Brooks et al., 2020; Howlett et al., 2020; White-Jefferson et al., 2020). Clear guidelines on communication frequency, platforms for updates, and shared performance metrics promote consistency across faculty–coach interactions (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). This structured approach reduces mixed messaging, clarifies responsibilities, and sets measurable goals for both roles, ultimately enhancing student support.

Another essential solution is sustained professional development (Brooks et al., 2020; Deiorio et al., 2016). Ongoing workshops, training sessions, and peer-led seminars allow faculty and academic coaches to update their skills, stay informed about emerging technologies, and strengthen inclusive teaching practices (Deiorio et al., 2016). Fostering a culture of continuous learning supports more intentional and effective collaboration. Additionally, administrative backing is vital to legitimizing the coach's role in student success (Howlett & Rademacher, 2023). When institutions recognize the coach's value through dedicated funding and infrastructure, faculty and coaches can coordinate efforts more efficiently, free from the constraints of limited resources or job insecurity.

Together, these strategies foster a culture in which faculty–coach collaboration is actively supported through clear policy, professional growth, and institutional recognition. By addressing foundational barriers, online public health programs can better leverage the complementary strengths of faculty and coaches, delivering a comprehensive educational experience that builds the skills and resilience essential to the evolving field of public health.

Legal, Ethical, and Privacy Considerations in Data-Rich Coaching

As analytics dashboards, early-alert algorithms, and chat-based advisors become commonplace, faculty–coach teams must navigate an ethical landscape as complex as the technologies themselves. The foundation is informed, ongoing consent: students should understand what data are collected, why, and how long the records will be retained. A one-time checkbox at matriculation is no longer adequate; consent must be renewed when new tools or metrics are introduced, aligning with best practices under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act and the General Data Protection Regulation.

Equally critical is data minimization. Each additional variable, such as geolocation from a mobile app or sentiment scores from discussion posts, increases privacy risk without guaranteed pedagogical benefit. Programs should adopt a “least-necessary data” principle, collecting only indicators that demonstrably enhance coaching interventions and purging raw data on a fixed schedule.

Another key consideration is algorithmic bias and fairness. Predictive models built on historical grade data can inadvertently reinforce existing inequities. Routine bias audits, diverse training datasets, and human-in-the-loop reviews help ensure early-warning alerts do not disproportionately flag first-generation or minoritized students. When an alert is triggered, academic coaches should treat it as a starting point for dialogue rather than a final judgment, inviting students to provide context before implementing any intervention plan.

Coach confidentiality sits at the intersection of mentoring and compliance. Because coaches often discuss personal stressors, finances, caregiving responsibilities, and mental health, a clear boundary must exist between private coaching notes and institutional performance records. Shared platforms should support role-based access, allowing academic leaders to view trend metrics without accessing individual narratives. Transparency about these boundaries fosters trust and aligns with the “maintaining confidentiality” principle emphasized in recent AI analytics guidance.

Finally, institution-wide policy alignment brings the framework together. Legal counsel, information technology security, disability services, and the teaching and learning center should jointly author a living governance document that defines

approved tools, audit schedules, breach-response protocols, and student appeal mechanisms. Publishing a concise summary, perhaps within the course catalog, signals accountability and clarifies the data ecosystem for students. By embedding these safeguards, programs transform data-rich coaching from a potential risk into a principled practice that protects student autonomy while providing timely, personalized support essential to modern public health training.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As online public health programs continue to evolve, faculty–coach collaboration is positioned to grow in both scope and impact. Advancements in technology and changing demands in the public health field will create new opportunities for more personalized, flexible, and comprehensive student support. Simultaneously, institutional policies, professional development efforts, and accreditation standards will influence how these partnerships develop and endure over time. The following sections outline key trends and recommendations that offer promise for strengthening faculty–coach collaboration and improving student outcomes.

Emerging Trends in Faculty–Coach Collaboration

One of the most significant developments on the horizon is the increasing use of AI-driven analytics. By leveraging AI tools that track student engagement, performance, and behavioral patterns, faculty and academic coaches can create personalized learning paths and identify at-risk students early (Guerschberg & Gutiérrez, 2024; Shankar, 2022). Automated early-warning systems will further support targeted interventions, such as providing specialized tutoring or modifying course content in response to real-time data (Shankar, 2022). Implementing AI-driven analytics requires selecting suitable tools, such as Canvas Analytics or Blackboard Predict, that monitor student activity, detect disengagement patterns, and flag students in need of support. Strict adherence to ethical guidelines, including transparency and confidentiality, is essential. At institutions already using analytics, data-informed interventions have led to notable improvements in student retention and satisfaction.

Looking ahead, advancements in virtual reality and immersive simulations offer new avenues for faculty and coaches to collaborate in delivering realistic public health experiences. Changing accreditation standards may emphasize integrated support systems, shaping institutional structures and funding priorities. As public health priorities evolve, faculty–coach teams must continuously adapt their strategies to remain effective and relevant.

Additionally, the rise of micro-credentials and continuing education presents new possibilities for flexible, skill-based learning (Guerschberg & Gutiérrez, 2024). By segmenting coursework into focused modules, such as emerging infectious diseases or community health assessment, faculty and coaches can collaborate to deliver just-in-time, tailored learning opportunities. This approach enables students and working professionals to stay current with the latest developments in the field.

Strategies for Institutional Support and Professional Development

Maximizing the impact of emerging trends requires robust cross-functional teams that extend beyond the traditional faculty–coach partnership. Librarians, instructional designers, and mental health professionals each bring expertise that enhances the learning environment and supports the diverse needs of online students (Edwards & Black, 2012; Shell et al., 2013; Zada et al., 2021). For instance, librarians can assist students in navigating specialized research databases, while mental health professionals provide coping strategies for managing stress and burnout, particularly relevant in the high-intensity field of public health.

Equally important is the practice of continuous quality improvement, in which institutions regularly evaluate the effectiveness of faculty–coach collaborations (Black, 2019). Systematic assessments, such as monitoring retention rates and measuring student satisfaction, allow for timely adjustments to intervention strategies and resource distribution. By fostering a culture of ongoing evaluation and refinement, programs can remain responsive to students’ changing needs.

To effectively measure the impact of faculty–coach partnerships, institutions should routinely collect and analyze comprehensive data. Key metrics include student retention and completion rates, which directly reflect the success of integrated support strategies. Tracking academic performance also offers insight into the effectiveness of collaborative teaching and coaching interventions. Institutions should administer annual satisfaction surveys targeting both faculty and academic coaches, supplemented by qualitative feedback from focus groups or structured interviews. Formal evaluation rubrics can further standardize assessment processes and support continuous improvement in faculty–coach collaborations.

Evaluation and Continuous Quality Improvement Frameworks

Just as clinical programs use morbidity-and-mortality reviews to refine practice, data-informed coaching requires a disciplined approach to learning from its outcomes. The Plan–Do–Study–Act cycle provides a familiar framework that translates effectively into the academic setting. The following four steps outline, as seen in

Table 2, how this continuous improvement model can be applied to faculty–coach collaboration:

1. **Plan.** At the start of each term, faculty, academic coaches, and institutional research staff identify three to five priority outcomes. Common choices include first-attempt pass rates in gateway courses, median time from risk flag to outreach, and equity gaps in retention across intersectional identity groups. The team sets evidence thresholds, such as a \leq three percentage-point disparity, as targets for improvement.
2. **Do.** Interventions are implemented and tagged in the learning analytics platform so that each student interaction, whether a chatbot message, coaching session, or virtual reality simulation, is time-stamped and traceable. A shared dashboard updates nightly, giving all stakeholders consistent visibility into emerging trends.
3. **Study.** Mid-semester, the group conducts a mixed-methods review. Quantitative data, such as trends in on-time submissions or heat maps of dashboard activity, are combined with focus-group feedback that explores the underlying reasons behind the patterns. Linking survey responses to their timestamps in the LMS allows analysts to triangulate sentiment and behavior.
4. **Act.** The team distills findings into a brief action memo with assigned leads and deadlines. Quick adjustments, such as reordering a confusing module, can be made within a week, while more substantial revisions, such as algorithm updates or expanded multilingual resources, inform the next term’s Plan phase, thereby closing the loop.

Table 2. Sample Key Performance Indicator Palette

Domain	Indicator	Cadence	Owner
Access	% of students who opt out of data sharing	Week 2	Registrar
Engagement	median hours from risk alert to first contact	Weekly	Advising lead
Learning	Gateway-course pass rate	End-of-term	Course director
Equity	Retention gap (URM versus non-URM)	Mid- and end-term	Institutional Research

Note. KPI = key performance indicator; URM = underrepresented minority. *Cadence* reflects the recommended interval for reviewing each metric, and *Owner* identifies the office primarily responsible for collecting, interpreting, and reporting the data.

A 30–60–90-day reporting cadence sustains momentum without overwhelming staff with dashboards: micro-reports at Day 30, comparative analysis at Day 60, and a full narrative at the end of the semester. Importantly, the same scorecard is published, in accessible language, for students and external reviewers alike. Trans-

parency not only builds trust but also reveals blind spots that internal stakeholders may overlook. Adopting this step-by-step continuous quality improvement model transforms evaluation from a retrospective audit into a daily practice; one that refines tools, strengthens pedagogy, and, most importantly, ensures that data-informed coaching continues to serve the learners it was designed to support.

Policy Implications for Enhancing Student Outcomes

At the policy level, accreditation standards can serve as catalysts for strengthening faculty–coach partnerships (Bloomberg, 2020; Turoff, 2006). Accrediting bodies that recognize and incentivize collaborative coaching models, through updated benchmarks or formal guidelines, can influence program design toward more integrated support systems. This emphasis may reshape how public health curricula are structured, how budgets are allocated, and how institutional success is measured. Beyond accreditation, national and international collaborations offer valuable opportunities for shared learning and innovation (Brzoska et al., 2017). By building partnerships across borders and cultural contexts, public health programs can exchange best practices in faculty–coach collaboration, drawing on a global network of professionals, students, and researchers. These alliances enrich academic experiences and mirror the inherently global nature of public health challenges.

In sum, the future of faculty–coach collaboration in online public health programs is both dynamic and promising. Whether through AI–driven analytics, micro-credentialing pathways, or cross-functional teams, these emerging strategies enable faculty and coaches to deliver more targeted, holistic, and equitable support. With strategic institutional investment and forward-thinking policy frameworks, the next generation of online public health education can serve as a model of collaboration and innovation ultimately preparing professionals to address complex, real-world health crises.

CONCLUSION

Online public health education now sits at the crossroads of pedagogical innovation, data-informed student support, and heightened expectations for equity. This chapter has traced that intersection from theory to practice, illustrating how purposeful collaboration between faculty and academic coaches can translate abstract frameworks into measurable gains in retention, achievement, and engagement. By combining faculty’s disciplinary expertise with coaches’ strengths in motivation,

mentoring, and early intervention, programs establish a dual lens that supports each student both academically and holistically.

Several key strategies emerged. Constructivist and Community of Inquiry principles provide intellectual grounding; DEI strategies ensure that rigor is distributed equitably; analytics dashboards and immersive simulations offer real-time insights and experiential depth; and a Plan–Do–Study–Act cycle embeds continuous improvement into institutional processes. When these elements are integrated under clear legal and ethical guardrails, faculty–coach collaboration evolves from an ad hoc arrangement into a foundational design feature of high-performing online programs.

The implications extend beyond any single course or semester. Institutions that invest in cross-functional training, transparent data governance, and policy frameworks that recognize coaching as an academic imperative will be better equipped to meet accreditation standards, address workforce demands, and attract a more diverse student population. For faculty and academic coaches, the message is equally clear: sustained dialogue, shared metrics, and mutual respect are not ancillary responsibilities but core professional competencies that directly influence student success.

In short, the path from collaboration to impact is now well defined. What remains is disciplined execution: refining dashboards, auditing algorithms, revisiting DEI scorecards, and communicating improvement efforts in ways that foster public trust. By embracing this continuous cycle of evidence and reflection, online public health programs can graduate practitioners who are not only technically skilled, but also resilient, inclusive, and prepared to lead in a field where the stakes are nothing less than population health.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITION

Academic Coaching: A structured form of student support that emphasizes motivation, accountability, and individualized strategies for success. Coaches help learners manage time, set goals, and persist through challenges, particularly in online environments where isolation and competing responsibilities may impede progress.

Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework: A model of online learning that emphasizes the interplay of cognitive presence (intellectual engagement), teaching presence (instructional design and facilitation), and social presence (interpersonal connection). Effective programs intentionally cultivate all three dimensions through shared faculty and coaching roles.

Constructivist Learning: A pedagogical approach that views knowledge as actively built rather than passively received. In public health education, this translates into real-world problem-solving, reflection, and case-based learning that encourage students to integrate academic concepts with professional and lived experiences.

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI): An iterative process of planning, testing, evaluating, and refining instructional and support strategies. In online public health programs, CQI ensures that faculty–coach collaborations remain responsive to changing student needs, technological developments, and evolving accreditation standards.

Data-Informed Coaching: An approach to student support that integrates predictive analytics, learning management system data, and early-alert signals into coaching strategies. This practice allows interventions to be more targeted, timely, and effective, bridging individual student needs with institutional goals.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Online Learning: The integration of practices that ensure fair access, cultural responsiveness, and equitable outcomes for students from varied backgrounds. DEI initiatives within faculty–coach partnerships involve culturally attuned instruction, identity-safe coaching practices, and systematic efforts to close achievement gaps.

Early-Alert Systems: Data-informed tools that track indicators of academic risk, such as missed deadlines or declining engagement. By generating timely signals, these systems allow faculty and coaches to intervene before small difficulties evolve into significant barriers to student success.

Faculty–Coach Collaboration: The intentional partnership between faculty, who bring disciplinary expertise and curriculum design, and coaches, who provide holistic student support. When roles are aligned, collaboration strengthens student engagement, retention, and learning outcomes by uniting academic rigor with personal guidance.

Holistic Student Support: A comprehensive model of education that recognizes learners as whole individuals whose success depends on academic, personal, and social factors. Holistic support requires coordinated efforts between faculty and coaches to address barriers while promoting resilience, equity, and professional readiness.

Mentorship in Online Education: Guided support that extends beyond course content to encompass professional development, research guidance, and career preparation. Faculty often serve as mentors by modeling disciplinary expertise, while coaches provide practical scaffolding for academic persistence.


Social Presence: A dimension of online learning that reflects the extent to which learners feel personally connected and supported in virtual spaces. Academic coaches often play a central role in fostering social presence by facilitating peer interaction and reducing student isolation.

Student Retention: The capacity of a program to sustain student enrollment through to completion. Retention reflects not only academic performance but also the quality of mentoring, motivation, and timely interventions that help students balance professional, personal, and academic demands.

Chapter 7


Impact of Academic Coaches on Student Success Through Caring Science at Nevada State University

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of embedded academic coaches in online nursing education, focusing on their impact on student success, engagement, and mentoring relationships. Using Nevada State University's RN-BSN program as a case study, it highlights how academic coaches enhance learning through timely feedback, emotional support, and collaboration with faculty. Faculty perspectives and best

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practices for communication, relationship-building, and instructional alignment are examined, grounded in the principles of Caring Science. A featured section on The Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying course illustrates how coaches model vulnerability, use heart-centered language, and create emotionally safe spaces for reflection. Through this course, the chapter demonstrates how coaches support transformative learning and help students engage with complex end-of-life care concepts. Analysis of student evaluations from 2020–2024 reveals recurring themes in the student-coach experience, including responsiveness, respect, and meaningful support, along with opportunities for continued growth.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of online education has necessitated innovative approaches to student support and engagement. As institutions strive to provide accessible and effective virtual learning experiences, the role of academic coaches has emerged as a vital component in fostering student success. At Nevada State University (NSU), this need prompted the development of a strategic, student-centered model that integrates academic coaches into its Registered Nurse (RN) to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (RN-BSN) program. The model addresses challenges commonly faced in online learning, including limited faculty bandwidth and the unique needs of working nurses returning to school.

The School of Nursing (SON) is the largest academic program at NSU and plays a central role in fulfilling the university’s original mission, which specifically emphasized the “preparation of nurses.” This institutional commitment is closely tied to addressing Nevada’s critically low nurse-to-patient ratios and ongoing nursing shortage (Feeney, 2024). The SON offers a BSN degree through two Pre-Licensure tracks: Full-Time (five semesters) and Part-Time (ten semesters), as well as a Post-Licensure RN-BSN track. Currently, the SON serves approximately 700 BSN students, underscoring its regional significance and the need for scalable, high-quality instructional support.

When the RN-BSN program was first developed, the SON faced limitations in hiring additional full-time faculty to meet the demands of a growing online student population. To address this, NSU adopted a scalable academic coach model that expanded enrollment capacity while preserving instructional quality and personalized student support. Over time, the model evolved into a cornerstone of NSU’s online teaching strategy, with academic coaches playing an essential role in supporting RN-BSN students—many of whom balance demanding careers, families, and rigorous coursework.

Initially, the introduction of academic coaches was met with faculty concerns about maintaining consistent grading, feedback quality, and student engagement. However, as the model matured and systems were put in place to guide the faculty–coach relationship, faculty began to recognize the value coaches added in enhancing student support, improving responsiveness, and reducing instructional load. Student feedback affirmed these perceptions, highlighting coaches’ timely communication, constructive feedback, and mentorship. Coaches are now viewed not merely as graders, but as invested partners who contribute meaningfully to student success and help uphold the standards and integrity of the nursing curriculum.

This evolving recognition of the coach’s role aligns with the SON’s foundation in Caring Science. Rooted in a commitment to empathy, compassion, and holistic student development, the RN-BSN program draws upon Watson’s Theory of Human Caring (2025) and Marilyn Ray’s Theory of Bureaucratic Caring (2021) to guide curriculum and instructional practice. Many faculty are trained Caritas Coaches® who model relational teaching and foster collaborative partnerships with academic coaches. This synergy allows coaches to engage with students in deeply meaningful ways, often serving as mentors, motivators, and facilitators of personal and academic growth.

A notable example of this philosophy in action is the RN-BSN course, *Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying*. In this emotionally intense course, academic coaches support students as they explore personal beliefs about mortality and end-of-life care. Students are invited to reflect on their own legacy and preferred death experience through structured assignments that demand both self-awareness and empathy. Coaches bring diverse experiences, clinical insight, and compassionate communication to help co-create safe, inclusive virtual spaces for reflection. They also model vulnerability and use heart-centered language rooted in Caring Science to cultivate a sense of emotional safety. This shared commitment to emotional presence, inclusion, and open dialogue strengthens the student–coach connection and enhances the depth of learning.

This chapter delves into the multifaceted contributions of academic coaches in online nursing education, examining their administrative background, engagement strategies, mentoring relationships, and how students perceive their support. Drawing from the lived experiences of faculty, coaches, and students, it highlights the development and refinement of this innovative model at NSU. The chapter also explores how faculty members build collaborative, trusting relationships with their academic coaches and align their teaching philosophies to ensure consistency and quality in the student experience.

To guide this exploration, the chapter addresses five central questions:

- What is the administrative and historical background behind the integration of academic coaches?
- How do coaches engage and mentor students, and what is the role of Caring Science in shaping those relationships?
- How do faculty perceive the value and effectiveness of academic coaches?
- How can academic coaches be effectively integrated into emotionally intense courses, such as *Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying*, to engage and motivate students?
- How do students perceive the value and impact of academic coaches on their overall learning experience?

Drawing from narrative accounts, empirical evidence, and reflective insights, this chapter explores how academic coaches impact student engagement, motivation, and learning at NSU. It begins by examining the administrative and historical context behind their integration, then highlights faculty–coach collaboration, Caring Science-informed practices, and student perceptions of coaching support. Student evaluations from 2020 to 2024 offer compelling evidence of the model’s effectiveness, while also suggesting opportunities for continued refinement. Together, these insights provide practical guidance for cultivating a thriving, values-driven online learning environment—at NSU and beyond.

ACADEMIC COACHES: AN ADMINISTRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Academic coaches were first considered during the development of NSU’s RN-BSN program, as part of a strategy to market it nationally. This initiative emerged when the online nursing education market was still developing, and NSU’s nursing administration recognized the potential for high demand. However, the university faced limitations in adding permanent faculty lines to a program that could experience fluctuating enrollment from semester to semester. To remain agile and avoid capping enrollment or committing to long-term hiring, the administration sought a scalable instructional model that could grow with student demand.

Guided by recommendations from a partnering marketing agency, NSU adopted the academic coach model through Instructional Connections to provide supplemental teaching support for faculty in high-enrollment courses. Academic coaches were envisioned as a solution to help manage course load without sacrificing instructional quality. This model allowed faculty to focus on course content and student engagement while coaches provided day-to-day instructional support. Coaches helped maintain instructional presence in large classes and ensured that students received timely responses and consistent feedback.

An academic coach is an individual who is academically and experientially qualified to support instruction within a course. For a baccalaureate-level nursing course, the coach must be an RN with a graduate degree. Upon assignment, course faculty meet with the academic coach to discuss course goals and expectations. Together, they align on approaches for grading, participating in discussions, and responding to student inquiries. Consistent use of detailed grading rubrics is essential, especially when multiple individuals are evaluating student work. Ongoing communication between faculty and coaches throughout the semester ensures a seamless experience for students. Like co-teaching, a well-structured course combined with active collaboration is the key to success.

Faculty were initially skeptical of the new model, as is often the case with innovative changes. Concerns centered around whether an academic coach could deliver the same level of quality as the lead faculty, particularly in grading and responding to student questions. Faculty also worried about maintaining consistency across sections. Over time, however, these concerns were addressed through clear processes and institutional support. The SON, in partnership with Instructional Connections, committed to hiring academic coaches with content-specific expertise and, whenever possible, reassigning the same coach to the same course each semester. This continuity helped build trust, improve instructional alignment, and foster stronger relationships between coaches and faculty.

Despite growing acceptance of the model, one of the greatest challenges in implementation has been supporting faculty in using the model consistently. Some faculty remain highly involved in all aspects of the course—grading, discussion, and student communication—while others take a more hands-off approach, focusing primarily on course content. Striking a balance between these extremes, and ensuring all faculty are familiar and comfortable with shared implementation practices, requires ongoing attention and refinement. Faculty development sessions, mentorship, and mid-semester check-ins have been used to promote more consistent integration of coaches across the program.

Another ongoing challenge involves faculty balancing dual teaching roles. Many RN-BSN instructors simultaneously manage face-to-face BSN classes and accelerated online courses, which are delivered in seven- to eight-week blocks with tight assignment deadlines. This dual responsibility requires significant effort and coordination to ensure timely feedback and consistent engagement in a fast-paced environment.

Academic coaches help manage this pace by responding promptly to student questions, offering feedback, and addressing instructional needs in real time. Students can reach out to the faculty or coach through the course messaging system, and whoever is available first responds. This shared model ensures continuity of

support and allows students to stay on track, while also helping faculty maintain quality instruction across both in-person and online teaching responsibilities.

Academic coaches are not assigned to every course in the RN-BSN program. A coach is assigned only when enrollment reaches 30 or more students. In smaller courses, the primary faculty of record is responsible for all course functions, including content delivery, grading, and student interaction. To ensure workload equity, each faculty member is expected to take responsibility for a full group of up to 30 students, and course assignments are structured accordingly. Without careful monitoring, inconsistent course loads can lead to faculty burnout or dissatisfaction.

Additional advantages of the academic coach model have emerged over time. Faculty report that the presence of a coach allows them to concentrate on course updates, curriculum innovation, and building student relationships. Coaches, in turn, value the opportunity to mentor students and engage in meaningful educational experiences. Their insights and feedback often contribute to ongoing course improvements and student success strategies.

Benefits of the academic coach model include:

- Scalable course management without the need to cap enrollment or overburden full-time faculty.
- Enhanced support for large class sizes while preserving personalized student feedback.
- Improved student retention through timely, individualized guidance.
- Consistent grading and instructional interaction aligned with faculty expectations.
- Increased faculty satisfaction through collaborative instructional partnerships.

The academic coach model at NSU evolved from a practical solution into a cornerstone of the RN-BSN program's online learning strategy. With intentional implementation, structured collaboration, and a shared commitment to quality, academic coaches have become essential partners in fostering student success. Their continued integration supports a sustainable, student-centered approach to online nursing education.

While the academic coach model addressed immediate structural needs, its enduring success is deeply rooted in the SON's broader philosophical commitment to Caring Science and the holistic development of both students and faculty. This guiding philosophy continues to shape faculty engagement, curriculum design, and the partnerships formed with academic coaches.

ENGAGEMENT AND MENTORSHIP: THE ROLE OF CARING SCIENCE

Excellence in teaching and a student-centered approach have guided the work of faculty and staff since the university's founding. Faculty are drawn to NSU because of their deep passion for teaching and the rewarding challenge of serving a diverse, largely first-generation student population. A shared commitment to improving students' lives creates a strong bond among faculty, who collaborate across disciplines in pursuit of this common goal.

The RN-BSN student body reflects a wide range of backgrounds, with 12% identifying as Black/African American, 18% as Asian, 21% as Hispanic, 41% as White, and 8% as two or more races. Faculty composition mirrors this diversity, with 7% Black/African American, 17% Asian, 7% Hispanic, and 69% White. Many faculty members are also first-generation college graduates, enriching the educational experience with perspectives that resonate with the students they serve.

The SON fosters an environment where individuals from all backgrounds feel welcomed, supported, and valued—a commitment embedded in the university's mission and reflected in its adoption of Watson's Theory of Human Caring and its ethic of belonging. Cultivating a faculty that mirrors the varied experiences of the student body strengthens students' sense of belonging and provides role models who understand the realities they face. By nurturing an inclusive academic community, the SON advances its mission to promote holistic development, well-being, and success for all students.

Foundations of Caring Science and Curriculum Design

Nursing, as guided by Caring Science, emphasizes spiritual-ethical growth, transpersonal relationships, and reflective practice. Preparing nurses to meet society's evolving healthcare needs—and to lead with compassion and integrity—requires students to be deeply grounded in disciplinary knowledge, professional values, and ethical behaviors. At the heart of person-centered care is the development of nurses who integrate multiple ways of knowing, apply critical thinking and evidence-informed interventions, form therapeutic relationships, and cultivate healing environments that support compassionate care.

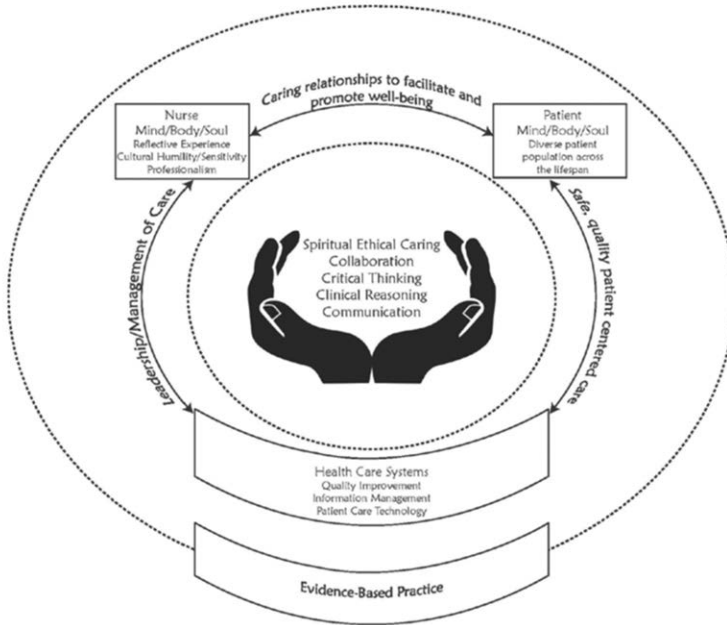
The SON's commitment to Watson's Caring Science has shaped curriculum revisions in 2017 and 2020, ensuring the integration of compassionate, theory-driven practices. Faculty have engaged in Caring Science scholarship through participation in the Watson Caring Science Institute (Watson, 2025), presenting research, and attending conferences focused on caring theories. They have also conducted research on the impact of Caring Science within the curriculum, particularly in relation to

simulation-based learning (Coffman & Durante, 2020). Ongoing training and collaboration have resulted in the development of clinical partnerships recognized as Caring Science Units. Faculty not only embody Caring Science in their curriculum and research but also extend these principles to their collaboration with academic coaches, ensuring that Caring Science values are consistently woven throughout the student experience.

Grounded in the Theory of Caring Science and the Caritas Processes®, the curriculum fosters students' personal and professional development through intentional presence, biogenic environments, and compassionate care. This framework emphasizes mindful connection with each patient and the creation of environments that nurture healing and well-being. This focus distinguishes NSU's SON, where students and faculty actively bring spirituality, connection, and compassion into healthcare and education.

Anchored in the foundational tenets of Caring Science, the BSN curriculum positions caring as a central element of the nursing meta-paradigm (see Figure 1). Faculty believe that caring within the human health experience is the essence of nursing. The goal of nursing is to promote well-being through caring, realized through the praxis of the Caritas Processes. These practices cultivate students who are caring literate, who live and embody Caring Science, and who practice loving-kindness, equanimity, and authentic presence. Students are guided to engage in biogenic, heart-centered actions that foster caring-healing environments. The curriculum integrates teaching, learning, and experiential strategies around the core concepts of Caring Science: transpersonal relationships, the Caritas Processes, caring moments, and caring consciousness for compassionate care.

Figure 1. Graphic Representation of the NSU SON



Note. Nevada State University. (2024). BSN student handbook – RN-BSN track 2024/2025. School of Nursing. https://nevadastate.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/RN-BSN-Handbook-Final_8.20.24-2.pdf

At NSU, teaching and student support are core institutional values. Guided by the university's mission, the SON promotes excellence in healthcare through innovative, evidence-based education. A dual emphasis on caring and competence leads to improved health outcomes, safety, and cultural awareness among the communities served. The SON's commitment to cultivating a caring culture is reflected through the integration of the Caritas Processes, woven into both the curriculum and the support structures designed to meet the needs of today's learners.

This commitment is especially evident in the RN-BSN program's faculty-coach-student triad model. Academic coaches extend faculty capacity while upholding the SON's standards of caring and excellence. Their support strengthens faculty-student connections, fosters personalized engagement, and contributes to student retention and success in a fast-paced virtual environment.

Faculty Modeling Caring Science Through Academic Coach Partnerships

Beyond the curriculum, faculty extend Caring Science principles into their collaborative work with academic coaches. Faculty-coach engagement reflects the

praxis of Watson's Theory of Human Caring, particularly the ethic of belonging and interconnectedness. Caring Science offers a worldview rooted in ethics, caring relationships, and shared humanity. It recognizes belonging as a foundational principle—our connection to each other and to a universal field of consciousness. Watson (2025) describes this field as the infinite source of spirit, energy, and existence, sustaining humanity across time and space. In online education, this worldview guides faculty presence and practice. At NSU, this ethic of belonging is visible in how faculty build intentional, compassionate relationships with academic coaches.

Intentional relationships, rooted in shared values and mutual respect, form life-giving (biogenic) professional partnerships that prioritize student success. Caring has long been recognized as foundational to nursing. Sitzman and Muller (2018) confirmed the applicability of Caring Science beyond nursing, suggesting it fosters interprofessional understanding and collaboration across disciplines and online environments.

Caring Science's relational ontology affirms unity and interconnectedness (Watson, 2025). Recognizing that technology can serve as both barrier and bridge, faculty prioritize relational and caring dimensions in online education. Timely, effective communication forms the foundation of strong faculty-coach partnerships. Most RN-BSN faculty at NSU are trained as Caritas Coaches or Caritas Leaders® through the Watson Caring Science Institute, prepared to embody Caritas literacies: living Caring Science, practicing loving-kindness and equanimity, being authentically present, moving beyond ego, becoming the environment, and allowing for miracles (Watson, 2025).

Effective coaching also requires self-care and deep personal awareness (Watson, 2025). Watson (2025) defines the Caritas Coach as an advanced practitioner prepared to transform both self and healthcare through Caring Science. Faculty apply these principles in their online teaching and in their partnerships with academic coaches, building virtual communities rooted in compassion.

Caring Science upholds values such as human dignity, love, wholeness, and moral and ethical awareness (Watson, 2025). Nursing faculty integrate these values into their work with academic coaches, co-creating a virtual community dedicated to student success. Watson (2025) describes *communitas* as a community built on love, connection, and shared responsibility. Faculty foster this culture of belonging with academic coaches, modeling care in their mutual support of students.

This approach becomes a way of being for both faculty and academic coaches, shaped by core Caring Science concepts: transpersonal relationships, Caritas Processes, caring moments, caring consciousness, and caring-healing modalities. Faculty cultivate these relationships through intentionality, affirmation, and a shared commitment to student success. Once coach assignments are confirmed, faculty welcome their assigned coach and schedule an introductory meeting—an essen-

tial act of connection that practices the ethic of belonging and builds an inclusive learning environment.

Academic Coaches Learning and Applying Caring Science

Academic coaches come from diverse backgrounds and varying levels of familiarity with Watson’s Caring Science and Ray’s Bureaucratic Caring Theories. Through both formal and informal interactions with course faculty—who are trained Caritas Coaches—they deepen their understanding and enhance their ability to support students. They also access course materials, including Caritas Process links, instructional videos, and Watson Caring Science resources.

Ray’s Bureaucratic Caring Theory complements Watson’s work by recognizing that caring must occur not only in personal relationships but also within healthcare and educational structures (Ray, 2021). The SON’s philosophy embraces both theories, supporting the integration of relational caring with systemic realities. Academic coaches, through collaboration with faculty, learn to balance the humanistic and systemic dimensions of student support, strengthening the program’s Caring Science foundation.

Faculty and academic coaches co-create a virtual space anchored in Caring Science to promote student engagement and achievement. At the start of each course, students are introduced to both faculty and academic coaches, with faculty presenting the coach as a collaborative partner in learning. Faculty, as Caritas Coaches, model Caring Science principles to affirm and support academic coaches’ contributions.

The effectiveness of asynchronous online education relies on clear content delivery, logical course organization, accessibility, relevance to practice, and strategies that keep learners engaged. The virtual learning environment co-created by faculty and coaches fosters motivation, builds confidence, and supports student growth. Communication—with students and each other—remains at the heart of this partnership.

Caring Across Distance: Watson’s Vision for Virtual Human Connection

Watson (2025) described online caring interactions as dynamic, multimedia exchanges capable of fostering intimacy and nurturing relationships across physical distance. Her work invites us to see online education as an opportunity to nurture meaningful human connections.

Watson’s seventh Caritas Process—engaging in genuine teaching–learning experiences grounded in interconnectedness and shaped by the student’s frame of reference—aligns closely with the virtual classroom. Conveying, modeling, and teaching caring principles remains a cornerstone of excellence in nursing education

(Watson, 2025). Sustained interactions that model caring—both in the classroom and at the bedside—help perpetuate a culture of compassion in nursing (Bevis & Watson, 2025).

SON faculty demonstrate their commitment to Caring Science by embodying the 10 Caritas Processes in collaboration with academic coaches, intentionally fostering an online culture of care dedicated to student success (see Table 1; Watson, 2025).

Table 1. Watson’s Caritas Processes®

Number	Caritas Process	Description
1	Embrace (Loving-Kindness)	Sustaining humanistic-altruistic values by practice of loving-kindness, compassion and equanimity with self/others.
2	Inspire (Faith-Hope)	Being authentically present, enabling faith/hope/belief system; honoring subjective inner, life-world of self/others.
3	Trust (Transpersonal)	Being sensitive to self and others by cultivating own spiritual practices; beyond ego-self to transpersonal presence.
4	Nurture (Relationship)	Developing and sustaining loving, trusting-caring relationships.
5	Forgive (Holding Space)	Allowing for expression of positive and negative feelings — authentically listening to another person’s story.
6	Deepen (Creative Self)	Creatively problem-solving-'solution-seeking' through caring process; full use of self and artistry of caring-healing practices via use of all ways of knowing/being/doing/ becoming.
7	Balance (Learning)	Engaging in transpersonal teaching and learning within the context of caring relationship; staying within other’s frame of reference; shift toward coaching model for expanded health/wellness.
8	Co-create (Caritas Field)	Creating a healing environment at all levels; subtle environment for energetic authentic caring presence.
9	Minister (Humanity)	Reverentially assisting with basic needs as sacred acts, touching mindbodyspirit of spirit of other; sustaining human dignity.
10	Open (Infinity)	Opening to spiritual, mystery, unknowns — allowing for miracles.

Note. Reprinted with permission from Dr. Jean Watson (Watson, 2025)

Faculty lead the application of the Caritas Processes in the virtual classroom by modeling Caritas-informed behaviors for academic coaches. These behaviors align with caring practices identified by Sitzman and Muller (2018), beginning with the practice of loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity toward self and others (Caritas Process 1). Faculty and coaches demonstrate patience, compassion, and composure as they work together to support students facing academic and personal challenges.

Authentic presence and attention to the subjective life world of self and others (Caritas Process 2) are expressed through intentional engagement and meaningful connection. Faculty remain attuned to students’ needs, appreciating their perspectives and emotional responses to stress. This sensitivity is reinforced through consistent,

timely caring language and human connections marked by warmth, respect, flexibility, openness, and positivity (Caritas Process 3).

Faculty foster trust and establish a caring presence (Caritas Process 4), holding space for both positive and negative emotions as a foundation for empathy and compassion (Caritas Process 5). Creativity and artistic problem-solving are encouraged when addressing student needs, reflecting Caritas Process 6. Faculty engage their full selves to create caring teaching moments, remaining within the student's frame of reference (Caritas Process 7). By consistently modeling these practices, faculty not only support student growth but also create opportunities for academic coaches to observe, internalize, and apply Caring Science principles in their own interactions—strengthening the coach–student relationship and reinforcing the program's caring-centered philosophy.

Caritas Process 8 emerges through consideration of diverse learning styles, proactive sharing of resources, and awareness of each student's unique experience. Faculty and coaches co-create healing environments (Caritas Process 9) by staying fully present, especially for struggling students, and guiding them forward in realistic, compassionate ways.

Respectfully assisting with basic needs and sustaining an intentional caring consciousness—hallmarks of Caritas Process 10—are reflected in faculty and coaches' willingness to offer help and follow up to ensure students receive support. A sense of spiritual openness and comfort with the unknown is conveyed through authentic presence in virtual spaces, trusting that connection, learning, and deep caring can occur even across distance.

Watson (2025) described virtual human interplay as a non-sequential, disembodied experience that fosters intimacy and nurturing in new ways, unbounded by time or proximity. Her work offers a powerful lens through which to envision caring in the online environment—as an opportunity to reach, nurture, and connect with students across space and time. Building on this Caring Science foundation, faculty bring intentionality and structure to their collaboration with academic coaches, shaping both the student experience and supporting coaches in embodying caring principles throughout their work.

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF COACHES

Consistent with the GROW model proposed by Norman (2024), nursing faculty can facilitate the academic coach's development by first establishing clear parameters for the relationship. Faculty are responsible for setting realistic goals with the coaches regarding expectations and the consistent handling of student concerns.

Transparent communication about roles and responsibilities enables coaches to provide meaningful, collaborative learning experiences alongside faculty.

Faculty and coaches must also acknowledge potential challenges such as biases, assumptions, limitations of expertise, role conflicts, time constraints, and organizational pressures. These factors can influence the student experience and affect a coach's ability to contribute effectively. Active listening, reflective dialogue, and a shared commitment to course outcomes build the coach's confidence and resilience—particularly in supporting student interactions and maintaining grading consistency.

RN-BSN students often balance school with full-time work, caregiving, and other responsibilities that affect how they learn. These complexities require academic coaches to adapt their strategies to help students navigate course materials, manage time effectively, and utilize technology efficiently (Cipher et al., 2018). Collaborating with experienced nurse faculty, coaches establish a positive learning environment and serve as liaisons between students and instructors (Cipher et al., 2018).

Mingo et al. (2024) emphasize the value of fostering resilience in students through a growth mindset, inclusion, and culturally sensitive communication. Academic coaches play a key role in this work by integrating inclusive practices in their interactions, often with guidance from faculty. For example, faculty may share universal design strategies or support coaches in developing problem-based learning approaches. When working with students who receive accommodations through disability resource services, faculty can also assist coaches in employing mindfulness-based strategies to ensure equity while maintaining academic rigor.

Pre-Course Meetings to Align with Program Mission and Philosophy

Effective preparation includes discussing expectations around student feedback, timelines for evaluating student performance, and aligning course objectives with broader program goals. Faculty should not assume academic coaches are familiar with the program's mission or philosophical grounding. As more programs shift away from explicitly identifying a guiding nursing theorist, it is important for faculty to share the school's theoretical foundation—such as Watson's Caring Science and Ray's Bureaucratic Caring Theory—to ensure alignment and deepen the coach's understanding (see Figure 2).


Re: Permission to use Caritas Processes table for publication

From Jean <jean@watsoncaringscience.org>
Date Tue 4/8/2025 5:56 PM
To Ludy Llasus <Ludy.Llasus@nevadastate.edu>
Cc jeanwatson@comcast.net <jeanwatson@comcast.net>; Ipusa Black <ipusa.Black@nevadastate.edu>; Julie Watson <julie@watsoncaringscience.org>

1 attachment (16 KB)
 Watson's Caritas Processes_Table.docx;

Ludy great to hear from you! How exciting - happy to give permission for use of table of Caritas processes. I see you have the r as registered trademark - thank you. Just wondering if caring sc or caritas could/ should be in title? Just a thought! Good success continuing! Happy to see developments deeper!
 Love jean

Jean Watson, PhD, RN, AHN-BC, FAAN, LL(AAN)
Founder Watson Caring Science Institute
www.watsoncaringscience.org
Jean@watsoncaringscience.org
 Distinguished Professor/ Dean Emerita
 University of Colorado CON

On Apr 8, 2025, at 4:53 PM, Ludy Llasus <Ludy.Llasus@nevadastate.edu> wrote:

Dear Jean,

I hope all is well with you. The work continues here at Nevada State. School of Nursing faculty here at Nevada State University has embarked on a journey to publish a book, titled:

The Impact of Embedded Academic Coaches on Student Success at Nevada State University
Authors: Ipusa Estavillo Black, PhD, RN, CNE, COI; June Eastridge, EdD, MSN, RN, CNE, COI; Ludy Llasus, PhD, APRN, NP-C; Dawn Taylor, PhD, RN, CNE; Pam Call, MSN, APRN, FNP-C, CNE, COI; Joy Patrick, DNP, APRN, CCNS-AG, COI; Janelle Willis, MSN, FNP, CNE
School of Nursing, Nevada State University
IGI Global Scientific Publishing
Dr. Harriet E. Watkins
May 9, 2025

<https://outlook.office.com/mail/5dAAQkAD3MD2YTRIL3WmYTeNdyxNi05YTg3LTfV3N5UwNTM5NTM8YwAQAPfA04%2B9m1AJYVV5i0Q4%2F4%3D> 1/3

Caring is a relational process that nurtures the wholeness of individuals—including faculty, students, and colleagues. Faculty bring Caring Science into their collaboration with coaches through practices rooted in empowerment, growth, hope, and ethical intention. Ethical caring serves as a compass in nursing, guiding decision-making and supporting consistent academic standards. Faculty can work alongside academic coaches to explore the layered process of integrating new knowledge and to demonstrate how caring and academic rigor can co-exist in decision-making and evaluation.

Building on the program's foundation in Watson's Caring Science and Ray's Bureaucratic Caring Theory, faculty extend this compassionate, student-centered approach to their work with academic coaches. By sharing the tenets of the Caritas

Processes, faculty invite coaches to reflect on how course assignments and interactions embody these principles.

Although student relationships with coaches often begin with assignment feedback, Mingo et al. (2024) note they flourish when paired with emotional support and trust. Multifaceted stressors—academic, personal, or professional—can impact student performance. Faculty should collaborate with academic coaches to determine how these challenges are addressed, either individually or as a team, particularly in situations where student-faculty interaction is limited.

The art and science of caring in nursing education supports optimal health and well-being. A sustained commitment to Caring Science across the faculty-coach-student triad helps cultivate a transpersonal caring environment. Supporting vulnerable or at-risk students while balancing faculty workload requires strong faculty-coach partnerships. Coaches should be well-supported and have access to course resources, such as textbooks, to enhance their content knowledge. Faculty are encouraged to share information about the institution's culture, course-specific expectations, and their own and the coach's teaching philosophies. This reciprocal exchange fosters alignment, trust, and integrates the coach into a blended teaching model that offers students challenge, value, and a sense of purpose—promoting academic success with intentionality and passion.

The Importance of Regular Check-Ins

Regular meetings—before, during, and after the course—help ensure consistency in how academic coaches engage with students and interpret course expectations. Subjectivity, bias, and lack of meaningful interaction with faculty can hinder an empathic coach. Structured check-ins offer a dedicated space to promote transparency around grading expectations, course objectives, time constraints, and the coach's familiarity with both content and institutional culture.

Norman (2024) emphasizes that honesty and openness during the initial pre-course meeting lay the groundwork for measurable and consistent outcomes in student assessment. Early conversations should address the coaching role, organizational limitations, and prior experiences—positive or negative—that may shape the working relationship. Recognizing and validating the limitations of both faculty and coaches, including their comfort with rubrics and course delivery, is essential.

These meetings are most effective when approached as collaborative, not hierarchical. Faculty and coaches are encouraged to practice humble inquiry (Norman, 2024)—asking thoughtful questions and remaining open to each other's insights. Dialogue should evolve throughout the course, providing opportunities to refine strategies for student support, clarify the purpose of assignments, and ensure alignment with course and program outcomes. Coaches may initially be hesitant to ask

questions or share ideas, but consistent and respectful communication helps foster trust, confidence, and shared commitment to student success.

Clear and collaborative communication protocols between faculty and academic coaches are essential for setting expectations around student concerns, course-related challenges, and availability throughout the semester. Both parties should anticipate how issues will be raised, how responses will be communicated to students, and what role each will play when unexpected situations arise. Establishing these expectations early promotes consistency and reduces uncertainty in the virtual learning environment.

Flexibility and a positive approach to change are key components of effective faculty–coach partnerships. Mid-semester check-ins provide a timely opportunity to revisit grading concerns, clarify any unresolved questions, and assess the coach’s comfort with course content and expectations. These conversations also help surface areas where adjustments may be needed to improve the student experience. Proactively scheduling both a mid-term check-in and a post-course reflection meeting fosters a culture of shared accountability and continuous improvement.

Faculty take ownership of initial course goals while remaining open to academic coaches’ feedback. As the course progresses, adjustments may be necessary based on what is working well—or what is not. Coaches often have valuable insights into student experiences that can inform instructional decisions. A shared commitment to inquiry, active listening, and reflection creates a supportive and responsive learning environment. When communication is mutual and respectful, faculty and coaches are better positioned to work cohesively in the best interest of students.

One course that vividly illustrates the strength of the faculty–coach partnership and the embodiment of Caring Science principles is *The Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying*. Beyond day-to-day course support, academic coaches play an especially pivotal role in emotionally intense courses where vulnerability, reflection, and compassion are central to learning.

ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

NSU’s RN-BSN program offers a curriculum featuring modern and distinctive courses designed to meet the evolving demands of contemporary nursing practice. Among these, *The Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying* stands out as a transformative and widely favored course. Academic coaches bring their expertise to support students through this deeply personal and meaningful subject. This section explores four key areas: (1) an introduction to *Conscious Dying*, (2) coaches’ roles in the course, (3) faculty relationships with coaches, and (4) using the Caring Science lens to inspire and engage students.

Introduction to Conscious Dying

Death is often regarded in contemporary society as something to be feared, hidden, or avoided in conversation. This cultural discomfort stems, in part, from the shift during the 20th century that moved the experience of dying from the home to institutional settings such as hospitals (Rosenberg, 2023). As a result, many individuals have become distanced from the natural process of death, contributing to uneasiness and a lack of open dialogue around the topic.

In clinical practice, nurses in hospitals, hospices, and long-term care facilities frequently serve as compassionate witnesses and guides for patients transitioning from life to death. However, many nurses report feeling unprepared for these profound and intimate moments. Limited exposure to end-of-life care in BSN programs, combined with a lack of confidence in discussing death openly with patients, contributes to feelings of inadequacy. This discomfort can, in turn, affect the quality of patient care, making it essential for nursing education to address the emotional, spiritual, and clinical dimensions of death and dying.

The Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying course at NSU helps students explore death as an integral and inevitable part of life. The course is intentionally designed to ease students' discomfort with the topic of death and instead foster acceptance by encouraging open, reflective engagement. Central to the course is the ancient Roman philosophy of *memento mori*, or “remember you must die,” a phrase historically used to underscore the universality of death. During Roman victory processions, soldiers would walk beside triumphant leaders chanting this phrase as a humbling reminder that even the most powerful were still mortal (Tate, n.d.). This philosophy is used to guide students in reexamining their views on death and recognizing it not as something to be feared, but as a natural human experience.

Students are encouraged to confront their own mortality through a series of reflective assignments. These include envisioning the type of end-of-life care they would want and articulating the legacy they hope to leave behind. In doing so, students move beyond the clinical aspects of death and begin to understand the emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions of dying. By engaging with these concepts, students develop a deeper sense of empathy for patients at the end of life and begin to cultivate a mindset grounded in presence, compassion, and acceptance.

Conscious dying is a mindful and intentional approach to the end of life, emphasizing presence, acceptance, and personal choice. It encourages individuals to consider the kind of death experience they wish to have—whether physical, emotional, or spiritual—fostering a sense of agency, dignity, and peace. At the heart of the *Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying* course is the belief that death can be approached with awareness and compassion, not fear.

The course draws on the foundational work of Tarron Estes and William Rosa (2016), whose scholarship and advocacy have profoundly influenced end-of-life care education. Their hallmark article, *What end of life care needs now: An emerging praxis of the sacred and subtle*, serves as an essential framework, offering guidance for nurses navigating the sacredness and subtlety of the dying process. In addition to their written work, direct communication and workshops with Estes played a formative role in shaping the structure and depth of this course at NSU.

Jean Watson's Caritas Processes (Watson, 2025) are thoughtfully integrated throughout the curriculum, further grounding the course in a caring-healing philosophy. These tenets of Caring Science help students cultivate compassionate presence, deepen self-awareness, and support others through meaningful, transpersonal connections. Together, the teachings of Estes, Rosa, and Watson form a holistic foundation for preparing nurses to meet patients at the end of life with empathy, intention, and reverence.

Coaches' Roles in Conscious Dying

Diversity and Connection

As the United States continues to grow more diverse, it is essential that faculty and academic coach representation reflect this evolving demographic landscape. Coaches with varied genders, ages, cultural backgrounds, professional experiences, and religious affiliations enhance students' ability to form meaningful connections with the learning team. The dying process is as diverse as humanity itself—shaped by religious, cultural, familial, and individual beliefs—and students benefit from engaging with coaches who either share or respectfully acknowledge these values.

In *The Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying* course, students come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, including Anglo-American, Latino-Hispanic, African American, and Asian American communities. Their religious affiliations span Christianity, Judaism, Atheism, Agnosticism, Catholicism, and Latter-Day Saint traditions, among others. Similarly, academic coaches bring a wide variety of lived experiences, nursing backgrounds, and worldviews to their teaching roles. This diversity helps cultivate an inclusive learning space where multiple perspectives on death and dying are acknowledged, honored, and explored with care.

Given the deeply personal and sensitive nature of this course, it is essential to cultivate an atmosphere where all perspectives on death are welcomed without judgment. There is no singular “right” or “wrong” way to view the end of life. Faculty and academic coaches play a critical role in fostering an open, respectful environment that encourages students to share their thoughts and experiences safely and authentically. Insights shared by faculty—whether they mirror or differ from

students' worldviews—broaden students' understanding of how societal perceptions of death vary across cultures and personal experiences. A diverse instructional team allows students to explore, question, and reflect on their own beliefs while learning from the lived experiences of others.

Building Relationships Through Introductions

To build trust and rapport, the course begins with a welcome activity during week one. The course modules are organized around a “cruise theme,” with each module representing a stage in the broader journey of life. Aligned with the course’s cruise theme, students, faculty, and coaches post personal travel photos and introductions on a shared Padlet board. Participants are encouraged to share a brief snippet about a past travel experience and where they would like to visit in the future. This light-hearted, low-stakes exercise helps create an initial connection between students, faculty, and coaches and sets the tone for a safe and inclusive learning environment. Coaches are also encouraged to introduce themselves and provide personal background information, allowing students to see them as approachable, relatable individuals. Starting with general, casual sharing builds familiarity and comfort, which supports deeper emotional reflection later in the course. This activity not only enhances student engagement but also underscores the course’s emphasis on honoring diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

Fostering Open Expression

Open-hearted sharing is encouraged by both faculty and academic coaches, who share the responsibility of making students feel accepted, valued, and heard. This is especially important in a course where assignments invite students to reflect on the meaning of death and explore their personal beliefs. Creating a safe, supportive environment fosters vulnerability and encourages students to engage with perspectives that may differ from their own. To promote this openness, faculty and coaches consistently emphasize that all ideas are welcome.

Coaches and faculty model this emotional openness with care and professionalism, sometimes choosing to share personal experiences with grief or loss when appropriate. When done with prudence, this modeling can create a ripple effect of deeper connection. For example, one faculty noted that after a coach shared a tender story, they also felt comfortable disclosing a personal experience, which then led to students sharing their own heartfelt stories—ranging from the loss of siblings and grandparents to emotional hardship and heartbreak. These moments of shared vulnerability foster a powerful sense of community and normalize the emotional terrain of end-of-life conversations.

By cultivating a milieu of acceptance and reinforcing the value of reflective, open dialogue, academic coaches play a pivotal role in helping students feel emotionally safe, seen, and supported. This sense of belonging is essential for engaging in the kind of self-inquiry and deep reflection that the course invites.

Faculty-Coach Collaboration

At the beginning of each semester, faculty hold a phone or Zoom meeting with the assigned academic coach to outline the course structure, philosophy, and expectations. These meetings introduce the Conscious Dying framework and emphasize the course's goals, assignments, and grading standards. Since the course centers on emotional reflection and self-awareness, rigid adherence to APA formatting and minor technical requirements is intentionally relaxed to prioritize authentic student expression and personal insight. An additional meeting is often scheduled two to four weeks into the course, particularly when working with a coach new to the content. These early touchpoints help ensure alignment with course goals, clarify expectations, and establish a foundation for consistent student support.

Ongoing communication via email is used throughout the semester to define grading criteria, address emerging issues, and resolve any ambiguity in instructional decisions. Frequent and intentional check-ins between faculty and coaches foster shared understanding, promote instructional consistency, and help maintain the integrity of the learning experience. This regular dialogue also supports a collaborative partnership that ultimately benefits student engagement and success.

Inspiring Students Through a Caring Science Lens

Effective coaches for this course utilize *caritas* language—a compassionate, heart-centered style of communication grounded in Jean Watson's Theory of Human Caring (Watson, 2025). Rooted in the Latin word *caritas*, meaning love and charity, this communication style promotes empathy, kindness, and intentional presence in both verbal and non-verbal interactions. When used consistently, *caritas* language fosters healing connections and contributes to an inclusive, emotionally safe learning environment.

Examples of *caritas* language used in this course include signing off assignments or messages with “blessings” or “kindly,” and affirming student reflections with phrases such as, “I honor your wisdom and journey,” “Your thoughts and perspectives are honored in this shared space,” and “In this sacred space, all emotions are welcome.” Even brief email exchanges begin with warm acknowledgments, such as “Thank you for reaching out.” These subtle but intentional phrases model the values of Caring Science, showing students how to extend respect and compassion to others.

By weaving caring language into their daily interactions, coaches and faculty create an emotionally supportive environment where students feel seen and heard. This approach not only enhances the learning experience but also provides students with a powerful model of how to use heart-centered language in their future clinical practice. Through consistent, intentional communication, academic coaches help cultivate a space of healing, reflection, and human connection—essential qualities in both education and nursing care.

Application Summary

The *Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying* course serves as a transformative learning experience, encouraging RN-BSN students to confront and reflect upon their personal beliefs, values, and perceptions of death. By exploring mortality through reflective assignments and philosophical frameworks, students begin to develop empathy and a deeper sense of presence in their nursing practice. The partnership with academic coaches enhances this experience by fostering connection, encouraging open expression, and modeling the principles of Caring Science.

Academic coaches play a critical role in helping students feel safe, supported, and heard throughout the course. Through candid communication, consistent emotional presence, and use of caritas language, coaches help create an environment where students can explore complex and often uncomfortable topics with compassion and curiosity. In addition to providing academic support, coaches play an important role in encouraging students to tap into internal motivation—focusing on personal growth, self-awareness, and meaningful engagement with the material rather than solely external motivators like grades or course completion. This deeper connection to purpose and learning helps students experience the course not just as a requirement, but as a transformative part of their nursing journey.

The ongoing collaboration between faculty and coaches ensures alignment in course goals, feedback strategies, and the delivery of caring, student-centered education. One student eloquently expressed the profound impact of this course, stating:

Throughout my journey in the BSN program, I have come across numerous classes that have shaped my understanding of nursing. However, none have resonated with me as deeply as the Theory & Practice of Conscious Dying class. The course content and discussions surrounding end-of-life care, palliative care, and the importance of compassionate support during the dying process touched me on a profound level. The way the class was structured, with a perfect balance of theory and practical application, allowed me to not only gain knowledge but also develop a deep sense of empathy and awareness for the needs of patients facing the end of life. Moreover, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to you, the instructor, for providing valuable resources and engaging assignments

that enhanced my learning experience. Your dedication to creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment fostered meaningful discussions and allowed me to further explore the complexities of conscious dying. This class has undoubtedly been the highlight of my BSN program, and I am grateful for the invaluable lessons and skills that I have gained (Anonymous student, personal communication, December 6, 2023).

Beyond individual courses, student evaluations across the RN-BSN program offer further insight into how academic coaches shape the broader student experience.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC COACHES

Building on the SON's commitment to student-centered learning and Caring Science, student evaluations offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of academic coaches and the overall learning experience. These evaluations help identify what is working well and what aspects of instruction, communication, or course design may benefit from refinement. This continuous feedback loop supports the SON's culture of improvement, transparency, and reflective practice.

Academic coaches are integral to the online RN-BSN program's learning culture. As previously described, coaches extend the faculty's capacity by offering timely, individualized support to students while maintaining alignment with the course's philosophical and academic goals. At NSU SON, academic coaches assist with grading, monitor discussion threads, respond to student questions, and ensure consistent, prompt feedback. Their involvement fosters student engagement, supports retention, and helps uphold the SON's standards for academic excellence. Importantly, their work allows faculty to focus on meaningful student interactions, course innovation, and the continued cultivation of a caring, inclusive virtual learning environment.

The importance of academic coaches extends beyond administrative support; they serve as mentors and facilitators of student success. Because of their significant role, analyzing student evaluations offers insight into how students perceive their academic coaches and highlights key themes in their feedback. Five themes consistently emerged from student evaluations between 2020 and 2024: timely and constructive feedback, engagement and responsiveness, respect and support for students, commitment to student success, and clear communication. By examining these themes and reflecting on students' perceptions of academic coaches, this analysis aims to provide insight into the strengths of academic coaching at NSU and areas for continued improvement.

Key Positive Themes in Student Evaluations

At the end of each semester, NSU collects student evaluations on their academic coaches to assess the effectiveness of the student-coach working relationship. Faculty use these evaluations to provide feedback to academic coaches, reinforcing strengths and addressing areas for improvement. The evaluation process consists of eight questions that measure the coach's performance in providing timely and helpful feedback, responding to student inquiries, showing respect, and demonstrating interest in student success. Analysis of these evaluations reveals five themes.

Timely and Constructive Feedback

One of the most consistently praised aspects of academic coaching is the timeliness and clarity of feedback given on coursework. Across multiple evaluations, students rated academic coaches highly in this area, with mean scores often exceeding 4.5 out of 5.0. Students especially appreciated feedback that was detailed, specific, and actionable, allowing them to improve their academic performance.

Effective feedback plays a crucial role in student learning. Rather than just indicating where a student went wrong, specific feedback provides guidance on how to improve, reinforcing learning objectives and fostering growth. Many students acknowledged that timely feedback helped them refine their writing, particularly in APA formatting. The ability to receive quick and constructive feedback enables students to address errors before submitting subsequent assignments, reducing frustration and enhancing confidence in their work. This is particularly important in the RN-BSN program, where courses run for just seven or eight weeks, leaving little room for delayed responses.

Furthermore, constructive feedback should serve as a learning opportunity rather than just an evaluation. When students receive meaningful feedback, they become more engaged in their learning process and better equipped to make improvements. Research suggests that feedback should be specific, balanced, and future-focused, ensuring students know exactly how to adjust their approach in future assignments (Norman, 2024). When coaches offer both praise for strengths and actionable suggestions for areas of improvement, students feel more motivated to apply the feedback effectively.

Engagement and Responsiveness

Students frequently highlighted the accessibility and responsiveness of their academic coaches. Many noted that their coaches were available via email and discussion boards, responding to inquiries promptly and with clarity. Students

especially appreciated coaches who asked follow-up questions and encouraged deeper thinking in discussions, as their engagement fostered a sense of connection and active learning in an online environment.

The importance of faculty presence in online learning cannot be overstated. Research indicates students are more likely to remain engaged in courses where faculty and academic coaches participate in discussions, provide consistent feedback, and are available within a reasonable timeframe, typically responding within 24 hours (Mingo et al., 2024). Academic coaches at NSU help create this sense of presence, ensuring students feel supported rather than isolated in their learning experience.

Additionally, because the RN-BSN program caters to adult learners—many of whom work full-time as registered nurses and have families—students often seek assistance at non-traditional hours, including evening and weekends. The presence of academic coaches who can address these inquiries outside of standard business hours significantly improves student satisfaction and academic progress. Coaches who were proactive in responding to student concerns were described as “*helpful*,” “*approachable*,” and “*supportive*,” indicating that their presence had a meaningful impact on students’ experiences.

Respect and Support for Students

Another dominant theme in student evaluations was the sense of respect and encouragement provided by academic coaches. Many students expressed gratitude for coaches who recognized their efforts, acknowledged their challenges, and treated them as professionals. As adult learners with established nursing careers, RN-BSN students expect to be treated with respect and value faculty who appreciate their experience, insight, and time constraints.

The evaluations consistently showed high ratings (above 4.5/5.0) in this area, with students highlighting how academic coaches displayed patience, kindness, and a willingness to help. Many comments emphasized that coaches were not graders, but mentors who genuinely cared about student success. This sense of encouragement helped students stay motivated, particularly when balancing coursework with demanding jobs and family responsibilities.

Research has shown students who feel respected and supported are more likely to engage actively in their coursework and persist in their academic programs (Mingo et al., 2024). Respect is particularly important in online learning environments, where students may feel disconnected from faculty. Academic coaches help bridge this gap by demonstrating compassion, mutual respect, and a commitment to student well-being.

Commitment to Student Success

Academic coaches who showed a vested interest in student success received positive feedback in evaluations. Students highlighted the value of coaches who provided meaningful, individualized feedback that went beyond grading. They appreciated coaches who reminded them of deadlines, encouraged growth, and fostered a supportive learning environment.

One student shared, *“My academic coach is very good. She gives you great feedback that you need. If you fall short and don’t understand something, she will take the extra step to help you understand. She is very responsive and kind.”* This highlights the importance of coaches who ensure students grasp key concepts and feel supported throughout their learning journey. In an online learning environment, where students may not have face-to-face interactions with faculty, having an academic coach who proactively assists students and ensures clarity can significantly improve engagement and retention.

Another student commented, *“Gave constructive feedback that was both encouraging in an upbuilding manner.”* Others echoed this sentiment, appreciating coaches who provided *“interactive, encouraging, and timely grading,”* and validated their work, even when they received full points. One student wrote, *“They would respond very quickly and give good feedback about work even when we got full points, so it validated what I was doing.”* This shows the value of not just offering constructive feedback but also recognizing and reinforcing what students are doing well, which helps build confidence and motivation.

Personalized attention and responsiveness were also key themes. One student shared:

My coach was always available to assist, especially when technical issues stifled work submission, which can be very frustrating and discouraging. He helped and provided increased assistance that helped me finally master the submission process. His comments were encouraging and helpful.

This underscores the vital role of academic coaches beyond grading assignment and answering questions, but also technical challenges that may impede progress.

Students also valued when academic coaches provided clear explanations for their grades rather than simply marking points off. One wrote, *“Fair grader who provided explanation on my grades. Gave me lots of encouragement, thank you!”* This level of transparency not only helps students understand how to improve but also builds trust between them and their coaches.

Another student commented on the value of thoughtful engagement, sharing, *“She always leaves thoughtful comments on each discussion grade and assignment grade, which makes me feel as though she actually cared to consider the writing I submitted. I appreciate her being an academic coach.”* This highlights the sig-

nificance of academic coaches who provide more than just grades—they foster a connection, making students feel heard and supported.

Encouragement and positivity were recurring themes as well. One student noted, “*She gave very positive feedback on assignments, and I appreciated the use of emojis to convey emotion.*” Even small gestures, like emojis, helped make the online learning environment feel more personal and supportive.

Ultimately, students expressed gratitude for academic coaches who not only guided them academically but also encouraged their progress, built their confidence, and made them feel valued. As one student put it, “*He is extremely patient and engaging with all students, providing important insight and positive reinforcement.*”

These reflections show that the most effective academic coaches are not just graders but mentors, motivators, and facilitators of student success. Their ability to provide encouragement, clarify expectations, and support students through challenges fosters an environment where learners feel empowered to grow. The student-coach relationship, when nurtured effectively, is key to success in an online learning environment, ensuring students receive the guidance and reinforcement they need to thrive.

Clear and Constructive Communication

The most effective academic coaches balance constructive criticism with encouragement, helping students understand their mistakes while also motivating them to improve. Many students valued detailed feedback on their assignments and requested clearer explanations, particularly regarding APA formatting.

While evaluations were largely positive, some students expressed frustration with vague feedback or inconsistencies in APA grading. Providing concrete examples of proper formatting, clearer rubrics, and specific corrections rather than generalized comments could further enhance the learning experience (Cipher et al., 2018). Ensuring alignment between grading expectations and course materials is another area for ongoing improvement.

Student Perceptions on the Academic Coaches’ Support and Guidance

Overall, students perceive academic coaches as invaluable resources who enhance their learning experience by offering personalized feedback, timely responses, and continuous support. Several insights emerged from the evaluations regarding how students experience this guidance.

Students emphasized that effective coaching is not just about grading but about fostering a deeper understanding of course material. Many expressed that academic

coaches helped them develop stronger writing skills, understand complex concepts, and stay on track with deadlines.

Although feedback was overwhelmingly positive, some students identified areas for continued improvement, including the desire for more detailed examples, clearer APA guidance, and faster response times to support timely application of feedback. Addressing these concerns will further strengthen the student–coach relationship and enhance the overall learning experience.

These evaluations highlight the critical role academic coaches play in promoting student engagement, motivation, and success—principles that are further explored in the chapter’s conclusion.

CONCLUSION

As illustrated throughout this chapter, academic coaches play a vital and multidimensional role in online nursing education. At NSU SON, their presence contributes meaningfully to student engagement, motivation, emotional well-being, and academic success. Student evaluations, combined with faculty insights, confirm that coaches are far more than teaching assistants—they are mentors, supporters, and key collaborators in creating caring-centered learning environments.

Engagement is a crucial component of the learning process. It refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, and passion that students show when they are learning. Academic coaches are strategically positioned to foster greater engagement among students. Through personalized guidance and support, they can tailor their approaches to meet the unique needs of each student. For instance, coaches often use methods that encourage active participation, such as interactive learning activities, goal-setting sessions, and reflective practices that prompt students to think critically about their learning processes. When students feel engaged, they are more likely to take ownership of their education, leading to deeper understanding and retention of material.

Moreover, the relationship between engagement and motivation cannot be overlooked. Motivation is what drives students to participate in learning activities and persist in the face of challenges. Academic coaches play a significant role in enhancing student motivation by providing encouragement, feedback, and validation. When coaches acknowledge students' efforts, celebrate their successes, and help them set realistic goals, they cultivate a sense of purpose and determination. This motivational support encourages students to push their limits, embrace challenges, and ultimately invest more energy and effort into their educational pursuits.

Perceptions of academic coaches significantly influence how students engage with coaching services. If students view academic coaches as approachable, knowledge-

able, and supportive, they are more likely to seek assistance and actively participate in the coaching process. Conversely, if the perception is that coaches are overly critical or disconnected from student needs, it can create barriers to engagement and hinder motivation. Therefore, fostering positive perceptions is essential for creating an environment conducive to effective learning and development.

Coaches can enhance their image by building rapport with students, being empathetic to their struggles, and consistently demonstrating a genuine commitment to their success—not only by offering support, but also by helping students strengthen their critical thinking skills and develop solutions to challenges. Effective coaching encourages students to engage in self-reflection and take ownership of their learning journey, rather than simply providing a space for venting without encouraging personal growth.

The interplay between these themes becomes evident when we observe the direct impact of coaching on student outcomes. Engaged students who feel motivated are more likely to succeed academically, and their positive experiences with academic coaches can contribute to a more favorable overall perception of educational support services. This feedback loop is critical; as students achieve their goals and see the benefits of coaching, their motivation may increase, leading them to seek out further opportunities for growth and engagement.

Additionally, it is essential to recognize the role of collaboration in enhancing these themes. When academic coaches work closely with faculty and administrators, they can create a more holistic approach to student development. Collaborative efforts can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of student needs, which in turn fosters a stronger engagement strategy tailored to the unique context of each school or learning environment. This collective approach helps standardize perceptions of support services, making it easier for students to recognize the resources available to them and the value those resources can offer.

The *Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying* course serves as a microcosm of this coaching model in action, demonstrating how academic coaches can engage students in transformative learning experiences that reach beyond intellectual growth to emotional awareness, cultural humility, and professional empathy. Through caring dialogue, heart-centered feedback, and presence in vulnerable moments, coaches help students examine death, grief, and meaning, which are essential skills for compassionate nursing practice.

In summary, academic coaches extend the reach of faculty and help bring NSU's mission to life. Their impact goes beyond grading or logistical support; they are intentional, caring contributors to a learning ecosystem rooted in Watson's Caring Science and Ray's Bureaucratic Caring Theory. By continuing to invest in these partnerships—with thoughtful preparation, clear communication, and reflective collaboration—institutions can ensure academic coaches remain catalysts for equity,

connection, and success in nursing education. In doing so, they help shape not only successful students, but also resilient, reflective, and compassionate future nurse leaders.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Biogenic Environment: A nurturing, life-giving space intentionally created through Caring Science practices. In education, it refers to learning environments that promote well-being, growth, and healing through relational, student-centered practices.

Caring Science: An ethical and philosophical framework that views nursing as a deeply human, relational practice. It centers on love, compassion, presence, intentionality, and wholeness in both educational and clinical settings.

Caritas Processes®: A set of ten guiding principles created by Dr. Jean Watson that operationalize Caring Science. These processes focus on human dignity, presence, and the sacredness of caring relationships, and are used by faculty and academic coaches to foster compassionate learning environments.

Ethic of Belonging: A principle grounded in Caring Science that promotes inclusion, connection, and mutual respect within learning communities. It supports each student's value and promotes environments where all individuals feel seen, heard, and supported.

Reflective Practice: A deliberate process in which nurse educators, academic coaches, and students critically examine their experiences, thoughts, and behaviors to improve personal growth, judgments, and caring capacity.

RN-BSN Academic Coach (or Virtual Teaching Assistant): A registered nurse with at least a master's degree in nursing who provides instructional support in online courses. Academic coaches assist with grading, feedback, discussion facilitation, student outreach, extending faculty capacity while maintaining course quality and consistency.


RN-BSN Program: A post-licensure academic track designed for registered nurses who have completed an associate degree or diploma in nursing and are pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree. This program supports professional advancement by building on prior clinical experience and focusing on leadership, evidence-based practice, and holistic care.

Transpersonal Relationship: A caring relationship that transcends the physical and technical aspects of education or care to include the whole person—mind, body, and spirit—fostering mutual respect, empathy, and meaningful connection.

Chapter 8


The Faculty–Coach Relationship: Communication

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to build on the faculty-coach relationship through communication. The aim is to outline how effective communication is the foundation of relationships and is vital for the success of faculty and coach collaboration. As faculty and coaches collaborate effectively, this promotes student learning, satisfaction, and positive outcomes. The chapter outlines best practices for the faculty when communicating with coaches, along with recommended communication strategies for coaches when working with both faculty and students. A dedicated section includes real-world scenarios to illustrate potential communication challenges and provide opportunities to apply the concepts discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is the sharing of information between individuals. This sharing can be synchronous or asynchronous, verbal or non-verbal, intentional or unintentional. The information may contain facts, opinions, emotions and is viewed in the context of each individual's view of the relationship. Because we are continually communicating the process is seen as a simple conveyance of information, we become frustrated when the process fails. Individuals need to carefully consider not only the information, but any unintentional messages contained in the communication. Often, the unintended message has a greater impact than the message itself. The meaning of the information can be misunderstood at any point during the process of communication. This misunderstanding can lead to confusion, mismatched expectations, errors, personal conflicts, blame and disengagement (Ruben et al., 2021).

There are multiple models of communication. Three common models are transmission, interaction, and transaction. The transmission model identifies a one-way process that is focused on the sender and the message. Feedback between the sender and the receiver is incorporated in the interaction model. When viewed through the transactional model of communication, the exchange of information is used to create relationships. Beyond the traditional alternating sender and receiver roles, this model identifies both as communicators who simultaneously send and receive information as they co-create the reality. As this reality is created, messages are exchanged within both social and relational contexts (Lapum et al., 2020).

Social context refers to the rules and norms associated with communication. In the online environment, the use of all capital letters implies yelling at the other person. There are generational differences to recognize within the social context of communication. One example is the use of 'textese' in writing. This is the use of numbers, abbreviations and loose or missing punctuation in written communication. Differences in familiarity with this format of written communication can create misunderstandings.

The relational context refers to the norms associated with the relationship between the communicators. Just as in face-to-face interactions, first impressions set the stage for this relationship. This relationship influences how the message is perceived, interpreted and responded to. A relational communication cycle has been described that identified elements that can assist the communicator in constructing, forming and strengthening the relationship through messaging. This is not a linear process, and each element may not be included in all communication. Begin by establishing rapport and showing interest. Within the message demonstrate empathy and respect for the other's point of view. Close the message by acknowledging and thanking the other communicator (Ruben et al., 2021).

Both communicators receive messages, and this process can be problematic. Most of the knowledge base on communication has been derived from verbal communication studies. Poor listening skills are often addressed as a challenge to the accurately receiving and understanding of messages. Since most communication in online courses is either written or asynchronous, the attention given to the message conveyed can be considered listening skills. Today, we are constantly flooded by information in many ways. Our ability to listen is dependent on our cognitive limits or attention span. Challenges to our attention include multitasking, drifting off, or daydreaming. Among the vast array of messages we receive every day, we select those we perceive to be of interest to us or meaningful. We often only listen or read to garner the information we need. Once we obtain the information we believe we need, we may stop listening and begin the process to organize and interpret it (Hargie, 2021).

Information is interpreted and given meaning based on the context, our knowledge, and our experiences. Personal and cultural experiences impact the interpretation of messages received. An individual's educational, personal, and cultural background can have an impact on how a message is interpreted. Communicators should strive to become mindful by paying attention to the context and perspectives associated with the message in addition to the language used. Following some simple steps can improve the interpretation of the message. Begin by clearly introducing or stating the purpose of the communication. Continue by providing the information and checking for understanding by the other communicator. Clarify any identified misunderstandings and end the communication by restating and summarizing the take away message (Ruben et al., 2021).

Not all communication is positive. When difficult information must be conveyed, it is best to present it clearly and honestly. The following suggestions can be utilized to assist in delivering the message. Begin the conversation with a positive tone that conveys empathy. Avoid accusations, generalizations, or attributing blame or motives as these can result in defensiveness and a shutting down of the communicator. Start by discussing areas of agreement, such as the shared commitment to quality education. Listen carefully and actively to identify the perspective of the other communicator. It is important to take the time to distinguish between facts and stories. Often misrepresented facts are at the heart of the problem, and this clarification can quickly solve the conflict. Work together to identify the best solution to the problem that is agreeable to both communicators. It is vital to have a plan how you will close the conversation. Taking the time to role play the interaction with a trusted colleague can improve your confidence in addressing the situation (Ruben et al., 2021).

Communication within the online educational environment is vital to success. Learners who choose online education are often non-traditional. They are adult learners who are juggling work and home demands with school work. An often

cited advantage of online courses is the flexibility while a major disadvantage is that students can feel isolated, uncared for, and disengaged from the course, classmates and faculty. Students who feel engaged report a sense of value from the experience and report higher satisfaction and improved learning. First reported in 1987, the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education provide evidence-based factors to maximize student engagement and learning. Four of the seven principles directly relate to communication and can be applied to online courses. Although the principles are aimed at student engagement, they can also be applied to the faculty-coach relationship. These principles are to encourage frequent contact, give prompt feedback, communicate high expectations, and provide a safe space for exchange of ideas (Hampton et al., 2023).

FACULTY AND COACH COMMUNICATION

Communication strategies are vital for promoting a good faculty-coach relationship, as well as for positioning the coach for success. Faculty want to collaborate with stellar coaches, but to work with stellar coaches, faculty must invest the time and commitment into developing a relationship and preparing coaches for their role. Properly prepared coaches are not only better able to collaborate with faculty, but they are also more confident in their role and better able to promote student learning, growth, and satisfaction (Cipher et al., 2018). The key component to a successful faculty-coach relationship and coach-student relationship is communication.

Faculty and coaches must be skilled in meaningful communication strategies to ensure collegial relationships are developed and information is shared. Utilizing best practices to ensure effective communication between the faculty and the coach, as well as between the student and the coach, are vital for the academic coach model to be most efficient (White-Jefferson et al., 2020). For an online learning environment, a variety of methods can be beneficial in providing asynchronous regular and meaningful feedback (Huber et al., 2023).

Best practice guidelines for when, how, and what to communicate for the faculty communicating with the coach, as well as coaches communicating with faculty and students, can promote faculty, coach, and student success. In addition, it is also important to consider the perception of those receiving the communication, to ensure the effectiveness of the transfer of information and perceived support, as well as to validate the accurate receipt and understanding of the valuable and needed information.

White-Jefferson and colleagues (2020) outlined communication as the key to faculty support for coaches. Four themes of supporting coaches include explaining overall expectations, onboarding and orientation, academic coach oversight, and

the best practice of a formal communication plan for lead faculty working with an academic coach. These strategies dovetail nicely with Hampton's principles of frequent contact, prompt feedback, communicating high expectations, and providing a safe space for idea exchange, to promote an effective faculty-coach relationship.

Communication from Faculty to Coach

As course faculty, it is your responsibility to establish and build on the faculty-coach relationship through effective and timely communication. Effective communication is the foundation of relationships and is vital for the success of faculty and coach collaboration. Faculty need to understand when, how and what to communicate with coaches, as well as ensuring that coaches recognize when, how, and what to communicate with faculty and students. As faculty and coaches collaborate successfully, student learning, satisfaction, and positive outcomes are strengthened.

Communicating Frequently

Course faculty serve as a resource for coaches and should build a collegial, supportive, collaborative faculty-coach relationship prior to the start of the term. A great way to start a collaborative relationship is for the faculty to contact the coach for introductions and to welcome them to the course, as well as to arrange a virtual meeting to discuss roles, responsibilities, and collaboration. To follow up on the initial conversation, sending a welcome email with the course syllabus, goals, and schedule, and to ensure the coach has the textbook is very helpful. Generally, meeting the week before the course begins for a detailed course orientation and to start onboarding is sufficient time to ensure coaches are fully prepared to serve in their role of supporting students (White-Jefferson et al, 2020). Through timely, meaningful communication, faculty should portray a supportive and respectful environment to guide coaches to be successful in their role of supporting students.

Following the start of the course term, continued communication should take place as needed to provide the coach with information that is pertinent to their role and performance. After the initial orientation and onboarding, lead faculty and coaches should continue communicating weekly through virtual meetings and email to ensure the coach has sufficient support and oversight. Frequent contact builds on the relationship and allows the coach to feel safe to openly communicate with the faculty. This high level of communication will ensure that the coach is well prepared to successfully perform in their role of promoting student learning and sustainability (White-Jefferson et al, 2020).

Another aspect to consider with effective communication is closing the loop to ensure understanding of information by the coach. Initially, coaches may be hesi-

tant to report their lack of knowledge or understanding of the information shared. This is why multiple methods of communication and follow-up are important because perceptions and interpretations vary, and faculty need to ensure coaches receive the information and voice understanding. Periodic follow-up communication with coaches through an email, telephone, or virtual conversation can confirm understanding and further provide coach support.

Onboarding and Communicating Expectations

Providing a comprehensive orientation and onboarding including a review of the course content, assignments, and clear expectations for performance are essential for the coach to be successful in their role (Broussard & White-Jefferson, 2018; White-Jefferson et al., 2020). The online learning management system should be reviewed, as well as all course components and format including the syllabus, objectives, schedule and timeline, weekly unit or module content, student learning resources, and assignments. Resources should be provided for the coach; it is extremely helpful for coaches if faculty provide thorough instructions and grading guidelines for the assignments, rubric grading criteria, grading timeline, and student feedback expectations to ensure valid and consistent grading. Program or software access and needed training for technology such as StatPearls, VoiceThread, Medatrax, Zoom, Teams, Kaltura, the learning management system (LMS), Slack, or Google Docs should be discussed and arranged to ensure the coach's comfort with the technology. Review best practice expectations for course participation, engagement, and interaction with students to promote positive coach-student interactions and student success. In addition, expected coach communication activities with students such as meetings including the frequency with students as a group or individually, response time to student emails, interfacing with students in the discussion board, and announcement posting should be clearly defined.

Weekly emails for coaches should be supportive and motivational to ensure the coach knows how much the faculty appreciates their collaborative efforts and to outline goals for the week. The unit or module overview, assignments due, grading requirements for the week, and feedback on coach performance for the previous week should be outlined. In addition, the faculty should ask about any student issues, encourage the coach to ask questions or seek clarification, and to provide an update on their work with the students. Praise for work well done and support with an action plan for success should be included if the coach does not meet expectations. Schedule a meeting as soon as deficiencies are identified and maintain a positive attitude. Provide the coach with space to discuss deficiencies and identify solutions.. Establish a mutual goal with a clear path for improvement including regular progress checks scheduled with the coach (Ruben et al., 2021).

Following the weekly email with a short virtual meeting for clarification and follow-up to ensure the coach feels supported and has the information and tools they need is helpful. In addition, these meetings provide a great opportunity to review the grading of assignments to ensure inter-rater reliability and consistency of grading. Additional periodic communication via email or phone conversations may be needed for clarification, discussion of issues with the course, or to inform the coach of concerns that arise with the coach or student performance.

Understanding the Coach Perspective of Communication from the Faculty

To ensure coaches feel confident, appreciated and supported, and have the tools they need to be successful in their performance, faculty need to explore communication from the coach perspective and anticipate any needs the coach may have. Ask the coach if they have everything they need or if assistance is required. Ensure they know that as faculty, you are available to collaborate and support them as needed. Coaches who are new to the university or to working with the individual faculty may need additional support. Acknowledging the hesitancy seen in new coaches may improve the coach's comfort with asking questions. Through effective communication inquiring about coach's needs and responding to those needs promptly, trust is built and coaches feel more comfortable contacting faculty with questions, for notification of an issue or student concerns, and to request assistance. By creating a positive, trusting, and collaborative working environment rooted in mutual respect, the coach and faculty can ensure a positive and mutually satisfying relationship that promotes faculty and coach success, which in turn, will promote enhanced student learning, satisfaction, engagement, performance, retention, and persistence.

Coach Communication with Faculty

Although it is imperative for faculty to communicate effectively and frequently with coaches, it is just as important for coaches to communicate with faculty. Coaches need to respond to communication from faculty but also may have the need to contact the faculty throughout the term. Faculty should respond to coaches' emails promptly as this builds trust. Requesting further information from coaches will help to ensure the coach is on the same path as the faculty and fully understands the communication efforts from the faculty. The coach and faculty should maintain a continual loop of communication and collaboration to ensure role success.

When, How, and What to Communicate

Coaches should converse in response to faculty communication within 24 hours to acknowledge the receipt of information and verification of understanding, as well as to ask for clarification or ask questions about information shared. In addition, coaches should feel confident in contacting the course faculty for additional information, to share concerns about the course or student performance, to clarify concepts, or to seek assistance as needed.

A great practice for coaches is to send a weekly email to faculty reporting their work for the course to include virtual meetings with students individually or as a group, student issues or concerns, course engagement, and grading completion. It is also good for coaches to provide feedback on the course itself and any suggestions they may have for change. Although coaches do not develop or edit courses since it is the responsibility of faculty to have courses prepared before coaches start working in the course, the coach's expertise and input is valuable in a collaborative relationship. Faculty can provide the space for the coach's input and recognize the contributions that either affirm the course is in good standing or identify areas for improvement.

Understanding the Faculty Perspective of Communication from the Coach

Just as faculty need to identify the coach's perceptions of communication, coaches should also attempt to view the faculty's perception of needed communication in working with coaches. Faculty want their coaches and students to succeed. Coaches who anticipate information to share with faculty and apprise them of their work are much appreciated by faculty. In a collaborative effort in meeting student needs, it is important to understand and be fully aware of each other's work and outcomes.

Communication from Coach to Students

To enhance the students' collegiate experience, coaches must engage routinely with students through a variety of communication strategies, model an online presence, and provide timely and detailed feedback. Technological advances have provided many opportunities for coaches to communicate effectively with students, as well as to assist in building academic relationships (Carr et al., 2021). Through the building of a collegial relationship with students, coaches can promote student learning, engagement, and greater academic achievement.

Hampton et al. (2023) outlined seven principles of good practice as applied to online learning, with four of the seven principles relating to communication with students. Principles include ensuring frequent faculty and student contact to encourage

involvement and motivation, providing prompt constructive feedback to improve student engagement and performance, communicating high expectations through providing resources and providing check points with students to ensure success, and providing a safe space for exchange of ideas and application to practice. Coaches can be present and engaged in the online course by implementing these principles to promote a positive learning experience for student success.

Students value communication with faculty along with clear expectations and direction (Huber et al., 2023). In a survey of 142 graduate nursing students to identify graduate students' perception of intimacy and caring behaviors, two of the five themes identified directly emphasized the importance of communication. Students value the faculty or coach willingness to communicate in a timely and respectful manner through meaningful feedback. In addition, students appreciate the willingness of faculty to communicate through a variety of methods including written (e-mail), virtual platforms, and phone calls. Telephonic or virtual meetings provide the non-verbal aspects of communication to students. Online students often feel alone, wondering if there is someone on the other side of the computer and the audio and video cues provide a humanization of the faculty (Huber et al., 2023).

Morris and Stommel (2018) state "The best online courses have a personality, create genuine relationships, and ask hard intellectual questions" (p. 63). The coach can develop professional academic relationships with students in an online community through positive, engaging, and motivational communication. In addition, by promoting learning through active question asking, coaches can ensure the student's growth and accomplishment of course outcomes. Through these effective communication actions, coaches can demonstrate personality with a caring respect for student success.

The coach serves as the main course contact for students and must ensure students are provided with the information needed to be successful, which includes communicating clear responsibilities and expectations in all student interactions (Billings & Halstead, 2016). Bourdeaux & Schoenack (2016) outlined that students value supportive communication from faculty and coaches to promote learning and positive outcomes and that effective communication includes positive behaviors to meet students' emotional needs and connecting with them authentically, which enables learning.

Coaches that engage students through creating an online community, providing social presence, and engaging learners are more apt to be successful in meeting the students' needs and improving their satisfaction with the course (Cipher et al., 2018). Social presence includes the elements of intimacy and immediacy. Intimacy in this context is the relationship that generates trust and promotes communication, while immediacy is the perceived distance between the communicators (Shea et al., 2022). Creating trust provides a sense of psychological safety to the students in a

course. This psychological safety allows students to feel a sense of trust that is vital to collaboration and the creation of community. Students need this safe community to take risks that lead to growth (Adams, 2021). Social presence also increases the sense of community among students and has been found to be positively related to the students' motivation to learn (Kozan & Richardson, 2014; Shea et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022). Activities that can negatively affect social presence include poor online communication, not responding in a timely manner and faculty disappearing from the course (Cain et al., 2024).

The perceived distance between communicators can be decreased with the use of faculty immediacy behaviors. These behaviors are vital to the students' perceptions of faculty presence, engagement and caring. Online graduate nursing students identified five themes of faculty immediacy behaviors, and all were related to communication. Students want faculty to be willing to communicate with them, to provide meaningful and respectful feedback, to provide compassionate support, to utilize audio or visual media, and to be present in the course (Huber et al., 2023). Coaches can also utilize emoticons and special characters to replace the missing audio and video cues in written communication (Shea et al., 2022). These intentional immediacy behaviors also communicate caring to students. Further, a study by Carr and colleagues (2021) found that the more coaches and faculty interact with students, the more students feel the coach or faculty cared about them. Students indicate that faculty or coaches who truly care about their performance and success demonstrate excellence in teaching. Caring behaviors can be displayed via communication that is responsive to students in a timely and respectful manner. Coaches should pay attention to the tone, word choice, and context of the students' emails and within their own responses. Addressing the student by their preferred name and using thoughtful, caring and empathetic language shows caring for the student. Feedback on assignments should be individualized and include specifics related to the student's submission letting the student know their work was read. Coaches should monitor the students' activity in the course to identify and respond to cues such as lack of participation, decline in work quality, late submissions or comments that indicate frustration. When these behaviors are observed, the coach should connect quickly with the student to inquire about the change, discuss solutions, and create a plan to get back on track (Sitzman & Watson, 2017; Zajac, 2025).

When, How and What to Communicate

Students indicate that communication and accessibility are perceived as faculty caring about them and their success (Carr et al., 2021). When faculty are present in the course to engage students, students perceive that faculty portrays a willingness to go beyond normal faculty participation and helpfulness. Communication can be

portrayed with words or actions to indicate a supportive, caring, and empathetic presence. In a study by Carr and colleagues (2021), faculty integrated a minimum of one electronic communication strategy with students over a semester, which resulted with statistically significant findings indicating a relationship between technology caring and a perception of faculty caring ($r=0.58$, $p<-.01$). Therefore, coaches communicating and interacting with students through technology or electronic communication are perceived as caring about their success, which motivates students to perform well.

Another study of 56 online educators from ten states evaluated student cues that encourage online instructors to provide caring interventions, 55 of the 56 educators felt it was possible to portray a caring online environment indicating that caring can be discerned and displayed through communication in online courses (Sitzman, 2016). Through effective communication including prompt action, using language that is non-threatening, meeting students' unique needs and concerns, providing assurance frequently, and willingness to have difficult conversations, intentional caring can be displayed. Technological communication tools can be very helpful to facilitate exchanges between the coach and student. Svinicki and McKeachie (2014) indicate that communication can be categorized as bi-directional or multi-directional. Bi-directional communication is between the coach and student and includes modalities such as SMS or texting, email, audience response or polling, chat, bulletin boards, and other online resources and applications. Texting and emailing are by far the most common and are quite effective to share information, quickly set up meetings during office hours, and to answer questions. Faculty and coaches are utilizing texting as a means of communication with students as it often yields a quick response, which has been well received with a positive impact to improve the effectiveness and accessibility of communication (Carr et al., 2021). Many faculty have incorporated other learning applications or technological communication options into courses such as announcements, discussion forums, the use of blogs, wiki, social media platforms, Padlet, various websites, LMS, and many more options. Recorded videos are very well received by students. There are a variety of software options such as Kaltura or ScreenPal to record and publish videos that students can watch asynchronously to gain the shared knowledge. Assignment feedback can be delivered via audio or video recordings using the tools found in most LMSs. This approach can further humanize the faculty or coach and allow the student to connect.

One aspect to consider is to set up ground rules for communication through technology such as ensuring students understand coaches have the goal to respond to their emails within a specific timeframe and ensuring all communication is respectful including proper netiquette expectations. Faculty should include in the course resources clear netiquette expectations for online learning and course communications. Faculty and coaches should role model professional communication expectations

in all communications with students. Online education requires students to be more self-disciplined and to take personal responsibility for their learning (Reilly et al., 2012). The coach provides support by promoting the concepts and holding students accountable for their performance in email, virtual chats, texting, discussion forums, group assignments, and other forms of communication. Netiquette encompasses being respectful of individuality and not using language that is harassing, offensive, insulting, threatening, discriminatory, or a violation of copyright (Shea, 2004).

Coaches should provide a personal introduction at the beginning of the course. This can be posted as an announcement, or on the course welcome page. Information should include professional background and as much information on personal interests as the coach is comfortable sharing. Detailing the connection the coach has with the course content allows the student to imagine the practical application of the content. The coach should provide contact options for the students, identifying which contact method is the best to use (Nash, 2011).

The frequency of communication goals should be determined collaboratively by the faculty and coach. Sending students a welcome email or announcement at the start of the term with motivation for excellent performance and success starts to build a positive academic caring relationship between the coach and student. Weekly meaningful announcements with an overview of the content and expectations for the week are helpful for students in fully understanding what is required for the week. Announcements are also utilized to share clarifying information with students or additional beneficial information is common practice to communicate with all students in a timely manner. Additionally, announcements are often used to provide motivational and encouraging words of advice to promote student commitment and continued knowledge that they can be successful. Depending on the course length, at least one personalized e-mail to check in with and support the student's efforts can be sent.

Communicating detailed constructive feedback in the rubric criterion and overall summarizing comments when grading provides individualized learning opportunities for students (Bastable, 2003). Thorough, detailed feedback in the grading rubric can be written, or in audio or video format. The variety of feedback modalities is helpful for students to learn and make positive changes moving forward. Feedback that is individualized with references to the student's submission conveys that you have read the work they completed (Sitzman & Watson, 2017). It is not only important when providing feedback to students to identify errors and the need for improvement, but it is also just as important to detail areas of student work where they excelled. Through praise of accomplishments, students are motivated to strive for excellence and continued learning. Qualified coaches that support faculty and students through providing timely feedback are likely to be successful in enhancing the student experience (Cipher et al., 2018).

Contacting students with concerns and communicating action plans for success is essential for students who are struggling. Emailing students or meeting students individually to clarify concepts or answer questions can help students get on track with lecture materials or assignments. In addition, students thrive when their faculty or coach provides motivation and encouragement that they can accomplish the expectations. Ensure that communication with students indicating concerns of performance identify that students have the ability to be successful if that is indeed the case.

Students indicate that in an online environment, it is important for communication to be effective to enable learning. Further, their emails must be responded to in a timely manner with comments and information that is clear, respectful, and with an intentional design (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Broussard & White-Jefferson, 2018). Methods for intentional design encompass a variety of strategies to ensure students receive clear expectations and adequate information. A common goal for responding to student emails is within 24 hours as courses are fast paced and adult learners generally have other obligations such as work and family needs with limited time to devote to schoolwork; therefore, students appreciate a fast response when they reach out to the coach so they can utilize the information received in their continued work for the course.

A helpful mnemonic to structure responses to student emails is **GUARD**. Open the email with a Greeting by addressing the student by their preferred name. Next demonstrate Understanding by acknowledging the student's concern. Provide an Answer to the concern with information and resources as appropriate. Then provide Reassurance by encouraging the student's efforts. Close the email with a Dedication to being available for further support (Zajac, 2025). Utilizing this mnemonic ensures the student feels heard, cared for and supported. It will strengthen the relationship between the student and the coach.

Holding virtual office hours with students weekly via Teams, Zoom or other platforms are encouraged; the meetings can be open to all students to discuss key concepts for the week and answer questions, or individual appointments can be scheduled to meet students' specific needs. The best option would be for both to occur, to hold both a group session and offer time weekly for individual meetings as needed. Students appreciate the opportunity to connect and communicate synchronously periodically throughout the course term and describe this as a display of caring by the coach or faculty (Broussard & White-Jefferson, 2018; Zajac & Lane, 2020). Group virtual meetings should be recorded and posted in the course for students to view asynchronously if they were unable to attend the scheduled meeting. Encouraging students to contact the coach with any questions after viewing the video opens the students to communicate with the coach moving forward.

Another form of communication and engagement with students is through the discussion board forum. Palmer (2017) outlined that to create a conversational pedagogy, identity and integrity of the teacher must be shared through stories. Stories of content and experiences can promote an optimal learning environment that encourages student active learning through contributions to the conversation. Sharing stories displays vulnerability to the students and communicates that this is a safe space for them to take risks and potentially make mistakes (Adams, 2021). Urging students to share their knowledge and experience through applying the concepts of the discussion through stories is powerful. Students not only learn from the coach, but also, they value their peers and learn through their perceptions and applications of the concepts (Bastable, 2003). In addition, this leads to building an online community where students build collaborative relationships with a common goal of professional development.

Discussion forums embody the constructivist theory that active learning takes place through active interactions building on knowledge rather than the passive intake of messaging. These areas are the equivalent of the face-to-face classroom in online courses. Discussion forums require coach attention and dynamic energy to engage students and help them develop critical communication skills, apply the course concepts and maintain their engagement with the course content (Covelli, 2017). To further prompt student response, coaches can share professional experience and knowledge, ask thought provoking questions to stimulate thinking, summarize key points, provide additional relevant resources, and challenge students to expand the conversation. Meaningful use of media such as audio or video recordings can get the student's attention while adding visual appeal to the forum. Using short video messages, coaches can pose thought-provoking questions to continue the conversation. Another engagement strategy is to acknowledge student contributions by name and then use them to frame further questions using the Socratic method. Using these types of questions to clarify students' responses, assumptions or viewpoints allows the student to examine their ideas rationally. Coaches can also reframe the student responses, identify the main points, and provide a prompt to continue the discussion among the students. This often intrigues students to bring further information into the discussion to make the collaborative effort more meaningful with deeper learning (Payne, 2021).

The faculty should discuss with the coach the expectations for presence in the discussion forum. The expectations may vary from one institution to another. One author identified the need to be in the forum at least every 48 hours regardless of how active the students are (Payne, 2021). Other suggestions include a mid-week post to reframe the discussion as stated above. Regardless of the frequency, coach interaction within the forums should be meaningful and promote student engagement and learning.

At times, there may be the need for the coach to have a crucial conversation with a student to help them understand their standing in the course and the need for improvement. Perhaps a student may currently have an unsuccessful grade, is lacking in participation, or may not be making positive changes based on previous constructive feedback. Grenny et al. (2023) outlines the importance of crucial conversations that can be frightening, frustrating, or life-altering should be managed delicately with precise planning to prevent unwanted consequences. Coaches need to feel confident in holding crucial conversations with students when providing constructive feedback, identifying unsuccessful performance, or discussing academic dishonesty. In addition, coaches need to feel the support and collaboration from faculty in conversing with students. Faculty and coaches should meet prior to implementing crucial conversations to prepare for the conversation. Developing an outline of the conversation including role play can increase the coach's confidence. Including the faculty in the conversation will portray a supportive relationship when meeting with students.

Coaches need to be vigilant and assertive in monitoring student participation and achievement in the course for any indication that the student is struggling. Once an issue is identified, time is a factor in meeting with students since course terms can vary from 5 to 16 weeks. To provide time for students to alter behavior or performance, the conversation must take place as quickly as possible.

When discussing an issue or situation with the student, it is important to carefully choose the content to discuss and to keep it simple. Simply discuss concerns and performance and behavior, as well as expectations for change in a safe environment (Grenny et al., 2023). Stay focused on the behavior avoiding contentious words and phrases; express your concerns with heart and show the student you care about them, their performance and success. Allow the student to respond and listen carefully and actively to their perception, reaction, and feelings. Then collaboratively, discuss how to move forward and develop an action plan for success with definitive milestones, deliverables, and consequences if there is no improvement. The coach must balance the need to maintain the course requirements with a compassionate understanding of the students' situation. (Ruben et al., 2021).

Understanding the Student Perspective of Communication from the Coach

When communicating with students, it is vital to use a lens of how they will perceive the message and ensure it is clear and understandable. Recognizing that the students are often juggling multiple responsibilities with school and this may influence their perception of any communication should impact all your interactions with students. In addition, as outlined with crucial conversations previously,

communicating difficult information in a caring manner is imperative to ensure students feel that you truly want to help them learn and succeed.

COMMUNICATION APPLICATION PRACTICES

The following samples allow faculty and coaches to explore implications for practice and application of communication strategies. The first example minimally meets the expectation of completing the task and the second is an example of excellence in providing the information. The communication examples include faculty welcoming a new coach to a course via email, faculty to coach weekly email, a welcome announcement for students, grading feedback, response to a student concern, a difficult conversation with a student not participating and in jeopardy of failing, a difficult conversation with a coach who is not performing, and a difficult conversation with a faculty who is not supporting a coach. Following each set of examples is a short discussion of the differences between the examples related to effective communication strategies discussed in this chapter.

Faculty Welcoming a New Coach Email

Example 1

Hello Dr. Coach, welcome to DNP 001. The term starts Monday; can you meet next week to go over the course and I can answer your questions. Attached is the syllabus.

Let me know when you can meet next week, and we will cover the course expectations.

Dr. Faculty.

Example 2

Hello Dr. Coach, welcome to DNP 001, Role of the DNP Leader. My name is Dr. University Faculty, and I lead DNP 001. I look forward to working with you! The term starts in two weeks; do you have any availability to set up a meeting via Zoom next week to review the course and discuss expectations and how we can collaborate? If you send me your available dates and times, I will check my calendar and send you a meeting invitation for a time that works for both of us. I have attached the syllabus for your review, please let me know if you have any initial questions. Do you need copies of the required textbooks? Please let me know if you need them and I will get them for you. I have the course set up in

the learning management system and have invited you to the course so you can start reviewing the modules. I have a placeholder for your bio, could you please send me your bio, and I will add it to the course.

Do you have any questions or need anything to get started? Again, I look forward to working with you.

University

Example 1 is very brief and lacks detail about the course, textbooks, and any expectations. It was also sent very close to the start date of the course, adding to the stress of the coach. The nonintentional message is one of a busy faculty who seems to not have time to be bothered with the details. Example 2 has a completely different tone. The language and detail are welcoming and display a sense of caring towards the coach. The faculty provides details about the course by including the syllabus and entering the coach in the course in the LMS. The coach is asked about needs related to the course in general and whether a textbook is needed. An offer to meet with the coach the week before the course opens is made giving the coach the opportunity to review the content and ask questions before the students have access to the course. All of these actions by the faculty show respect for and provide support for the coach.

Faculty to Coach Weekly Email

Example 1

Hello Dr. Coach, we move into week 6 this week. Be sure to be in the discussion board with students at least 3 days, last week you were in the discussion board, but only on one day with one student. This week you need to grade the Module 5 discussion board and the role paper. Please use the grading guidelines.

Let me know if you have any questions.

Dr. Faculty.

Example 2

Hello Dr. Coach, can you believe we move into week 6 this week? This week the students learn more about the role of the DNP prepared nurse as an educator and they have the discussion board to apply the concepts.

These courses move very quickly, and it is easy to get behind. Please be sure to check and be present in the discussion board at least 3 days posting on student's initial posts with comments elaborating on their posts, sharing your experience and knowledge, asking thought provoking questions, or providing additional resources related to the topics. Last week you were only able to participate on

one day, but if you could be engaged with the students 3 days this week, that would be wonderful. Students are motivated to participate when they see your presence and information in the discussion, it stimulates their critical thinking, deepens the discussion, and displays that you care about the students.

Last week, you did a great job grading the discussion board. You had a nice range of student grades, which shows individualized grading, and your feedback was very detailed. You clearly outlined where students performed well and where improvements could be made to promote continued learning. Thank you, I truly appreciate your dedication to student support and success.

This week you will need to grade the week 5 discussion board and the role paper. Remember, you have the grading guidelines in the coach resource module of the course that are very helpful with tips for grading.

Please let me know if you have any questions or need assistance and have a fabulous week!

Dr. Faculty

Again, this set of examples provides a contrast in the tone. Example 1 feels rushed with minimal information. The tone is accusatory and only the coach's lack of presence in the discussion board is addressed along with a 'to-do' list for the upcoming week. Example 2 conveys a more open and caring tone. The faculty acknowledges the fast pace of the course which allows the coach to feel the faculty understands the potential time management issues that the coach may be experiencing. Providing additional rationale for participation in the discussion board encourages the coach to interact with the students. Praise and appreciation for the coach's work to this point in the course promotes continued good performance. Ending the email with a reminder of upcoming assignments, available resources, and the faculty's openness to assist as needed displays a sense of caring and collaboration to the coach.

Student Welcome Announcement

Example 1

Hello and welcome to DNP 001. Be sure to review the syllabus and get started in Module 1. This week you have a discussion board assignment to complete; the initial post is due Thursday.

This is a busy course, but you can do it. Let me know if you have any questions.

Dr. Coach

Example 2

Hello and welcome to DNP 001. DNP 001 is your Role of the DNP Leader course. I am excited to share this part of your journey as you learn about the role you will soon be assuming.

Please watch this short video where I briefly review the course syllabus, modules and assignments. VIDEO Embedded here. (Closed Caption available)

Please review the course syllabus, as well as Modules 0 and 1; they include a lot of information you need to know to get started working in the course.

Here are a few important items to get you started:

- Within Module 0, there is a discussion forum where you can post questions throughout the course. It is also located on the Home page.
- You must complete Module 0 to access Module 1 or any of the other Modules.
- Students will participate in discussion boards each week. The discussion board will begin each week (starting with Module 1) on Monday at 12:00 a.m. EST and End on Sunday at 11:59 p.m. EST. Your initial post must be posted weekly on or before 11:59p.m. EST (midnight) on Thursday. You must then respond to your peer's initial post by 11:59p.m. EST on Sunday for the week. Please review the rubric for full criteria. In addition, posted on the discussion board is a short video where Dr. Faculty reviews the discussion board instruction and rubric and provides tips for success. It is very helpful, and I encourage you to watch it before completing your initial post this week.

On January 15th, at 6:00pm EST, I will hold a Zoom meeting to review the syllabus and course, as well as to answer questions. I will send the Zoom link information to you in an announcement on Wednesday. If you cannot attend the meeting, I will post the recording within the course after the meeting.

I look forward to working with you this term. The best way to contact me this term is via email (drcoach@university.edu). Do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or need assistance. I am here to help you be successful in this course.

This is a busy course but by reviewing the schedule, making a plan and taking it one bite at a time, I am confident you can do this!

Dr. Coach

Academic Coach

Online students can feel alone and overwhelmed at the start of a course. This could be the student's first online experience or cover content the student feels where they are weak. Example 1 conveys to the student that they should know how to get started in the course. Directing the student to complete the first assignment and commenting on how busy the course is could enhance the student's fear of failure. This could impact the student's decision to continue in the course or even the pro-

gram. There is no sense of caring for the student contained in the message. In stark contrast, example 2 conveys caring by welcoming the student and providing clear and concise directions on how to engage with the course. Providing a video about the course is a faculty immediacy behavior (audio and video cues) that students specifically identified as caring (Huber et al, 2023). Additionally, the synchronous meeting with a recording provides the opportunity for ‘face-to-face’ communication with the coach. As in example 1, the coach ends the email acknowledging the busyness of the course; however, the guiding information and encouragement in example 2 helps the students feel empowered to be successful.

Grading Feedback

Table 1. Example 1: Discussion Board Rubric

Criteria	Rating	Comment
Quality	4.5/5	
Assessment, Reasoning, Synthesis	5/5	

Total Points: 9.5

*Rubric criterion would be more detailed with expectations, but just the headings are listed for the scenario.

Assignment Comment:

Hello student, you did a good job this week posting in the discussion board and met the rubric requirements except there are a few APA formatting errors. Be sure to use your APA manual.

Let me know if you have any questions.

Dr. Coach

Table 2. Example 2

Criteria	Rating	Comment
Quality	4.5/5	Overall, great job meeting the rubric criterion for quality. You supported your discussion well with evidence for the intervention's impact on BP. However, there were a few APA formatting errors. Please note the following: -Credentials are not included in the reference list. -For articles in the reference list, the journal name and volume are in italics. -With 3 or more authors, the intext citation is the first author and et al. It would be like this: (author et al., date). -Intext citations for direct quotes require page or paragraph numbers.
Assessment, Reasoning, Synthesis	5/5	Excellent work meeting the rubric criterion for assessment, reasoning, and synthesis. Nice work answering the questions and applying the concepts for the week related to the DNP role as change agent. Your application of Lewin's Model with your DNP project was very well done.

Total Points: 9.5

*Rubric criterion would be more detailed with expectations, but just the headings are listed for the scenario.

Assignment Comment:

Hello Student, you did very nice work applying the concepts of the discussion board. You provided a great example of evidence-based practice that could be helpful with your DNP project. Your project of providing education for patients with hypertension and evaluating their blood pressure could truly make a difference in patient care and outcomes. The only area of improvement would be your adherence to the APA guidelines. Remember to check the APA Manual or utilize the online resources available to help. Good luck continuing to plan your project. Keep up the great work and let me know if you have any questions.

Dr. Coach

Academic Coach

Assignment feedback should be individualized, kind and constructive. Example 1 lacks all of these components. Note that there are no comments on how the student met the requirements or how to improve future submissions provided. There are no comments specifically related to the submission, so how does this student even know the coach read their submission? Example 2 gives the student specific details related to their work which demonstrates that the coach read their work. The feedback includes both praise and details about the good work and specifics related to areas for improvement. Including this level of detail conveys to caring to the student and provides clear direction for future assignments. This level of engagement with the student supports their continuing good work.

Response to a Student Concern

Example 1

Hello Student,

I received your email contesting the grade you received on the last discussion board assignment. Your submission did not meet the criteria to receive full points for the assignment.

Thanks,

Dr. Coach

Example 2

Hello Student,

Thank you for bringing your concerns regarding your grade on the last discussion board to my attention. I understand that it is upsetting when you feel the grade you received does not match the effort expended on the assignment. I have reviewed your submission related to the grading rubric provided. While your submission addressed the items in the prompt, there were deficiencies in the argument you made. You made several declaratory statements that were not supported by references or evidence. Support for your position in a discussion post or as a leader trying to change practice adds credibility to your argument. I found your argument was weakened by this lack of support. For future submissions, providing current evidence to support your position will strengthen your argument and demonstrate your mastery of the objectives of the course. I know you can do this, and I am available to support your success in this course.

Thank you,

Dr. Coach

Academic Coach

A common issue that arises for faculty and coaches is a concern raised by a student regarding their grades. Example 1 conveys a dismissive attitude toward the student's concern. The coach does not acknowledge the student's concern. Further, there is no reason provided for why the submission did not meet the criteria for full points. Example 2 utilizes the GUARD structure to respond to the student. Within the email the coach conveys an attitude of caring by acknowledging and trying to understand the student's concern. Information about how the student's submission did not meet the criteria for full points and ways to improve future submissions is clearly described. The coach maintains the rigor of the assignment rubric while also supporting the student's efforts. Closing the email with reassurance of the student's

ability to be successful and an offer of assistance provides the student with the sense that the coach has truly considered their concern.

Difficult Conversation – Student Not Participating or in Jeopardy of Failing

Example 1

Hello Student,

I noticed you did not meet the requirement to participate in the discussion board this week. As this assignment is 20 percent of your grade, a 0 means you will fail this course.

Please contact me to discuss this.

Dr. Coach

Example 2

Hello Student,

I hope all is well with you. I am concerned as you missed participating in the discussion board this week, which is unusual for you. The discussion board is a vital part of demonstrating your learning in this course. I would like to set up a time to discuss any concerns or issues you have encountered. As you know, discussion board participation is a component of your final grade. I would like to set up a time to discuss the way forward for you to be successful in this course.

Thanks,

Dr. Coach

Academic Coach

Difficult conversations need to be handled with a great deal of thought. In example 1, the coach is blunt and aggressive in the tone of the email. The coach does not inquire as to why the student missed the assignment, just makes a flat statement indicating that the student has no opportunity to be successful in the course. Example 2 conveys the coach's interest in determining why the student's behavior has changed. The coach requests the student to identify a time to discuss issues or concerns that may be impeding the student's participation. While the coach also acknowledges that the missed assignment will have impact on the student's grade, they are also expressing the desire to assist the student to be successful.

Difficult Conversation – Coach Not Performing

Example 1

Dr. Coach,

This is the second week that your grades for the discussion board were not completed in the required time frame. I cannot tolerate this and will be asking that you not be assigned to work in this course again.

Dr. Faculty

Example 2

Dr. Coach,

I hope all is well with you. I noticed that your grades for the discussion board were not recorded within the required time frame for the second week in a row. When we spoke last week, we agreed that you would have your grading completed prior to the deadline. I am concerned and hope that there is not any issue that is preventing you from completing the duties required in this course. I and the students appreciate all the work you have done for the students in this course and value you as a coach. Can we get together and talk about this? I am available anytime this afternoon or tomorrow.

Thanks,

Dr. Faculty

Addressing poor performance with a student is difficult, when the poor performance is from the coach it seems even more difficult. Remembering the points previously discussed on difficult conversations can be helpful. In example 1, the tone is accusatory, and the unintentional message is that the faculty has made up their mind regarding the coach's behavior. The faculty threatens the coach with not being used again in the course. The faculty does not ask for any explanation nor offer to meet with the coach to discuss the behavior or opportunities for improvement. In example 2, the faculty expresses concern for the coach and reaches out to identify any issues that are preventing the coach from completing their duties. Even though this behavior has been discussed previously, the faculty is open to discussing why it is continuing. Providing immediate availability to meet conveys the faculty is truly concerned about the coach.

Difficult Conversation – Faculty Not Supporting the Coach

Example 1

Dr. Faculty,

I have previously requested to speak with you regarding my concerns about a student's lack of participation in the course without any response from you. I have no choice but to give the student a 0.

*Thanks,
Dr. Coach*

Example 2

*Dr. Faculty,
I hope all is well with you. I know you are busy, and I hope my previous email on Monday about a student concern did not get lost in the system. I have not dealt with a student who has not participated at all in the course and would appreciate a short conversation with you about options. I am available all day tomorrow (Thursday) if you are available. I look forward to hearing back from you.
Thanks,
Dr. Coach*

A coach relies on support from the faculty to complete their duties. When this support does not occur, the coach may feel isolated and unsure of what to do next. Adding to this uncertainty is the power differential in the faculty-coach relationship. Example 1 has a hostile tone and would likely not be received in a positive way by the faculty. This could strain the relationship and result in further ineffective communication or even confrontations between the coach and faculty. Example 2 is assertive in the request to meet with the faculty yet also provides understanding of the potential of a missed email by the faculty. The response to this email would be very different from Example 1. The faculty would not feel attacked and likely would be appreciative that the coach did not assume they were ignoring their request for help. Ultimately the result would be an effective communication about how the faculty could be more supportive of the coach.

While reviewing the scenarios, faculty and coach can evaluate the difference between the minimal and excellent examples. As a new coach, which email would you wish to receive from the course faculty or which weekly email from faculty would be more beneficial and motivating? If you were a student, which welcome announcement would you prefer your coach to provide you? And which grading feedback would be most beneficial and conducive to learning? Examples of responding to a student's concern over their grade are beneficial as this is a common communication with a student. Also consider the impact of a well-constructed assignment feedback communication on the potential student email about their grade. Using effective communication can decrease the workload of the coach and the faculty. Difficult conversations are often avoided because we are not well trained on how to have them. Using the concepts described in this chapter, faculty and coaches can become more comfortable having them. Remember the keys are to be honest and clear, and to maintain an openness to discussion as a method to resolve the conflict. The examples provided were created with the intention to highlight

the differences. The first set of examples meet the intent of the communication; however, the information was minimal. The second set of examples also meet the intent of the communication, but it was more detailed, thorough, supportive, and motivating. These examples also convey a sense of caring for the recipient of the message. By following the best practices discussed in this chapter, coaches and faculty can improve the communication process.

CONCLUSION

Communication, although ubiquitous among humans, is often not as effective as we believe. Sharing and the transfer of information is impacted by multiple factors including social context, relational context, language, tone, and professional, personal, and cultural experiences. Communication in online educational settings is further impacted by the lack of non-verbal interactions. Throughout this chapter, multiple communication strategies were provided along with examples for faculty and coach to communicate with each other, as well as for the coach to communicate with students. When communicating, planning and perceiving the reception of the information from the person you are sharing information with is vital for positive interactions and mutual understanding. Not all communication is positive, and difficult conversations must be addressed. It is imperative to approach these conversations with forethought and honesty. The outcomes of difficult conversations can be improved by these strategies. Through the use of caring and effective communication techniques, faculty and coaches can develop and nurture a collegial, collaborative relationship that promotes faculty, coach, and student success.

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Chapter 9


Faculty–Academic Coach Collaboration: Cultivating Caring Relationships Behind the Screen

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to contribute to the existing body of research on faculty-academic coach collaboration in online education. It begins by exploring the current literature surrounding the concepts of caring, connectedness, and belonging in online learning environments. Following, strategies will be presented for successfully leveraging faculty-academic coach collaboration to cultivate an online teaching and learning environment grounded in human caring and one that promotes student connectedness and belonging. Finally, a case study will be presented that illustrates the real-world application of these strategies by a faculty-academic coach collaborative team in their ongoing journey to design, facilitate, and co-learn in an evolving online interdisciplinary course grounded in caring science.

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INTRODUCTION

Online learning continues to grow regardless of discipline, educational level, and public or private institutions. In 2022, 54% of college students (10.1 million) took at least one online course while 26% (4.9 million) took courses exclusively online (Welding, 2024). The shift to online learning in higher education has transformed the way students engage with course materials, interact with faculty and classmates, and navigate academic challenges. While online courses offer flexibility and convenience, they can also present unique obstacles for students, such as feelings of isolation and disconnection from the learning community. This can be especially challenging for those students who require additional guidance, motivation, and personalized support and for those enrolled in larger classrooms where students find it difficult to feel a sense of caring, connectedness, and belonging. In addition, large online classes, some of which are taught in an accelerated manner, can be overwhelming for a lone faculty member to manage, leaving them less time to focus on promoting a teaching and learning community grounded in caring science.

Online education is not a new concept; however, online enrollment and learning platforms have greatly increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning offers traditional and non-traditional students flexible options for education, with a strong focus on work-life balance and viewing students as self-entities with life experiences and challenges which have shaped them as individuals. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, there were substantial numbers of students in multiple programs (graduate and undergraduate) who were shifted from traditional classroom to online learning, oftentimes without having a choice. This placed new demands on students who may not have been accustomed to learning online or using a computer, which in turn led to increased anxiety and frustration. Faculty were also faced with increased class sizes and demands for grading, often resulting in lack of promptness in grading, engagement, and specific feedback to improve work.

Academic coaches have emerged as a vital resource in addressing this need, providing personalized support and guidance to students navigating online courses while also supporting faculty in achieving the educational vision for their course. In order to leverage the full potential of an academic coach, it is crucial for course faculty and academic coaches to establish and nurture a mutually collaborative partnership. This book chapter explores the utilization of the faculty-academic coach model to promote a sense of caring, connectedness, and belonging for online students and to cultivate a virtual environment which establishes the teaching and learning caring relationships that support learning. Successful strategies and lessons learned through one such faculty-academic coach collaboration grounded in caring science will be highlighted and include the perspective of a faculty member

and the academic coach with whom they have partnered during the evolution of an asynchronous, online interdisciplinary course.

Background

Online courses have become increasingly popular in recent years, offering students flexibility and convenience. However, students may struggle with self-motivation, time management, and gaining the academic skills needed for success in an online environment in which they feel isolated and disconnected from course faculty, other classmates, and content. Another area of concern in the field of online learning and design is a lack of focus on the affective or emotional aspect of the online learning environment. This encompasses the wide range of feelings, attitudes, and motivations that learners experience during online learning. It is critical that those involved in online education understand how student emotions can either enhance or hinder the learning process and how creating a positive and supportive online environment can improve student engagement and outcomes.

From the perspective of human caring, learning is a dynamic, lived human experience that occurs at the juncture of the authentic caring relationship that is created and lived by the faculty and students and the knowledge they cocreate (Hills & Watson, 2011). Sitzman and Leners (2006) define caring as: “one person mindfully and appropriately attending to the spoken and unspoken needs of another” (p. 254). Caring occurs “when the one caring connects with and embraces the spirit of the other through authentic, full attention in the here and now, and conveys a concern for the inner life and personal meaning of another” (Sitzman & Watson, 2014, p. 17). The concept of caring is considered foundational to the profession of nursing (Watson, 2008), yet is an important and necessary component of other healthcare professions and all online classrooms. Therefore, to accomplish this work, nurse educators and those in other disciplines must establish teaching and learning caring relationships in the classroom that are respectful, authentic, compassionate, and based on equity, trust, and safety (Cara & Watson, 2021). This caring teaching and learning environment in turn fosters students’ sense of connectedness and belonging.

The rise of online education in disciplines such as nursing has prompted an examination of what it means to convey and sustain genuine caring in online classrooms (Sitzman, 2016). It can be difficult for faculty to create learning experiences that encourage students to feel a sense of belonging and care (Plante & Asselin, 2014) and do so in a way that meets the needs of diverse students in online classrooms (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015). Online students have unique learning needs; however, faculty can impact the student experience by displaying caring behaviors to increase connectedness and accessibility, which provides a sense of caring from the student perspective, and results in student belonging (Cox-Davenport, 2014).

With enrollments increasing in online classrooms, establishing teaching and learning caring relationships with larger groups of students is an even greater challenge. However, the use of a faculty-academic coach collaborative model is one strategy that can help address this challenge. Academic coaches are highly qualified, experienced professionals who hold expertise in a specific academic discipline, such as nursing (White-Jefferson, Broussard, & Fox-McCoy, 2020). In the online environment, these professionals partner with course faculty to help ensure student engagement and success by providing one-on-one support, guidance, and encouragement and through strategic modeling of caring through faculty-academic coach-student interactions. The addition of an academic coach to an online classroom provides faculty with the support needed to facilitate learning at the faster pace demanded in accelerated courses and for larger groups of students, thus resulting in greater student satisfaction and achievement of learning goals. As with any healthy relationship, the one between a faculty member and their academic coach must include clear communication, mutual respect, well-defined roles and responsibilities, open collaboration, a commitment to student learning, and a shared vision of the course and the teaching philosophy guiding instruction. Therefore, it is imperative that educators and researchers investigate best practices for implementing and sustaining the faculty-academic coach collaborative educational model to support student belonging and connectedness and the creation of teaching and learning caring relationships in the world of online learning.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the world of online education, “caring”, “connectedness”, and “belonging” are interconnected and crucial for student success. Caring refers to a student’s perceptions of faculty caring as reflected through faculty attention and support. In turn, faculty caring fosters a sense of connectedness among students, making them feel valued and respected. This connection contributes to a stronger sense of belonging, whereby students feel they are accepted and part of the learning community. While these concepts are interrelated and contribute to student well-being, each has a distinct definition and is supported by research as being a vital component of successful education in all settings. Creation of an online caring learning environment by the course faculty and academic coach provides the critical foundation in which student connectedness and belonging can flourish.

Caring

Esteemed nurse theorist and caring science scholar Jean Watson (Watson Caring Science Institute, 2023; Watson, 2002; 2008; 2009) first defined caring within nursing as a transpersonal relationship that involves the nurse and patient in a way in which both are nurtured and experience growth. Her work has evolved to include the realm of online education, where her theory emphasizes the importance of fostering caring connections and relationships in digital spaces (Sitzman & Watson, 2017). Another nurse theorist and researcher known for her work in the area of caring science, Kristen Swanson (2018) defines caring in her theory as a nurturing way of relating to a valued other towards whom one feels a sense of commitment and responsibility.

Within educational settings, the concept of “caring” often refers to a student’s perceptions of faculty caring. Researchers in the area of caring in education have proposed several definitions of online caring presence, including (a) faculty and students, mutually present and engaged, creating a connection promoted by the faculty’s affirmations and sensitive feedback in a safe environment for the purpose of student success (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Post et al., 2017); (b) intentional communication and actions designed to meet students’ actual and potential needs for human connection, learning, support, and respect (Jones et al., 2020); and (c) one person mindfully and appropriately attending to the spoken and unspoken needs of another (Sitzman and Leners, 2006).

Swanson (1991) identified five processes associated with the expression of caring that are especially relevant for educators, both in traditional and online learning environments (McKelvey, 2018). In applying these processes to online education, the faculty member conveys caring to the student in the following ways: (1) by *maintaining belief*, which reflects a faculty’s fundamental belief in a student and their capacity to get through a course; (2) through *knowing*, representing the faculty’s ability to perceive and appreciate the meaning that being in an online learning environment has in the life of a student; (3) by *being-with*, which reflects the faculty being emotionally present for the student – letting them know that they are not alone; (4) in *doing for*, which reflects all of time, energy, and encouragement that a faculty provides when supporting a student until they are able to feel comfortable with online learning and course content; and (5) through *enabling*, which can be thought of as facilitating a student’s passage through the course by fostering a caring teaching and learning environment (McKelvey, 2018; Swanson, 1991).

Previous evidence (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015) further suggests that caring science values can be applied to the faculty–student relationship; specifically, online nursing instructors have reported that student success, affirmations, and caring feedback were essential in creating transpersonal relationships with students (Post et al., 2017).

As digital and online interactions have become fundamental in nursing education programs and across other various professional contexts, it is crucial to comprehend how to best exemplify, instruct, convey, and uphold caring in online education. The comprehension and understanding of how to infuse caring in education is essential for preserving caring as a foundational value within nursing and other disciplines (Frangieh et al., 2024). Therefore, exploring the phenomenon of care in online learning is an important effort to bridge this gap and deepen our understanding of the role of emotions, specifically the feeling of caring and being cared for, in online learning (Robinson et al., 2020).

When applied to the online learning environment, faculty caring for and with students is about deliberately creating a virtual environment in which each person in the classroom community feels they have a safe place to teach and learn through the formation and nurturance of supportive relationships with their instructors and fellow students, where they feel valued and supported. This in turn fosters a sense of belonging and encourages academic success (Robinson et al., 2020). Several key actions proactively taken by faculty have been identified by students as being reflective of caring, and are reflective of the caring theories of both Swanson (1991) and Watson (2009). These include (a) intentional communication and actions; (b) meeting student needs; (c) fostering a sense of belonging; (d) promoting academic success; and (e) humanizing the online environment (Jones et al., 2022).

Intentional Communication and Actions

Intentional communication and actions in an online classroom involve faculty's thoughtful planning and deliberate efforts to connect with students, foster engagement, and create a positive learning environment (Jones et al., 2022). This includes establishing clear and open communication channels, using various tools to enhance interactions, and promoting a sense of community among students and the instructor (Khazanchi et al., 2022). Providing detailed feedback is another indicator to students of faculty caring. Previous research has shown that feedback was considered absolutely necessary in an online course where faculty and students do not "see" one another. This feedback was provided via course announcements, faculty participation in online discussions, video recordings, phone calls, and quizzes (Post et al., 2017).

Meeting Student Needs

In addition to providing clear and timely feedback, students perceive faculty as caring when they offer extra help and are flexible with course deadlines in order to meet the needs of individual students (Jones et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2022). This flexible approach conveys to students that they are seen by faculty as individuals,

rather than simply disembodied names on a roster (Post et al., 2017). This critical recognition by faculty of the humanity of their students and respect for their diverse support needs is one of the most prominent themes evidenced in the literature as reflecting faculty as caring individuals. When students perceive faculty care about their needs, they feel the transpersonal connection of which Watson has written (Watson, 2002; 2008; 2009).

Fostering a Sense of Belonging

When faculty take the time to create a safe and inclusive classroom environment in which students feel they belong and are accepted, they feel free to express their thoughts and ask questions. This engenders a sense of belonging in their students which allows for engagement with course faculty, fellow students, and the course content (Jones et al, 2022).

Promoting Academic Success

As facilitators of learning, faculty are expected to promote the academic success of their students. Faculty demonstrate caring in the virtual classroom by being invested in their students' learning and helping support them in reaching their full potential (Jones et al., 2022). Students appreciate it when faculty convey that they want them to be successful (Post et al., 2017).

Humanizing the Online Environment

Faculty caring for and about students begins with course design and organization (Jones et al., 2020). During this stage, faculty should be aware of diverse students' learning needs, present content in a variety of ways, provide guidelines and rubrics for course assignments, and set up the course for easy navigation and offer navigational aids (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Post et al., 2017). Faculty who personalize the online learning environment and make it more engaging by demonstrating empathy, concern, and respect for each student and a passion for teaching the course are also viewed by students as caring (Jones et al, 2022).

Additional Faculty Caring Behaviors

Other behaviors that evoke a sense of faculty caring among students enrolled in online courses have been identified. Timeliness of communication (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Sitzman, 2010; Sitzman & Leners, 2006) and various emotional responses such as affirmations (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015), empathy (Ch'ng, 2019; Sitzman,

2016b; Sitzman & Leners, 2006), and faculty expressions of confidence in students' ability to be successful (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Sitzman, 2010) have been identified as important. Frequent and caring feedback, faculty availability (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Sitzman, 2010; Sitzman & Leners, 2006), the development and presentation of an organized course (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Sitzman, 2010), setting of clear expectations (Sitzman, 2010; Sitzman & Leners, 2006), and the establishment of multiple methods of communication (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Sitzman & Leners, 2006) were additional best practices associated with caring in the online environment. Faculty's belief in "what I'm doing" (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015, p. 54), instructors' commitment to (Sitzman & Leners, 2006) and enthusiasm for learning (Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Sitzman, 2010), as well as faculty's efforts to create connections with students communicated caring in the online learning environment (Jezuit et al, 2020; Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Sitzman & Leners, 2006) as well.

Robinson et al., 2020 studied the concept of intentional design of online courses using a care-centered approach. Research participants discussed some of the actions and behaviors taken by online instructors that made them feel cared for. One important indicator which emerged was faculty presence, established through active participation on the part of course faculty, which modeled caring for students. Researchers concluded that modeling care happens through course design and student-centered versus course-centered teaching practices (Robinson et al., 2020). Another important indicator of faculty caring that was identified by participants was through dialogue such as course announcements and personalized communication with students via emails. In addition, timing was identified by participants as being a critical theme which referred to the amount of time it took for an instructor to respond to learner inquiries and questions as well as timing communication to provide additional support around course deadlines – a time of greater stress for students (Robinson et al., 2020). Finally, eliciting student feedback on course design and delivery emerged as an indication of caring through dialog in an online environment. When faculty give learners an opportunity to provide feedback on course design and delivery and whether it has met their expectations and needs, they are engaging in an open-ended dialog in an attempt to reach a mutual understanding of learners' experience in the course (Robinson et al, 2020).

Finally, Sitzman and Watson (2017) provide an overview of human caring theory with digital world applications and examples of online caring initiatives that range from individual to global. They note that the method or practice of "CyberCaring" promotes human dignity, civility, and a healing presence which overall role models caring and peace.

Connectedness

Connectedness is an important concept in online higher education (Trespacios, et al., 2021) which is defined as a student's sense of being part of a community, having meaningful relationships with the learning environment or with other learners, and a sense of belonging (Ahern et al., 2024; Leino et al, 2024). Traditionally described as a measure of a person's relationship to others, connectedness in online courses includes interaction among peers, faculty, and students, and inter-dependence of course participants to successfully complete learning objectives (Tseng et al, 2022). For connectedness to work, faculty and students must have meaningful interactions with one another (Jamison & Bolliger, 2020).

A sense of community, which is built through communication and collaboration and is connected to student engagement, is an important component to success of online students (Chaffin & Jacobson, 2017). Within online education, it has been suggested that a community refers to the mutual interactions and collective behavior directed toward the common goal of shared learning (Dolan et al, 2022). The connection between community and engagement is evident in the literature and supports the idea that by being part of a supportive focused academic community, students can engage in dialogue and reflection (Dolan et al., 2022). Faculty must purposefully design courses which cooperative learning occurs with specific goals in mind such that learning is improved for all students. If designed correctly, online courses can encourage peer interaction. When students have a sense of community, they understand the purpose of learning, can contribute, connect with other students, and feel a sense of owning their learning. Thomas (2012) outlined the essential elements necessary for creating a sense of community in an online course: (1) interdependence among members; (2) sense of belonging/connectedness; (3) recognition of membership; (4) trust/credibility in others and activities; (5) interaction based on tasks; (6) common expectations; (7) shared values and goals; and (8) overlapping histories among members.

It is important to understand connectedness as it can fundamentally impact academic performance and retention in higher education programs (O'Keeffe, 2013). Recent studies have shown a significant correlation between students' sense of connection and academic success in online courses and programs (Kim, 2011). Therefore, connectedness is an important component of online courses and programs for adult learners (Barbarick, 2013). Connectedness focuses on the external relationships and interactions that foster a sense of community within a classroom and can help students feel less isolated and more engaged with the learning process, which can lead to better academic outcomes. Connectedness is achieved when an individual experiences a sense of social relationship and integration (Hehir et al., 2021). Feeling connected increases the likelihood of student health and wellbeing

(Arslan, 2021) and academic success (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Felton & Lambert, 2020). Therefore, it can be inferred that feeling connected is an essential component of the student experience.

Connectedness and engagement are positively correlated with many educational outcomes, yet engaging learners in online learning is challenging (Wang, et al., 2023). Students enrolled in online learning report feelings of isolation, loneliness, and social and psychological distance (Hehir et al., 2021). This lack of connectedness in online classes refers to the feeling of isolation and disconnection students often experience when learning remotely, due to the absence of physical presence in a classroom, which limits their ability to interact with peers and instructors in a natural way, leading to a decreased sense of community and belonging compared to traditional in-person learning (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). Another common challenge facing online learners who do not feel connected in an online classroom is a lack of motivation and engagement with the learning process and course content. Without a connection with faculty and fellow learners, a student may find it difficult to stay motivated to complete their coursework. It is important to note that faculty also report feeling disconnected in online higher education compared to teaching in more traditional settings (Whitmore, 2024). This lack of engagement can result in some instructors neglecting the community building component of their online course since they do not see and interact with learners regularly (Berry, 2019).

Course structure, which encompasses both delivery methods and pedagogical choices, is a significant predictor of learner interaction, instructor presence, and student learning, engagement and satisfaction (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). Faculty have a role in creating a learning environment in which students feel connected. The online learning environment can promote connectedness and a sense of engagement for all participants, influencing the way in which faculty engage with students and students engage with fellow learners and course content (Cox-Davenport, 2014).

Merely forming discussion groups and providing reading materials, and assignments is not sufficient to promote deep and meaningful learning experiences. The relationship between faculty and student is extremely important for the students' success in most educational situations, including the online environment. Some of the factors identified that contribute to a lack of connectedness in online courses include poorly designed online learning platforms, lack of proactive efforts by instructors, and limited opportunities for social interaction and community building within the online environment (Li et al., 2022). Prior research highlights negative consequences associated with psychological remoteness or relational distance between faculty and students in a classroom environment (Singh et al., 2022). This also holds true for online environments where physical distance between faculty and students can further aggravate the situation.

Three components of engagement needed to foster a sense of connectedness in online classrooms are reflected in the Community of Inquiry framework, developed by Garrison, Anderson, & Archer (2000). The interdependent components of this model, which should be addressed during online course design, include social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Ahern et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2022).

Social Presence

Social presence pertains to the “level of interaction and connectedness among learners and teachers, fostering emotional expression, open communication, and the creation of a supportive learning community” (Ahern et al, 2024, p.e244). Researchers have emphasized the need to “humanize” online learning, whereby instructors make intentional efforts to enhance the extent to which students feel they are understood and perceived as a real person who is connected to the learning community (Bolinger et al., 2025; Li et al., 2022; Pacansky-Brock, et al., 2020). Humanizing learning includes the use of strategies and practices to incorporate students and instructors as social agents into the learning process and enable them to feel connected with each other (Pacansky-Brock, et al., 2020). This humanization of the online experience in turn leads to a meaningful and engaging learning experience (Garrison et al., 2000) and creates an environment in which students feel a sense of connectedness, trust, belonging, and comfort (Cobb, 2011).

Gallagher-Lepak et al. (2009) found that the emotional connectedness engendered through social presence was a crucial factor in setting the tone for feeling a sense of community, decreasing isolation, and building confidence. Creating a sense of social presence in which students feel connected and part of the learning environment is a challenge faced by faculty when teaching online classes (Plante & Asselin, 2014). Unlike traditional in-person classrooms where faculty utilize physical presence as a signal of their active involvement, instructors in an online environment must proactively participate in the course to show presence (Carstens & Worsfold, 2000). One factor influencing a successful online learning environment and social presence is faculty immediacy. Faculty immediacy refers to a faculty member’s verbal and nonverbal behaviors that reduce the perceived psychological and physical distance between them and students in a virtual setting (DellAntonio 2017). Recent research suggests that students are frustrated and express disappointment when faculty fails to establish presence in online classes (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). They feel that faculty do not care and report being isolated when faculty do not build stronger bonds in the virtual setting. On the other hand, students report feeling a greater sense of faculty presence when technology enabled tools are used to communicate in online classes along with higher levels of engagement when faculty include audio and video chats or live presentations using zoom or other web conferencing tools. Students also felt

connected when faculty posted regularly in online chat rooms, encouraged students to ask questions, and provided detailed responses on student course work. Clarity of instructions, faculty ability to use technology, and well written assignments led to improvement in quality of courses as well (Jaggars & Xu, 2016).

Faculty must understand the affective experiences of online learners and integrate both affective and cognitive aspects of learning into course design. Effective social presence and faculty immediacy in an online teaching environment allows learners to express themselves freely, build connections, and function as a cohesive group, rather than feeling isolated and fearful of posting incorrect positions (Reilly et al., 2015). Social presence assists in creating an environment of trust and open dialog that supports interaction, collaboration, and a questioning predisposition (Glenn, 2018).

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence focuses on intellectual aspects of learning and encourages critical thinking, problem solving, and active engagement with course content to construct meaning (Ahern et al., 2024). This includes introducing students to new ideas, concepts, or problems, guiding them to explore, integrate ideas, and propose solutions (Garrison et al, 2000). In addition, students who are cognitively present in a course are able to engage in higher-order thinking, meaningful interaction with content and peers, and active engagement with the learning materials. In support of cognitive presence, faculty must design, facilitate, and direct cognitive and social processes in online courses to produce meaningful educational outcomes. This includes breaking down complex concepts and assignments into more manageable pieces. Scaffolding of learning ensures that as students master one level, they have the confidence needed to advance to the next stage of their journey.

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence, the third element of the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000), represents the teaching role, and encompasses the design, delivery, facilitation, communication strategies, and feedback mechanisms to support student learning (Ahern et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2022). Teaching presence is experienced by students as direct instruction or through facilitation of learning. In the online environment, direct instruction refers to the need for faculty to create means to connect students and course material to promote learning, while facilitation of learning includes strategies to engage the student in the actual learning process (Cox-Davenport, 2014). This ability to connect with students virtually also builds a sense of being present for students when they need support. It is important to

note that strong faculty presence can reduce feelings of isolation and help students improve their academic performance.

Belonging

The concept of belonging in regard to online education refers to a student's subjective internal sense of being accepted, valued, respected, encouraged, and supported by peers and faculty in the academic environment (Allen et al., 2021; Bull et al., 2024; Lee & Robbins, 1995). Student belonging is not the result of predefined criteria, rather it's a feeling that is unique to each individual. A sense of belonging is crucial for motivation, engagement, and academic success, as it helps a student feel as though they have a place in the learning environment. (Bull et al., 2024). Within the ever-expanding online learning environment, building connections by implementing relationship-rich education philosophies is considered more vital than ever (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Teacher-student and peer-peer connections are especially important in asynchronous online learning spaces (Reilly et al., 2015). Here, a low sense of belonging in students is associated with lower student engagement, which may be characterized by academic performance and retention but also incorporates social engagement (Hoi & Le Hang, 2021). Despite evidence of practices that support online students in university learning, promoting engagement and building a student sense of belonging continue to be a challenge. Lack of access to the physical campus means that the online experience and content must be engaging and interactive, purposely designed and intended for online delivery to retain all learners (Adlington et al., 2024; Goering, 2023).

Belonging has been linked to positive outcomes in higher education, including academic success (Kirby & Thomas, 2022), retention (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012), self-efficacy (Freeman et al., 2007), and engagement (Wilson et al., 2015). Although creating a sense of campus-level belonging is important, Wilson et al. (2015) argue that classroom-level belongingness has an even stronger impact on academic success, making it particularly important for classroom faculty to implement pedagogical practices that help students feel as if they are valued and respected members of the community. Research suggests that belonging is more likely to occur if students (1) feel as if their voices are “heard and honored” (Thiers, 2022, p. 13), (2) connect with one another, and (3) engage in repeated positive interactions with their instructor (Johnson et al., 2007).

STRATEGIES FOR LEVERAGING FACULTY-ACADEMIC COACH COLLABORATION

As evidenced from the previous literature review, the creation of caring teaching and learning environments that foster a sense of connectedness and belonging for online students is critically important. These caring teaching and learning environments in online courses begin with purposeful planning and course design. Therefore, faculty across all disciplines are encouraged to either create new courses or revise existing online course offerings with the following strategies in mind. For some professions, the impetus for this change is already present. As an example, in nursing schools across the United States, faculty and administrators are currently charged with revising their existing curriculum to reflect the new American Association of College of Nursing (AACN) Essentials (AACN, 2021). This is an ideal time to integrate caring practices into revisions that directly relate to the fundamentals of nursing, as caring is directly mentioned in several of the new essentials and throughout the document (Johnson et al., 2024). Fostering caring relationships, promoting caring for improved outcomes, and integrating compassionate care are specifically mentioned, and can easily translate to the faculty-student relationship in online learning. This correlates with previous studies indicating that instructor presence can directly impact caring environments in online learning (Li et al., 2022; Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Robinson et al., 2020). The following sections present strategies that support course design within the framework of caring science and which provide the foundation for faculty-academic coach caring and student connectedness and belonging in online learning.

Faculty-Academic Coach Caring in Online Classrooms

Caring communication from faculty and academic coaches is a crucial part of creating a safe and welcoming teaching and learning environment. Sitzman (2016) has shared several broad strategies that can help faculty and academic coaches convey this sense of caring and empathy in online courses. (1) Be fully present for students. Read their discussion board postings and assignments and provide feedback that reflects an appreciation and understanding of their position and work. (2) Create a warm, caring, and cohesive atmosphere by addressing students by name, using greetings and check-ins, offering encouragement, acknowledging student efforts and ideas, and demonstrating caring for students' life situations. (3) Acknowledge the shared humanity of all the individuals in the course – faculty, academic coach, and students. Faculty and academic coaches self-disclosure, such as sharing personal stories of their own time as students and challenges they overcame along the way, helps to inspire students and creates a feeling that they “know” the individuals teaching

the course as “real people”. (4) Attend to each student as a person and a valuable member of your class. Recognize their individual strengths, needs, experiences, and learning goals. (5) Regularly seek feedback from students on how the course is going. Ask for and provide clarification as well to ensure students understand important concepts and expectations for assignments. (6) Demonstrate flexibility, acknowledging your awareness that sometimes students have unexpected life events that prevent them from meeting rigid deadlines. (7) Acknowledge challenges and offer support and potential solutions to issues that may arise. (8) Approach each class with a measure of humility, recognizing the power differential inherent in traditional faculty-student interactions. Faculty and academic coaches must not only be givers of knowledge, but humbly demonstrate their ability to also learn from their students and the interaction of each community of learners.

Microlevel strategies to enhance faculty and academic coach online presence and caring behaviors have also been identified by Zajac et al. (2021) which fall into four broad categories. (1) Provides timely communication: Faculty should strive to respond to student emails or phone calls within 24-48 hours. They should provide personalized and caring feedback, and provide students with reminders to keep them on track in the course. (2) Offers academic support and invests in student success: Faculty should provide students in the course with tips for success in the course and identify ways to reach the faculty and academic coach when support is needed. They should also send out a weekly overview summarizing important learning from the previous week and provide links to tutors, writing centers, and research librarians, and additional resources on topics that students found especially interesting. (3) Presents an empathetic presence with authentic communication: Faculty and academic coaches should find out student’s preferred names and use when communicating. They should post clarifying announcements for complex assignments or course content. (4) Be flexible as an instructor and demonstrate authentic communication and investment in the student throughout faculty-student or academic coach-student interactions: Faculty and academic coaches should be patient with beginning online students, providing necessary support and encouragement. They should also be open and transparent with students and admit when they make a mistake. When delays happen in grading due to unforeseen circumstances, faculty and academic coaches should communicate with students with an anticipated time frame for completion.

Fostering a Sense of Connectedness and Belonging

One key challenge facing online students is feelings engendered by a lack of community. Some of the negative emotions experienced by online learners, and best practices for combatting them, have been identified (Boettcher, 2013; Sitzman, 2010). Feeling alone in online learning is one issue experienced by students. To

combat this, faculty and academic coaches need to show their presences on the site frequently. When faculty actively interact and engage students, the class develops as a learning community, developing intellectual and personal bonds. If there are circumstances that will delay email responses or grading, such as travel for conferences, etc., that information should be proactively shared with students so they do not feel abandoned when they do not receive a response in the time frame they are expecting. Another feeling online students report is feeling anonymous. Therefore, faculty should seek to create a supportive online course community where students feel they have a place and contribute. Faculty-to-student dialogue can be promoted through a video course introductions and videos introducing each learning module. Faculty and academic coaches should also share their own personal introductions, and include comments on their teaching philosophy, educational background, professional experiences, including teaching background and research interests, and any personal information they might wish to share, such as hobbies, family, pets, etc. Weekly opportunities to meet with faculty during virtual office hours should also be posted as part of the course. Posting reminder announcements prior to specific due dates or recognitions of various holidays, such as Veterans Day, help students feel they are valued members of the class. In addition, provide students with summary wrap-up announcements following completion of specific modules or learning activities. Faculty can include key take-home points from the module or assignment, positive reflection on overall student submissions, as well as sharing their own perspective and additional insight they may have on the topic.

Not only is it critical to establish opportunities for faculty-to-student engagement, but it is also important for faculty to design courses in a way to encourage student-to-student engagement. Beginning the term with a personal introduction so that students have the opportunity to get to know one another is another important strategy. Students should be encouraged to share professional experiences and goals, personal information such as family and pets, a photograph, and in interdisciplinary courses, their program of study. Courses should also be designed with an open discussion board forum in which students can connect for questions, seek study buddies among fellow students, and share interesting resources they discover related to classroom assignments.

Yet another common feeling shared by online students is a fear of the unknown – they are often uncertain as to what to expect in the course. Share a set of clear expectations for students, including how to communicate and how much time students are expected to work in the course each week. In addition, let students know what support they can expect from the faculty and academic coach. Providing exemplars of various assignments as well as rubrics to guide assignment preparation by students and grading by faculty and academic coaches is another way to reduce uncertainty.

Finally, online students, especially those who are new to virtual classrooms, often experience trepidation as they begin a course. In order to reduce student anxiety, it is crucial that faculty and academic coaches be familiar with course content, assignments, and any technology that students are being asked to use. After the first few weeks of class, it is helpful to ask students how they feel the course is going or if there are any questions they might have. This informal feedback can allow faculty to make modifications to improve the students' experience or to provide additional support. It is also important to continuously remind students to contact faculty privately if they have any concerns or if there are extenuating circumstances that are preventing the student from full engagement and participation. Remind students that you and the academic coach are there to support them and will help them address any challenges that might arise.

According to Boettcher (2013), community building in an online classroom should be equal parts social, cognitive, and teaching presence. In addition to the previously provided evidence-based approaches for building connectedness, social presence, and a sense of community in an online class, other strategies for building community have been proposed by Boettcher (2013). (1) Faculty and academic coaches should role-model appropriate netiquette and respect when communicating with students and one another. (2) Assign relevant learning activities designed to relate to the student population's profession, work setting, or interests. (3) Prepare discussion posts that invite questions, discussions, reflections, and responses. (4) Focus on content resources, applications, and links to current events and examples that are easily accessible from learner's computers, rather than requiring numerous textbooks. (5) Combine core concept learning with customized and personalized learning. This means that faculty and academic coaches identify the core concepts and competencies to be learned in a course and then mentor learners through a set of increasingly complex and even customized projects applying these core concepts. Many online learners within degree completion programs are working professionals. Supporting these learners with their professional goals that are closely linked to the competencies of a course and even beyond the course parameters is a win-win for the learners individually and as a class. (6) Plan a satisfying closing experience and ending activity for the course. A well-designed ending of a course provides opportunities for reflection and integration of useful knowledge. Presentation of culminating projects to fellow classmates, faculty, and academic coaches allows students to find pride in completion of the course and satisfaction in their accomplishments, especially if final projects are the result of completion of smaller class assignments spaced throughout the course.

It is important for faculty and academic coaches to create a sense of safety and predictability in their online classrooms. Evidence-based recommendations have been made to support student connectedness and belonging (Robinson et al., 2020;

Singh et al., 2022). (1) Establish clear routines and guidelines during course design. Building on the concept of backward course design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006), plan and begin your class with the end in mind. Identify what you would like your students to gain by the end of the course and then ensure the appropriate content and activities are embedded into the course to allow students to obtain the desired outcomes. The use of standardized templates for course design, rubrics, and course calendars helps students feel courses are more manageable. Construction of a detailed syllabus that includes detailed expectations and responsibilities for faculty, academic coaches, and students, as well as standard class processes helps students feel safe and supported. Instructional design teams in colleges or universities are an invaluable resource for faculty to draw upon when designing caring-centered online courses. (2) Provide opportunities for interaction. Actively encourage online discussions, collaborative activities, and include virtual engagement opportunities throughout the course. Include opportunities for students to find commonalities with one another. For example, when instructing RN to BSN students, faculty might ask students to post their area of nursing practice, years of experience, and future professional goals as part of an introductory discussion board (Reilly et al, 2015). (3) Utilize technology strategically. Leverage online platforms such as Canvas and Blackboard to facilitate interaction, collaboration, and support. Include discussion forums for non-course related discussions, course and technology questions, and introductions. Signal the importance of peer-to-peer interaction by assigning grades to community-building exercises such as students' posting of their pictures and interesting professional and personal information. Finally, it is vitally important that all faculty and academic coaches engaging in online education receive training to enhance their technological skills and competence. Research has indicated that many educators teach an online course without previous online teaching or learning experience and with minimal faculty development; therefore, faculty development needs to go beyond basic information technology (Martin et al., 2018; Mastel-Smith et al., 2015; Oducado et al., 2022; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020). Online faculty need to seek support and acquire appropriate pedagogy and course design skills. Faculty development and skill level greatly influence the quality of online programs, and faculty need to feel confident and competent when using technology. As mentioned previously, when faculty or academic coaches struggle with the use of the same technology they are asking their students to use, or when links provided for accessing course materials do not work, this results in increased student anxiety and frustration. (4) Recognize and celebrate accomplishments. Provide a discussion board forum in which students, faculty, and academic coaches are encouraged to share good news – either professional or personal accomplishments. This positive reinforcement and recognition can boost student morale and a sense of belonging. In addition, faculty and academic coaches should not only reach out privately to individual students who are missing

assignments with a student alert, but they should also contact students who excel on a specific assignment in the form of congratulatory kudos. (5) Be mindful of the unique needs of online learners. Acknowledge that online learners may have different needs and preferences than traditional students. For example, faculty and academic coaches teaching in online RN to BSN programs must be mindful of the fact that some of their students are newly licensed as nursing professionals and are therefore not only completing online coursework, but also juggling the demands of a new career (Reebals et al., 2022). (6) Include examples of completed work so that students are able to see what is expected of them. This reduces uncertainty and supports students' sense of comfort and safety.

Ahern and colleagues (2024) have developed the CONNECT framework which can be used to build social presence and connectedness in online learning. This framework outlines strategies to coincide with each letter of the acronym. "C" stands for *communication* that is responsive and supportive. Students are encouraged to include all teaching staff, such as faculty and academic coaches, in their correspondence in order to elicit timely feedback, while faculty and academic coaches endeavor to respond to student communication within 24 hours. "O" stands for *optimal* online presence, meaning that students have a wide range of methods for engaging with content, classmates, faculty, and academic coaches. "N" represents *nurture* educational and professional growth. Faculty achieve this by creating online course content that is well designed and scaffolded. Student assessment is constructively aligned and allows opportunities to demonstrate both educational as well as professional growth. The next "N" represents fostering of *networking* opportunities. Course instructors provide students with orientation and preparation materials early and then encourage them to network with peers and members of the teaching team. "E" stands for *engaging* communities of learning. Teaching staff proactively use evidence-based strategies that reflect teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al, 2000). In addition, online course content is designed by academics with expertise in the discipline's knowledge that is taught in the course. The second "C" stands for *contemporary* and authentic content. Faculty and colleagues work collaboratively to ensure online content undergoes periodic review so that it reflects the most current evidence and meets the needs of the student cohort. Content and assessments are authentic to the profession such that students are able to directly apply learning in their practice or professional roles. Finally, "T" reflects *timely* and effective feedback for learning. Faculty and academic coaches who are grading assignments provide timely feedback that is considered essential and supportive of learning and development (Ahern et al., 2024).

Strategies for promoting cognitive presence in online classrooms include the use of (1) asynchronous online discussions in which learners are encouraged to share ideas, ask questions, and respond to each other; (2) video communication

utilizing recording to foster a sense of connection and facilitate interaction; (3) active learning activities that guide learners through the phases of practical inquiry, such as problem-solving, case studies, and culminating projects that build over the length of the course; (4) self-selected topics which allow learners to explore areas of interest to them and then share those resources and ideas with fellow classmates; and (5) a mix of various resources, learning activities, and assignments. Faculty and academic coaches can also support cognitive presence for students by helping them make connections between the online class, course assignments, and their field of work/expertise.

Finally, there are specific strategies that faculty and academic coaches can leverage in order to promote teaching presence in online classrooms. Teaching presence is achieved by thoughtfully designing the course, facilitating discourse among participants, providing direct instruction, and providing constructive feedback to learners. The establishment of a strong teaching presence is best achieved through the faculty and academic coaches' creation of an online persona (Cox-Davenport, 2014; Jones et al., 2020; Martin, et al, 2018). Strategies for conveying a caring persona include personal greetings and closings and the use of first names in online communication with students. In addition, utilizing strategies that reduce the distance between faculty, academic coach, and students can be accomplished through the use of narrated PowerPoints, video introductions to learning modules, and providing module overviews at completion. Sophisticated facilitation of asynchronous discussions is another way in which faculty and academic coaches can establish a strong teaching presence. Anderson et al. (2001) summarized discussion guidelines in five areas: (1) identifying areas of agreement and disagreement to help reach consensus and understanding; (2) encouraging, acknowledging, and reinforcing contributions; (3) fostering a climate for learning; (4) drawing in students and fostering discussion; and (5) assessing the efficacy of the discussion. When a student perceives that these practices are taking place, they report feeling more engaged with the community and report learning more (Shea et al., 2006).

CASE STUDY

The following paragraphs present a case study which explores the implementation and effectiveness of faculty-academic coach collaboration in an online classroom. This case study includes insight from an experienced nurse educator and researcher with over twenty-three years of teaching experience in higher education and an expert academic coach who will share their reflections on the evolution of their 12-year partnership and their interdisciplinary course which has provided a space in which each has grown both professionally and personally.

Background

As part of the evolution of a traditional RN-to-BSN program to an online offering in a larger urban Midwest university's college of nursing, faculty were called upon to translate their varied years of in-person teaching experience into the virtual classroom. In addition to shifting learning to a digital platform, classes were accelerated, moving from 14-week to 7-week offerings that covered the same content, but with larger enrollments of students spanning the United States drawn from the population of registered nurses prepared at the associate degree level who wished to earn their baccalaureate degree. Program faculty received extensive training in online education methods and partnered with instructional designers to prepare their assigned courses. While tremendous planning went into this effort, no one was prepared for the increased classroom sizes, need for rapid turnaround in grading and responses to student emails, and very real faculty overload. Everyone was overwhelmed – faculty and students. This need led to the adoption of the faculty-academic coach educational model, which paired trained academic coaches hired through a contract with an outside organization with the course faculty – a decision that in this course led to what can only be referred to as a “match made in heaven” – a faculty-academic coach partnership grounded in caring science and guided by a shared teaching philosophy and course vision that has evolved over the last twelve years.

The online course being presented in this case study is unique, in that it is an interdisciplinary offering, drawing students from across the university at both the undergraduate and graduate levels who come together in a safe virtual classroom to explore the social determinants of health and factors contributing to health issues impacting members of vulnerable and marginalized populations in the United States. In this course, students spend seven weeks engaged in collaborative, asynchronous online learning guided by an experienced faculty member and expert academic coach as they complete five course modules. The following discussion will illustrate the translation of some of the previously described strategies for creating a caring teaching-learning online environment in which students experience faculty-academic coach caring, connectedness, and belonging. It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that none of the strategies and timelines described in the following sections would be possible in classes which range in size up to 130 students were it not for the faculty collaboration with a supportive, conscientious, and caring expert academic coach. It truly takes a village to care for online students!

Evolving Course Design

In designing this course, the Understanding by Design (UbD) (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006) framework, which depicts a backward course design approach, was used. The faculty assigned to the course described in this case study completed this entire process when developing the original course, and then again when adapting it to the online environment. Over time, the course has evolved, growing from a traditional face-to-face class open only to undergraduate nursing students, to an online offering which enrolls both undergraduate and graduate students from across the university, including those from nursing, pharmacy, social work, and public health. In addition, many of the students enrolled in the course are RN-to-BSN students who are nursing professionals drawn from across the country, thus expanding the boundaries of the classroom beyond the physical university. Therefore, while the overarching course objectives have remained the same, content, teaching strategies, learning activities, resources, and assessments have been revised to meet the needs of these diverse interdisciplinary learners. Most recently, revisions have been made in order to better align the course with the current AACN Essentials (2021). In making each of these revisions, and any periodic course updates, the faculty and academic coach have collaborated based on their lived experience of facilitating the course in partnership for the last 12 years.

The UbD (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006) framework describes three stages for curriculum planning. In stage 1, faculty identify the desired results of the course. Questions to guide the planning process include: (1) What should students know, understand, and be able to do upon course completion? (2) What essential questions or topics will be explored in-depth and provide focus to all learning? Important knowledge and skill objectives, targeted by established standards, are also identified in Stage 1. This stage is critical, because often a course covering a specific subject area has more available content than can be reasonably addressed within the limited time frame of an academic term. It is challenging for faculty who are experts to refrain from including all of the content they are passionate about in a course that falls in their area of expertise! However, by pre-determining faculty teaching and student learning end goals, it is easier to prioritize the information that you will be covering.

Stage 2 of the UbD (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006) framework asks faculty to determine assessment evidence. Important questions guide faculty course design in this stage: (1) How will we know if our students have achieved the desired results? (2) What evidence will we need to collect to demonstrate student understanding and their ability to apply or transfer their learning in new situations? Assessment evidence needs to reflect the desired results identified in Stage 1.

Finally, in Stage 3 of the UbD (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006) process, faculty plan learning experiences and instruction. Guiding questions for this stage include: (1)

How will we support learners as they engage with important ideas and processes presented in the course? (2) What activities, sequences, and resources are best suited to accomplish our goals? It is important to remember that lectures facilitate learning at the lower end of the taxonomy, while discussions, problem-solving, writing and other more interactive teaching strategies tend to facilitate higher-order learning processes and lend themselves to greater student engagement, especially in online courses. Once course content, learning activities, and assessments have been determined, it is recommended that faculty prepare their syllabus and course calendar while working with instructional design experts in order to build out the online course.

Nurturing the Faculty-Academic Coach Connection

In order for any faculty-academic coach partnership to flourish, each member of the team must feel seen, heard, valued, respected, and cared for. This provides the foundation of trust that is a critical element needed to create a caring online teaching and learning environment. During the initial meeting between the faculty and academic coach, we discussed our nursing background, teaching philosophy, values, goals, communication preferences, expectations of one another, and the responsibilities each would have in the course. We also shared information from both our professional and personal lives in order to establish that human connection spoken of throughout this chapter. Each of us was surprised and delighted to learn that our approach to nursing practice, teaching, and life are grounded in human caring. The bond forged during that first meeting and each time this course has been taught has only grown. This has allowed for seamless communication and support of one another, and our students, especially at times when either of us was faced with professional or personal events that prevented us from being fully engaged, such as traveling to a conference, attending a wedding, the birth of a grandchild, or sadly, the loss of a beloved pet. Thus, students are not only provided with education in how to care for others, but they witness the faculty and academic coach model that caring through their interactions with each other. A successful faculty-academic coach relationship leads to positive student outcomes which in turn create better outcomes for the students in the course, and those for whom they provide care.

Fostering Caring, Connectedness, and Belonging Behind the Screen

The faculty-academic coach team teaching this course proactively incorporate strategies beyond course design to further convey a sense of caring and empathy. Both have received substantial training in online teaching pedagogy, thus allowing

them to easily navigate the online environment while guiding students in gaining those same skills. An initial welcome to the class is posted in Canvas as a course announcement that is also distributed to each student via email a few days before the start of classes. This email orients students to the course and discusses its evolution and the caring-centered pedagogy guiding its creation and facilitation. Students are also introduced to the course faculty and academic coach, with information provided on their lengthy collaborative relationship. In addition, the faculty member has created a Welcome Video in which they provide students with an overview of the course, learning activities, assignments, expectations, responsibilities, and anticipated outcomes. Introductory videos are also created by the faculty for each of the learning modules. These videos address module topics, learning activities, and assignments, with tips and supportive guidance provided for each.

The course is opened to students a few days prior to the official launch of the term in order to allow for review of the syllabus and course schedule and posting of any questions in a Course Questions discussion board. Classroom policies and procedures are also addressed in the syllabus in order to reduce any uncertainty. Finally, the syllabus describes the teaching philosophy of the faculty-academic coach team, and provides a customary addressing expectations for classroom civility, mutual respect, and caring needed to foster a classroom climate of supportive learning. This customary is based on the faculty's own experience being a student in several non-caring classroom environments in which the faculty chose to ignore disrespectful behaviors and language. Establishing this non-negotiable expectation for interpersonal communication is especially important given this is a course in which sensitive topics are discussed in a classroom comprised of a faculty, academic coach, and students from diverse backgrounds, some of whom have been or currently are members of the vulnerable populations being discussed. Students are reminded that at any given time in the life of an individual, they may well experience vulnerability. Over the years, countless students have identified this specific course strategy as being an important part of providing a safe space in which to learn and one in which they feel free to share their personal reflections and honest reactions to the topics discussed.

As part of their beginning journey of learning, students are asked to participate in a welcome activity in a "Getting to Know You" discussion board forum. In this space, students share where they live, the program in which they're enrolled, previous and current experiences that are relevant to the course, and future professional goals. Finally, they are asked to share any personal information they wish, as well as the name they wish to be called and their preferred pronouns. As founding members of the caring online learning community, the faculty and academic coach also begin each new class term with self-disclosure, sharing our pictures and unique stories as nursing professionals and educators, as well as former students – including the

challenges both have faced along the way in various programs and the fact that the faculty member is a graduate of this same RN-to-BSN program. In addition, we share a glimpse into our personal lives, including family, pets, and hobbies, thus helping our online students feel as if they “know” the people behind the screen who are facilitating their learning. Finally, during this initial phase of community-building and prior to the start of course work, the faculty and academic coach also engage in cultural humility, reminding students that we are not simply givers of knowledge in the course, but also fellow learners, gaining new knowledge and growing through our interactions with students.

Prior to reviewing any posted learning resources, students complete an initial reflective assignment to determine base-line knowledge of the course topics. Students are asked to keep a copy of this submission for their final course assignment, in which they are asked to look back and reflect on their growth in knowledge and understanding over the 7-week term. As the course continues, so does the faculty-academic coach caring through regular greetings and check-ins, responses to student emails within 24-hours if not sooner, and prompt grading of assignments within 24-48 hours of submission. Modules consist of small point-value formative assignments to determine if knowledge on a topic is forming, while a final summative assignment with a greater point-value is included at the end of each module to allow students to demonstrate their competency in the specific topics covered in the module. Students needing extra support at each level of assignments are provided additional resources and coaching and allowed to resubmit assignments. A 7-week course tends to move quickly, resulting in some students falling behind; therefore, prompt, specific, and meaningful feedback and encouragement has been a key component of the success of our students and our relationship as faculty and academic coach.

General clarifying information is regularly posted for any topics which are causing confusion, as evidenced by multiple student emails or as a result of the team’s experience teaching the course for twelve years. Based on the course calendar and suggested due dates for completion, the faculty member posts a summary announcement at the completion of each module. In this announcement, they provide an overview of the important concepts addressed in the module as well as additional insight gained during her years of teaching the course, changes that have occurred over time surrounding the topic areas, and perspective gained over her many years conducting research aimed at promoting the health of vulnerable and marginalized populations. Finally, the announcement highlights important and interesting points made by various class members, while keeping their identities confidential. These summaries are noted by students in all of the course evaluations as being instrumental in furthering their understanding and retention of information presented.

Each student who enters this classroom is unique; they come from diverse backgrounds with different lived experiences, are enrolled in different professional

programs, face different personal challenges, and often are at very different points in their lives and careers. However, every student is valued as an important member of the learning community, a person with feelings, emotions, and an entirely separate life outside of the classroom. While their diversity is celebrated, all are reminded of the unifying goal that leads each to be a member of the classroom community - the desire to gain knowledge and skills that can support their efforts toward a meaningful and impactful career in which they make a difference in the lives of others.

Throughout the term, the faculty-academic coach team offer tremendous flexibility and support to meet the individual needs of the students enrolled in the course. These include private meetings to provide encouragement and guidance for learners new to the online environment, referrals to the writing center, introductions to directors of graduate programs to which students are considering applying upon graduation, supplementary learning materials, or empathy to those students experiencing life challenges. In order to reduce student anxiety over due dates, all assignments are given suggested dates for submission; however, the only firm due date is the end of the term, by which time students should have all assignments submitted. Even then, for any students experiencing extenuating circumstances, an Incomplete Agreement is completed which affords them extra time in which to be successful.

Promoting Social, Cognitive, and Teaching Presence

To create a culture of connectedness through social presence, our course includes the formation of additional group spaces beyond the Getting to Know You discussion board. One of these, Study Buddy Connections, uses a discussion board format to connect students with fellow classmates in order to receive additional social support from peers while navigating the course. Students in this space often ask one another questions about course topics and projects or request professional advice regarding preparation for licensure exams, career choices, and employment opportunities such as travel nursing. Another student social space is a Sharing Good News and Celebrating Achievements discussion board in which students, faculty, and academic coach are encouraged to post professional or personal accomplishments, achievements, honors, or recognitions. Some examples celebrated in the past include passing their licensure exam, earning certification, presenting at a conference, being hired into a new position, getting engaged/married, having a new baby, adopting a new puppy or kitten, publishing an article or book chapter, or receiving an award or grant funding. One student recently shared that they had completed a marathon, including describing their training. This led the student to connect with other runners in the course. Providing students with an outlet allows them to connect on a

personal level, which is a critical component in fostering an environment of caring and setting students up for success behind the screen.

Additional strategies are embedded in our course which allow students to feel they are part of a caring teaching and learning community. All assignments and learning resources are designed to relate to our students' chosen profession, work setting, and interest, and include exemplars from previous classes as well as detailed rubrics to guide assignment completion. As part of each module's learning activities, students are asked to complete a specific discussion board posting addressing questions regarding the concepts and topics that have been presented or in response to an assigned case study or viewing of media. In addition, they are required to provide substantive and supportive responses to at least 2 classmates postings. The faculty-academic coach team continuously monitors the discussion board postings, contributing their own responses and insight, thus indicating teaching presence. As part of the first module which addresses community level vulnerability, students are asked to describe two communities close to them with which they are familiar – one that is thriving, and another which faces health challenges. In this way, students learn about many different communities across the country, and gain additional insight into their fellow classmates, thus promoting social presence and the building of community. As they complete assignments, students are also encouraged to share any interesting resources they find with their classmates, faculty, and academic coach. In this way, students are encouraged to recognize the value they bring to the course.

Beginning with the first course module, students are asked to identify a specific vulnerable population that holds significant meaning to them, whether it is one with whom they work, volunteer, or even one with which they personally identify. This population serves as the basis for all of the small assignments completed by a student during the course, while each of these assignments contributes to the larger culminating project – an academic poster presentation that is shared with their classmates as part of a virtual poster celebration of learning at the end of the term. Students are encouraged to celebrate the hard work of their classmates by placing comments under each poster they review, while individual students are recognized for and take pride in becoming experts on their chosen topic. This approach allows each student to pursue a customized project that holds special meaning for them. One final assignment consists of a reflective essay in which students are asked to review their initial assignment completed on the first day of class and then reflect on any changes in their understanding of the topics presented as a result of participation in the class. In addition, they are asked to identify any assignments or learning activities that they found most beneficial, or those which they felt did not hold as much value for them, thus affording the faculty and academic coach with the opportunity to engage in continuous quality improvement of the course. These final essays are always a time of deep satisfaction for the faculty-academic coach

team, as they convey significant learning and growth of students as professionals and caring human beings. When an especially touching essay is graded by either the faculty or academic coach, they will pass it along to their counterpart to inspire ongoing commitment and dedication to this caring teaching and learning endeavor.

Final Course Reflections

Even though students spend just a short seven weeks learning with us, each semester we are able to successfully form a community of caring within our online course. Over the years, we have shared with students and cared for them during many of their own personal and professional experiences. We have supported students who had family members, parents, or loved ones pass away, those who had accidents, fell ill, or were hospitalized during class, those who gave birth, got married, quit their jobs, switched jobs, made significant career changes, moved into leadership positions, moved out of leadership positions, and made cross-country moves just to name a few. We have counseled those experiencing homelessness, domestic violence, or food insecurity – some of the very topics we cover in our course. Additionally, we have celebrated big and small victories with our students, from weddings to births to graduations to promotions and more. We have also shared empathy, compassion, and tears during their times of loss.

The faculty-academic coach partnership described in this case study has led to great success as evidenced by student evaluations of the course, faculty, and academic coach and in final reflective essays and email messages of gratitude sent to our team. Student often report a significant change in their attitudes and beliefs, and their ability to translate those same lessons beyond our classroom through the use of person-centered language and expressions of empathy and care in their respective fields or programs of study, whether it be nursing, social work, graduate or undergraduate, and in their personal lives as well. Students relate specific examples from the course to their practice and describe ways in which they are modeling the caring they experienced in the classroom when engaging in personal and professional encounters outside the classroom. Finally, as each term closes, students voice a recognition that we, as healthcare professionals, can have a tremendous and lasting impact on members of vulnerable and marginalized populations, not just through application of our technical skills, but also by simply seeing and treating those individuals seeking their services with caring and respect and as fellow human-beings, people with feelings and emotions, individuals who want to feel cared for and valued. We firmly believe these student learning outcomes are the result of the caring online teaching and learning environment we have cultivated in our course and the sense of connectedness and belonging experienced by our students.

CONCLUSION

A sense of community, caring, and connectedness is integral to the success of learners in any educational environment. The increase in online education and new technology has necessitated a reconsideration of course design and instructional skills needed to successfully facilitate student engagement and learning behind the computer screen. One of the main challenges regarding online education involves the need to create a virtual community in which learners establish and maintain connections with the faculty, academic coach, other learners, and the content.

Despite the inherent challenges of online education, establishing a caring online teaching and learning environment is possible. Faculty-academic coach collaborative partnerships are a readily available resource that can be leveraged to meet the needs of online learners. These valuable educational teams are uniquely positioned to design, facilitate, and guide both social and cognitive classroom processes that create teaching and learning environments grounded in caring science which foster online students' sense of connectedness and belonging.

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ADDITIONAL READING

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Coach: An educational professional who partners with course faculty to provide student and faculty support that enhances teaching and learning outcomes in an online environment.

Belonging: A student's feeling of connection and acceptance within a classroom setting, where they feel safe, valued, respected, and have a sense that they contribute to the group.

Care-Centered Pedagogy: The theory and practice of teaching that emphasizes building relationships between faculty, academic coaches, and students, to foster a supportive and nurturing learning environment.

Caring: The authentic and purposeful beliefs, actions, and communication of faculty to meet the needs of their students for human connection, learning, support, and respect and facilitate their learning and growth.

Cognitive Presence: The extent to which online learners can actively engage in critical thinking, actively exploring ideas and applying new knowledge.

Community: A group of individuals in an online course who connect and interact through a digital platform based on shared values and a sense of belonging that fosters respect, safety, communication, learning, and collaboration.

Connectedness: A student's sense of being connected to the faculty, academic coaches, other students, and the content in an online course.

Engagement: An online learner's active involvement and authentic interaction with the learning process, including content, peers, faculty, and academic coaches.

Faculty: An education professional who designs, delivers, facilitates, and evaluates student learning in an online environment based on evidence-based practices.

Online Learning: A form of education where instruction and learning is accomplished through the leveraging of technology to deliver content, facilitate communication, and assess learning.


Social Presence: The ability of learners to perceive themselves and others as real people within the online environment, and sense connection, interaction, and engagement.

Teaching Presence: The online faculty and academic coach's deliberate actions and strategies that promote meaningful learning experiences for students. This includes designing, facilitating, and guiding both social and cognitive processes to achieve educational goals.

Chapter 10


Student, Faculty, and Coaches' Perceptions and Experience of Academic Coaching in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores student, faculty, and online academic coaches' perceptions of academic coaching in large online courses at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), one of the nation's largest Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs). Our goal was to examine their experiences to gain insights into the effectiveness of

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academic coaching and identify areas for improvement. The results have implications for institutions looking to enhance student support services and promote student success in online learning environments.

FACULTY COACH PERCEPTIONS

Online education has become a significant component of higher education, with colleges and universities offering more degrees and courses every year (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). As the demand for online courses increases, colleges and universities can expect higher student enrollment in individual courses. How might this impact the overall quality of education? While taking online courses offers many opportunities, the quality of a course can significantly impact the learner's experience. Wright et al. (2023) identified four major themes in high-quality online learning: effective course design, the role of instructors in facilitating quality experiences, student engagement, and quality assessment. However, class size is another factor known to affect the quality of an online course.

High enrollment in online courses can lead to higher dropout rates, less student engagement, lower attendance, and low instructor performance (Lowenthal et al., 2019). The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) is committed to maintaining the highest standards of excellence regardless of the course delivery format. Because of this, the Division of Academic Affairs has set specific qualifications and expectations to ensure UTRGV's online, hybrid, and web-augmented courses meet quality assurance guidelines. In addition, instructors teaching large-enrollment online courses can request an academic coach or an online teaching assistant (TA) for instructional support needs.

Distance Education in UTRGV

UTRGV is at the southern tip of Texas, one of the fastest-growing areas in the United States. It has multiple campuses throughout the Rio Grande Valley region and is considered the second-largest Hispanic-serving institution in the nation. Distance education started at its legacy institutions, The University of Texas—Pan American and The University of Texas at Brownsville, in the late 1980s by integrating WebCT, an e-learning platform and online course management system designed to enhance traditional courses. In 2003, 80 online courses and 53 hybrid courses were taught with the free pilot Blackboard. Today, the university offers over 1,199 online course sections and 361 hybrid courses, which are supported by the Center

for Online Learning and Teaching Technology. The university offers various minors, certificates, and undergraduate and graduate programs online.

Online programs in UTRGV meet rigorous quality standards from external accrediting agencies such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges and The Quality Matters Program. The university also offers many online accelerated master's degree programs in business and management, education, health sciences and human services, and liberal and fine arts. Given the student demand for online courses, higher education institutions are looking for instructors willing to take on this challenge, and UTRGV is no different. There is no question that teaching opportunities for faculty have increased due to distance education, and there are advantages to teaching online. However, there is also enormous pressure for accountability and course quality. Online faculty face numerous challenges that go beyond technical issues. Literature on online teaching highlights challenges from managing time and workload to a lack of student engagement and the inability to interact and create personal relationships with online students (Kellen & Kumar, 2021; Na & Jung, 2021).

Teaching Large Online Courses

There are fully online courses in which one instructor can have 30 to 100 students enrolled depending on the discipline. Lowenthal et al. (2019) pointed out that online courses can accommodate hundreds if not thousands of students in a single course. In one study conducted by the same authors on faculty perceptions and experiences teaching high-enrollment online courses, faculty named two important challenges with teaching this type of course: finding the time to respond to students' questions and to provide prompt feedback. Hawthorne and Sealey (2019) suggested that the increasingly larger classes can lead to a lack of faculty engagement with students, increased stress on professors, and a poorer quality experience for students. The Center for Online Learning and Teaching Technology at UTRGV offers workshops to help faculty develop pedagogical methods to alleviate the challenge of teaching large online courses.

A significant aspect of large-enrollment online courses is the student's learning experience. Mohammed et al. (2021) found that students were more likely to report higher anxiety about their large-enrollment online college science courses compared with large-enrollment in-person college science courses. Among the reasons students identified were difficulty in paying attention and staying engaged, more difficulty in staying organized and keeping up with the online coursework, difficulty making connections with other students, and greater workloads and expectations (Mohammed et al., 2021).

The student learning experience is closely related to teaching and facilitation and is one quality dimension in online learning. In this regard, teaching and social presence become crucial in motivating students to engage with the course. Student engagement decreases when there is a lack of human connections that can motivate students. According to D'Alessio et al. (2019), student performance in online courses benefits when instructors build a supportive community with students and facilitate their interactions around course ideas. In large-enrollment online courses, faculty might need support to focus more on teaching and providing feedback; therefore, many higher education institutions have turned to academic coaches to support online faculty.

Student Satisfaction and Engagement in Online Learning

Student satisfaction in online courses, as described by Gunawardena et al. (2010), “informs how e-learning is received, accepted, and valued, and attests to the quality of the learning experience” (p. 209). According to Rahmani et al. (2024), student satisfaction is a significant factor, as it has been identified as a strong contributor to student dropout rates in online courses. Behr et al. (2020) also found that negative student satisfaction is a predictor of attrition that negatively impacts students' motivation and their willingness to invest time in studying. Several factors can impact student satisfaction, including the relevance of the course, peer and instructor interaction, the ability to apply knowledge, course design, and learner support systems that provide academic guidance.

Student engagement is described as the extent to which a student is intentionally involved in and outside the course activities. It has been recognized as a critical determinant of educational outcomes, including satisfaction, persistence, and achievement. Several studies, including Chakraborty and Muyia Nafukho (2014), have evaluated engagement strategies and found that positive learning environments that include community building, timely feedback, and technology integration can create engaging online learning experiences. At the same time, student satisfaction is not only an outcome of engagement but also an influencing factor in sustaining high levels of engagement throughout online learning experiences (Rahmani et al., 2024).

Defining Academic Coaching

Academic coaching appeared in higher education in a new role called the academic success coach in 2000, and since then, hundreds of institutions have created in-house coaching services (Robinson, 2015). Robinson defined an academic success coach as a university representative who meets one-on-one with a student, focusing on the academic and overall collegiate student experience. At UTRGV, an academic

coach helps students navigate obstacles they may encounter during their academic career and provides guidance that will help students with in-person and online classes. However, within the context of online learning- which is the focus of this paper, another group of ‘academic coaches’ exist that assume a distinct support role, one that extends beyond traditional coaching and responsibilities associated with an online graduate assistant. Academic coaches, being addressed in this paper, are third-party instructional support staff who hold at least a master's degree in their respective disciplines and assist faculty by grading, providing student feedback, and, depending on instructor expectations, communicate with students via email and discussion forums.

Online academic coaching is one type of institutional support that has proved essential for students in online courses due to the unique support online students need (Tuiloma & Graham, 2024). For example, in a study by Hernandez and Garcia (2022), most graduate students in an accelerated course felt positive about having an online academic coach. Students interviewed commented that they appreciated that academic coaches were available to answer their questions and clarify assignments. In addition, students expressed the importance of having someone advocate for them and be “another set of eyes” that gave them expertise and best practices for the topic.

Nevertheless, Hernandez and Garcia found some challenges that students perceive when faculty work with academic coaches: the availability of the academic coach, lack of communication between the academic coach and the student, lack of collaboration between the professor and the academic coach, and concerns over the quality of the feedback. These findings shed light on the importance of exploring the role of academic coaches in increasing learning effectiveness and student satisfaction in online courses.

Academic Coaching for Online Learning in UTRGV

UTRGV legacy institution The University of Texas—Pan American began its academic coaching program for accelerated online programs in 2011. In the fall of 2015, which was the inception of UTRGV, the demand for online courses increased exponentially, leading to a long wait list of students. A solution brought about by administrators was to increase maximum enrollment in courses and make available the use of academic coaches. To ensure quality, they required faculty that received academic coach support to receive training in large online courses as well as complete the Quality Matters Applying the QM Rubric certification. They tasked the Center for Online Learning and Teaching Technology with offering a comprehensive

workshop to help faculty manage large online courses that also addressed how to utilize academic coaches and what academic coaches' roles and responsibilities were.

Academic coaches at UTRGV are employed by Instructional Connections, LLC, which provides instructional support services to colleges and universities. Today, over 30,000 students across 27 different universities have access to academic coaches and the services they provide (Letchworth et al., 2023). UTRGV faculty can receive assistance in managing a large online course by requesting an academic coach if the course has a minimum capacity of 75 students or more and has at least 60 students enrolled for undergraduate courses and 45 students enrolled for graduate courses. Faculty received assistance in managing their large online courses by requesting an academic coach through the Instructional Connections form created for UTRGV. This allowed faculty to focus their time and resources on the delivery of the course curriculum. Academic coaches are subject matter experts with at least 14 years of experience and a minimum of a master's degree. At UTRGV, online academic coaches are extensions of the professors and they operate under their direction.

In online courses, academic coaches typically support instructors by assisting with grading, engaging in asynchronous discussions, maintaining communication with students, addressing student inquiries, and troubleshooting course-related issues. The extent to which academic coaches are utilized varies by faculty member and is determined at the instructor's discretion. Some instructors prefer to serve as the primary point of contact for students, while others delegate this role to their academic coaches. Instructors also decide which assessments coaches will grade and define the level of coach participation in course discussions. This flexibility underscores the adaptable nature of the academic coaching model within the institution. For further discussion on how coaches are utilized, refer to the chapter by Forman and Sanchez in this book.

Academic Role in Student Achievement

The conceptualizations of academic coaches and their roles in student achievement in virtual learning environments hinge upon three main categories: their self-perceptions and designated responsibilities, the distinction they draw between their duties and those of the instructor of record, and the extent to which they consider themselves of benefit in the online classroom and the challenges they may face. Armstrong et al. (2021) found that TAs contribute significantly to student engagement and interaction in online education. Comparably, Talbot et al. (2015) stated that TAs' presence and support can positively impact student satisfaction, conceptual understanding, and overall learning outcomes in virtual courses.

Comparing Responsibilities: Instructors of Record Versus Academic Coaches

The instructor of record contributes subject matter expertise and pedagogical guidance in teaching the course content. According to Talbot et al. (2015), the instructor is responsible for course content delivery and assessment. In contrast, the academic coach assumes a supportive role, facilitating communication between faculty members and students. Coaches enhance the learning experience by offering detailed feedback and differing perspectives due to their real-world work experience. The academic coach also provides additional support by assisting faculty with administrative tasks as assigned.

Although there is limited research on academic coaches' perceptions of their work in online courses, there are studies that contribute to the knowledge about TAs in online environments. Tuiloma and Graham's (2024) analysis of the online TA's role in student engagement offers an insight into the disconnect between program expectations, instructor expectations, and TAs' expectations about what an online TA's role should be. Based on the online TA's interviews, Tuiloma and Graham suggested that online TA training is vital to understanding the guidelines for the role. In a study by Armstrong et al. (2021), most online TAs reported always feeling achievement in helping students learn. The same research reveals that TAs positively impacted student satisfaction with the university. Taken together, these results suggest that online TAs or online academic coaches enhance the online teaching and learning experience by supporting faculty and students alike.

The finding that faculty and student satisfaction determine online student success has led to a growing interest in academic coaching to help online instructors facilitate large courses. Armstrong et al. (2021) suggested that the addition of TAs in online education is a potentially useful strategy to improve student learning outcomes, scale, access, and faculty and student satisfaction. With more instructors teaching large online courses and requesting academic coaches across programs in our institution, we wanted to explore student, faculty, and coaches' perceptions of academic coaching within the context of online higher education. By examining the experiences of students, faculty, and academic coaches, we can gain insights into the effectiveness of academic coaching and identify areas for improvement. The results of our study have implications for institutions looking to enhance student support services and promote student success in online learning environments.

RESEARCH STUDY METHODOLOGY

Given the significant number of online faculty collaborating with academic coaches at our institution, we aimed to explore their experiences working together while also gaining insights from students and coaches themselves. To achieve this, our study employed a mixed methods design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative elements directly into the survey. This approach allowed us to capture a comprehensive understanding of the interactions and perceptions among these groups.

The qualitative component provided the flexibility needed for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, beliefs, and concepts, making it particularly suitable for understanding the nuanced perceptions of academic coaches and the experiences of students and faculty. Meanwhile, the quantitative component enabled us to gather specific, measurable data.

Surveys were distributed to three distinct groups: students, faculty, and academic coaches. These surveys included both closed-ended (quantitative) questions, which collected specific information such as demographics and Likert scales of perceptions of coaches, and open-ended (qualitative) questions, which allowed participants to freely express their feelings and experiences. Some of the survey questions were derived from the instrument developed by Gatlin and Alexander (2010), chosen for its relevance due to their previous work on student and faculty perceptions of clinical TAs.

By combining these methods within the survey, we were able to obtain a rich, multifaceted understanding of the dynamics between online faculty, academic coaches, and students.

Study Population

The study examined students, faculty, and academic coaches at a Hispanic-serving institution in South Texas, focusing on fully online courses that utilized academic coaches during the fall 2022 and spring 2023 semesters. For this study, the faculty and students surveyed were limited to those in large online courses that used academic coaches. These courses came from various disciplines, including political science, history, chemistry, biology, health sciences, education, and business.

In fall 2022, 31,559 students were enrolled at UTRGV; among these students, 90.9% identified as Hispanic, 60.3% were female, and 39.7% were male (Strategic Analysis & Institutional Reporting, 2023). In that semester, UTRGV employed 1,901 faculty, of which 1,340 were full-time faculty and 561 were part-time faculty. In addition, there were 164 instructional TAs. Of those, 322 professors, 251 associate professors, 276 assistant professors, and 888 other faculty were ranked. Regarding tenure status, 522 were faculty tenured, 215 were tenure track, and 1,164 were non-

tenure track. Regarding ethnicity, 810 faculty were of Hispanic or Latinx origin, 560 were White or Caucasian, 13 were American Indian/Alaska Natives, 231 were Asian American or Asian, 56 were African American or Black, 168 were international, 62 were unknown, and one was multiracial. The diverse composition of the faculty and students surveyed allowed for a comprehensive exploration of student perceptions and experiences related to academic coaching within online education.

Instruments

To measure both student and faculty perceptions of academic coaches, we employed the survey from Gatlin and Alexander (2010). We modified the survey by replacing “clinical TAs” with “academic coaches” to better fit our study context. The perceptions survey included 11 statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Additionally, we expanded the survey to include open-ended questions to delve deeper into the perceptions of academic coaches.

To measure student satisfaction, we selected the survey developed by Bolliger and Wasilik (2012). This instrument was chosen because it focuses on large online courses and thus closely aligns with our study. Although Bolliger and Wasilik's study primarily targeted undergraduate students, their previous research included graduate students as well, making the instrument suitable for our diverse student population. It consists of 20 questions formatted on a 5-point Likert-type scale, also ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), that addressed four key student satisfaction areas: instructor behavior, learner characteristics, course design, and outcomes.

For the survey provided to academic coaches, we created our own survey that included demographic questions, both open-ended and closed-ended questions, and items designed to capture the perceptions of academic coaches and their experiences supporting students. The survey questions for academic coaches were designed to gather comprehensive information about their demographics, professional backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions.

Data Collection

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, invitations were extended to students via their institutional email accounts and course announcements on the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS). These invitations included details about the study and a link to the survey instrument. Similarly, only faculty who utilized academic coaches were invited to participate using their UTRGV email accounts. The survey included a question asking for consent to participate; if participants did

not agree, the survey would immediately close. Only those who consented continued with the questionnaire. Academic coaches were invited to participate through their business email accounts. Responses were collected via Qualtrics, managed by the institution, which requires UTRGV credentials to access the data.

RESULTS

Sample Population

The following sections provide an overview of the population sampled, including students, faculty, and academic coaches.

Students Surveyed

Of the 313 students who completed the survey, only 233 responses were deemed valid after data cleaning. The gender distribution of this group was predominantly female, accounting for 84.5% of the population, while males represented 13.3%. The majority of respondents were aged 18–24, comprising 63.9% of the sample. Among the respondents, juniors made up 36.05% and sophomores 21.46%, indicating that these two groups were the most represented. In terms of ethnicity, a significant majority identified as Hispanic or Latinx. Detailed demographic characteristics of the student responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Student, Faculty, and Academic Coach Responses

Demographic	Student (N= 233)		Faculty (N=50)		Coach (N=227)	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Gender						
Female	197	84.55%	34	68.00%	187	82.38%
Male	31	13.30%	16	32.00%	38	16.74%
Non-binary	3	1.29%	0	0.00%	1	0.44%
Decline to state	2	0.86%	0	0.00%	1	0.44%
Age						
18-24	149	63.9%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
25-34	36	15.5%	3	6.00%	28	12.33%
35-44	30	12.9%	11	22.00%	66	29.07%

continued on following page

Table 1. Continued

Demographic	Student (N= 233)		Faculty (N=50)		Coach (N=227)	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
45-54	9	3.9%	12	24.00%	74	32.60%
55-64	4	1.7%	20	40.00%	40	17.62%
65-74	1	0.4%	0	0.00%	18	7.93%
75 years or older	0	0.00%	1	2.00%	1	0.44%
Non-Declared	0	0.00%	3	6.00%	0	0.00%
Race						
African American or Black	4	1.72%	3	6.00%	47	20.70%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Asian American or Asian	3	1.29%	5	10.00%	6	2.64%
Hispanic or Latinx	211	90.56%	21	42.00%	10	4.41%
Middle Eastern or North African	0	0.00%	2	4.00%		0.00%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
White or Caucasian	13	5.58%	19	38.00%	158	69.60%
An Identity Not Listed	2	0.86%	0	0.00%	6	2.64%
Classification or Title						
Freshman	26	11.16%				
Sophomore	50	21.46%				
Junior	84	36.05%				
Senior	28	12.02%				
Graduate Student	45	19.31%				
Faculty Rank						
Assitan Professor			10	20.00%		
Assocaite Professor			12	24.00%		
Full Professor			9	18.00%		
Lecture			18	36.00%		
Non-Declared			1	2.00%		

Faculty Surveyed

Of the faculty members who participated in the survey, a diverse group was represented. The gender distribution included a mix of male and female faculty, with a

notable proportion identifying as female (68%) and male (32%). The majority of respondents were aged 55–64, comprising 40% of the sample. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of respondents identified as Hispanic or Latinx (42%). In terms of academic rank, a significant number of respondents were tenured professors (18%), while others were in various stages of their academic careers, including assistant professors (20%) and associate professors (24%). The faculty members came from a range of disciplines, reflecting the broad scope of the courses surveyed. Detailed demographic characteristics of the faculty responses are presented in Table 1.

Academic Coaches Surveyed

Of the total of 243 academic coaches that responded, 227 completed the survey. The majority of respondents were female (82.38%), with 16.74% being male. The majority of respondents were also found to be White or Caucasian (69.60%) and within the 45–54 age group (32.60%). More detailed demographics can be found in Table 1. Out of this number, 38 are at UTRGV, including 10 men and 28 women, who were involved in 21 distinct undergraduate courses, several of which had multiple sections over a 16-week semester. These coaches possessed advanced academic qualifications, including 16 Master of Science degrees and seven Master of Arts degrees, with specializations such as international affairs, public health, etc. Additionally, there were seven Doctor of Philosophy degrees and three Juris Doctor degrees among the coaches. To enhance the generalizability of the findings, coaches from institutions other than UTRGV were included to obtain a broader range of feedback.

Quantitative—Student Perceptions of Academic Coaches

The survey results, as shown in Table 2, provide a comprehensive overview of student perceptions of academic coaches in large online courses. A total of 233 students participated in the survey. These findings suggest that the use of academic coaches in large online courses positively impacts student engagement, performance, satisfaction, and perception of course quality.

Table 2. Student Perceptions of Academic Coaches

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
I feel that the use of academic coaches in my course has substantially increased my participation in the class.	15.0%	14.2%	24.9%	24.5%	21.0%
In my opinion, the use of an academic coach in this class has substantially increased the time I spend on the course.	15.0%	14.6%	32.2%	19.3%	18.9%
In my opinion, the use of academic coaches has substantially improved my performance/learning in this class.	13.3%	14.6%	22.7%	25.3%	24.0%
Generally, I feel that my student colleagues and I are more satisfied with this course, overall, as a result of the addition of an academic coach.	12.9%	12.0%	25.3%	22.7%	26.6%
I feel that I am less likely to withdraw from a course when an academic coach is assigned to assist with the course.	16.3%	14.6%	20.2%	26.6%	22.3%
In my experience/opinion, students receive quicker and more consistent feedback when an academic coach is used in a course.	11.2%	9.4%	14.2%	24.0%	41.2%
In my opinion, academic coaches have improved the real-world relevance of courses in which they are employed.	12.4%	13.3%	29.2%	26.2%	18.9%
In my opinion, the use of academic coaches has allowed faculty to concentrate on improving course content.	9.4%	8.2%	21.9%	31.3%	29.2%
I feel that, overall, the use of academic coaches has resulted in better assessment techniques being employed in the course.	12.4%	8.2%	19.3%	28.3%	31.3%
In my opinion, the use of academic coaches in large enrollment classes frequently provides a better learning experience than do large enrollment courses without academic coach support.	12.0%	6.0%	18.5%	30.0%	33.5%
In my opinion, partly due to the use of academic coaches, large enrollment classes frequently provide a better learning experience than small classes taught by the faculty without academic coach support.	12.0%	9.0%	29.2%	22.7%	26.2%

Most students agreed (*somewhat agree* or *strongly agree*) that the use of academic coaches increased their participation in the class (45.5%), improved their performance/learning (49.3%), and resulted in better assessment techniques being employed in the course (59.6%). Moreover, 48.9% of students agreed that they are less likely to withdraw from a course when an academic coach is assigned, and 65.2% agreed that

students receive quicker and more consistent feedback when an academic coach is used in a course. In terms of course content, 60.5% of students agreed that the use of academic coaches has allowed faculty to concentrate on improving course content, and 45.1% agreed that academic coaches have improved the real-world relevance of courses. Finally, 63.5% of students agreed that the use of academic coaches in large enrollment classes frequently provides a better learning experience than large enrollment courses without academic coach support.

In terms of course content, 60.5% of students agreed that the use of academic coaches has allowed faculty to concentrate on improving course content, and 45.1% agreed that academic coaches have improved the real-world relevance of courses. Finally, 63.5% of students agreed that the use of academic coaches in large enrollment classes frequently provides a better learning experience than do large enrollment courses without academic coach support, and 48.9% agreed that large enrollment classes frequently provide a better learning experience than do small classes taught by the faculty without academic coach support, partly due to the use of academic coaches.

Perceived Benefits of Academic Coaches

Students were asked whether academic coaches were beneficial to them and their learning experience (see Table 3). The majority of students reported seeing academic coaches as beneficial (76.79%).

Table 3. Were Coaches Beneficial to Students?

	<i>Highly Beneficial</i>	<i>Beneficial</i>	<i>Somewhat Beneficial</i>	<i>Negligibly Beneficial</i>	<i>Not Beneficial</i>
Was the academic coach beneficial to you in your course learning experience?	22.32%	29.91%	24.55%	8.04%	15.18%

This question was then followed by asking students in what ways their academic coaches were beneficial; students were given the option to select more than one choice (see Table 4). The majority of students reported that coaches provided timely feedback (30.42%).

Table 4. Student-Perceived Benefits of Academic Coaches

How Academic Coaches Were Beneficial	Percent
The coach was supportive	11.99%
The coach provided timely feedback	30.42%
The coach provided prompt responses to questions	17.13%
The coach was helpful in clarifying course concepts	17.13%
The coach was helpful in getting through the difficult course content	8.39%
The coach was of no benefit	15.73%

Although students appreciated the timely feedback and the prompt responses to their questions, some students felt little support from the coaches, and 15.73% of respondents considered having an academic coach unbeneficial to their learning experience. In addition, when asked if coaches had met their expectations, only 21% responded they had fully met their expectations. Nevertheless, 41.6% of respondents considered that academic coaches had met their expectations.

Student Satisfaction With Their Learning Experience

In addition to student perceptions of academic coaches, we wanted to find out students' satisfaction with the course as a result of their overall learning experience. Table 5 presents the overall findings from this set of questions. Most students strongly agreed that they received timely feedback on tests and assignments (53.13%), the instructor was enthusiastic about the subject matter (53.33%), and they were happy with their overall grade (60.65%). Many students were satisfied with their ability to work on projects independently (63.56%), the relevance of assignments (63.11%), and the logical organization of course content (62.95%). In line with this, many students strongly disagreed that they were dissatisfied with their performance in the course (51.11%) and strongly disagreed that the instructor was not accessible (52.02%).

Table 5. Student Satisfaction Responses

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
I receive feedback on tests and other assignments in a timely manner.	7.59%	5.36%	8.04%	25.89%	53.13%
The instructor is not accessible to me.^R	52.02%	20.18%	11.21%	6.28%	10.31%
The instructor is enthusiastic about the subject matter.	9.33%	3.56%	11.56%	22.22%	53.33%
I am comfortable in the online learning environment.	7.11%	4.00%	7.56%	19.11%	62.22%
I am satisfied with my ability to work on projects on my own.	7.11%	3.56%	8.44%	17.33%	63.56%
My level of self-directedness in this course is sufficient.	6.22%	3.56%	11.56%	26.67%	52.00%
I am dissatisfied with my performance in this course.^R	51.11%	16.89%	10.67%	12.00%	9.33%
I feel connected with my peers, instructor, and academic coach in the course.	9.78%	11.11%	23.56%	27.56%	28.00%
Assignments (e.g., quizzes, tests) in the course are relevant.	6.67%	4.89%	5.78%	19.56%	63.11%
I am satisfied with the pacing of the course.	7.11%	4.00%	5.78%	26.22%	56.89%
I am satisfied with the level of effort this course requires.	6.67%	4.00%	9.33%	28.44%	51.56%
The organization of course content is logical.	6.25%	3.57%	8.93%	18.30%	62.95%
I can apply what I have learned in this course.	5.78%	4.44%	10.22%	22.67%	56.89%
My interest in the subject matter has increased because of this course.	6.67%	5.33%	15.56%	22.67%	49.78%
I am satisfied with my learning in this course.	6.25%	4.46%	6.25%	25.89%	57.14%
I will be happy with my final grade in the course.	4.63%	5.09%	9.72%	19.91%	60.65%

Qualitative—Student Perceptions

When looking at the qualitative portion of the survey, which provided a more in-depth insight into how academic coaches met and did not meet expectations,

the following themes emerged, separated by positive and negative experiences that expand on our previous findings.

Positive Student Experiences

Timely Feedback and Grading. As indicated in the closed-end portion of the questionnaire, many students appreciated receiving quick feedback on their assignments. This timely feedback helped them understand their mistakes and improve their performance in subsequent tasks. For example, a student reported, “When I would turn in a discussion, I received a grade and feedback the day after the deadline. It was incredibly useful compared to waiting days or even weeks to see what grade I got. By the coaches immediately grading my assignments, I would know how to do better on the next assignment.” Another student reported, “The academic coach assigned to me was always on time with submitting grades or giving feedback. It also gave me reassurance that, in case my professor couldn’t get back to me, I could always go to the academic coaches.” In relation to quality of feedback, those receiving good feedback valued it. A student reported, “The academic coach was a tough grader, so he made me take every assignment more seriously. The academic coach also gave clear guidelines/feedback regarding any missing points in our assignments.”

Availability and Responsiveness. Another positive theme that emerged related to the academic coach's availability and responsiveness. Students valued academic coaches who were readily available to answer questions and provide support. Quick responses to queries and consistent communication were highlighted as positive aspects. A student reported, “They always responded quickly and helped explain concepts and answered any questions I had.”

Support and Encouragement. Academic coaches who provided encouragement and support were seen positively. This included helping students stay engaged and motivated throughout the course. A student reported, “They encouraged me to participate in my own learning.” Another shared, “They provided positive feedback and encouragement; she also responded really quickly when emailed.”

Personalized Assistance. Some students felt that the academic coaches offered personalized assistance, which made them feel more focused and supported. A student reported, “They gave us feedback, and since we were broken into smaller groups with the coaches, it felt as if we had more focus within our smaller groups.” Students also valued their coaches’ shared personal experiences. A student stated, “They talked about their work and life experience, which was both relevant and interesting to the course.”

Negative Student Experiences

Clarity of Feedback. However, just as some reported having valued the feedback given by their coaches, some students reported that their coaches lacked clarity and understanding of the assignment or course content and were unable to provide clear explanation and guidance. Some students felt that the feedback from their coaches was vague, confusing, or nonexistent. Others reported that the feedback was not helpful in improving their performance. A student reported, “Feedback to questions asked was varied and not clear at times. Made it hard to understand what I was supposed to do in regard to the question I asked them.” Another student commented on the feedback, “I wish the coach was more aware of our subject and able to provide in-depth explanation of the subject. Rather, the coaches served as an unnecessary barrier between the professor and student.”

Lack of Communication and Involvement. In terms of communication, some students mentioned issues such as not having the coach’s email or not knowing about the existence of a coach until later in the course. A number of students reported that their academic coaches were unresponsive or did not communicate effectively. A student reported, “There was no communication or involvement.” Another shared, “My coach always referred me to the course professor.” It is important to note that some instructors prefer to address all questions and ask coaches to refer student questions back to them.

Administrative Focus. Some students perceived academic coaches as focused primarily on administrative tasks such as grading rather than providing meaningful academic support. A student reported, “The coaches, in my opinion, have only helped the instructors with grading.”

Overall, students who felt negative about the experience felt that the interactions with their coaches were superficial or impersonal.

Quantitative—Faculty Perceptions of Academic Coaches

Impact of Academic Coaches

A faculty survey was conducted to assess perceptions regarding the implementation of academic coaches across various aspects of course delivery and student engagement. Fifty faculty members participated in the survey. The results, as shown in Table 6, provide a comprehensive overview of faculty perceptions of academic coaches in large online courses. These findings suggest that while some areas have less agreement on the benefits of using academic coaches, there are notable areas where their use is perceived as highly beneficial for both course enhancement and student learning outcomes.

Table 6. Faculty Perceptions of the Impact of Academic Coaches (N = 50)

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Neither Agree nor Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
The use of academic coaches has substantially increased student engagement in my course.	2.00%	0.00%	0.00%	18.00%	38.00%	8.00%	34.00%
The use of academic coaches has substantially improved student learning/performance.	2.04%	0.00%	4.08%	20.41%	30.61%	10.20%	32.65%
The use of academic coaches has allowed faculty to concentrate on improving course content.	0.00%	0.00%	2.04%	4.08%	12.24%	10.20%	71.43%
Due to the use of academic coaches, large enrollment classes frequently provide a better learning experience than large enrollment classes that do not use coaches.	0%	0%	2.00%	4.00%	18.00%	6.00%	60.00%

The survey results indicate varied levels of agreement across the statements. For instance, 34% of respondents somewhat agreed that academic coaches have substantially increased student engagement in their course, and 32% strongly agreed that academic coaches have substantially improved student performance. A significant majority (70%) strongly agreed that academic coaches have allowed faculty to concentrate more effectively on improving course content and provided a better learning experience for students.

Appropriateness and Usefulness of Academic Coaches

The faculty survey conducted also assessed perceptions regarding the appropriateness and usefulness of the knowledge and experience reflected by an academic coach during interactions. The results are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Faculty Perceptions on the Appropriateness and Usefulness of Academic Coaches (N = 50)

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
The knowledge and experience that the academic coach reflected in your interactions were appropriate and useful.	0%	2%	4%	20%	74%

The survey results indicate that most respondents either agreed (20%) or strongly agreed (74%) that the knowledge and experience demonstrated by the academic coach

during their interactions were appropriate and useful. A small minority were neutral (4%), while only 2% disagreed with this sentiment. None of the respondents strongly disagreed with the statement. These findings suggest a high level of agreement among faculty regarding the appropriateness and usefulness of academic coaches.

Expectations of Academic Coaches

A faculty survey conducted also evaluated the extent to which an academic coach met their expectations. The results are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Faculty Expectations of Academic Coaches (N = 50)

	Had no expectations	Did not meet my expectations	Negatively met my expectations	Somewhat met my expectations	Met my expectations	Fully met my expectations
How well did the academic coach meet your expectations?	0%	2%	0%	8%	22%	68%

The survey results indicate that none of the respondents reported having no expectations or that their expectations were negatively met (0% for both categories). A small minority of respondents felt that the academic coach did not meet their expectations (2%). Some respondents indicated that their expectations were somewhat met (8%), while a larger proportion expressed that their expectations were met to some degree (22%). Notably, a substantial majority reported that the academic coach fully met their expectations (68%). These findings suggest a high level of satisfaction among faculty regarding the performance of academic coaches.

Qualitative—Faculty Perceptions

Based on the feedback provided, several themes emerged regarding how academic coaches met or did not meet faculty expectations in their courses.

Providing Support

Faculty satisfaction with their academic coaches is extremely high. Faculty find that their coaches help by giving them time to focus on course management and improvements: “The biggest benefit to the use of coaches is time. 1. More time for the instructor to use for course management and improvements. 2. Better turnaround time for student feedback.” Another faculty member commented, “They are very good at providing faculty with time to improve the online experience for students.”

Understanding of Course Concepts

Our best indicator that academic coaches are meeting instructors' needs is that faculty are requesting an academic coach for their courses every term. This reflects their satisfaction with the academic coaches' knowledge and experience with the subject: "I have utilized academic coaches that went through the course. They have a good understanding of the concepts of the course."

Better Course Assessments

Course assessments provide students with multiple ways to demonstrate progress in the course. One challenge in teaching large classes is to design courses with assessments that require constructive and personalized feedback. Having an academic coach helps instructors create courses with multiple forms of assessments. In this study, more than half of faculty indicated that having an academic coach helped them improve course assessments. One instructor advised others who teach large courses and accelerated courses to request an academic coach: "I would like to encourage faculty members who teach large classes and especially accredited operations professional classes to work with academic coaches. Doing so will help with reducing multiple-choice questions assessments."

Challenges of Working With an Academic Coach

Nevertheless, this working relationship is not exempt from challenges. While faculty mentioned being satisfied with the support provided by their academic coaches, some of them also felt that there is inconsistency in grading, especially when there is more than one academic coach in the course: "The biggest drawback with the use of coaches is the inconsistency of grading when more than one coach provides support within the course." Another challenge relates to the time academic coaches spend participating in class: "Most academic coaches have their jobs. It is not very realistic to expect a lot of coach participation in class other than grading of assignments."

Academic Coaches' Perceptions of Academic Coaching

Academic coaching in online learning has become a valuable support service in higher education. Academic coaches or online TAs have a valuable role in the online classroom since they address students' academic concerns and personal and motivational factors that impact learning outcomes. Even though many academic coaches reported that their main reason for doing the job is to make extra money, a

good percentage of them said that they enjoy interacting with students and developing experience in teaching. One interesting finding in our study is that 82% of online academic coaches are women. Another is that more than half of the respondents have experience teaching in higher education. This holds significant relevance because academic coaches with teaching backgrounds in higher education are more likely to understand the challenges of working with undergraduate students and use their expertise and experience in the classroom to assist them.

Perceived Barriers to Student Success

Understanding barriers to student success helps us implement effective interventions to improve retention and success in a course. In this regard, the most significant finding in this study is that academic coaches consider students' ability to cope with life situations or personal issues as the first barrier to success in the classroom. The second barrier is students' lack of awareness of support structures available to them. A possible explanation for this might be that the students working with academic coaches are undergraduates who are still figuring out the higher education system. A third barrier, which is just as important as the previous ones, is the lack of clarity from the instructor on course assignments. This barrier is related to the course design, which is vital for students to succeed. In summary, 95% of academic coaches observe students struggling in online courses, again, due to the first barrier they observe: life circumstances or personal issues.

Work Expectations

In our study, we asked coaches to identify basic expectations that they would have of faculty and that faculty would have of them going into a course. The responses, as depicted in Table 9, reveal that the predominant expectation of the instructors was to facilitate student learning through activities such as responding to emails and discussion forums and evaluating assignments. Twenty-six percent of respondents pointed out that they expect to receive clear expectations and instructions from the instructor of record. Academic coaches also saw themselves leveraging their subject matter expertise to help students.

Table 9. Academic Coaches' Perceptions of Basic Expectations Going Into a Course

Choice	Count
I will have clear expectations/instructions from the faculty member	140
I will help students (respond to their emails/answer questions/monitor discussion boards, etc.)	128
I will grade assignments	136
I will most likely be asked to do something outside of my coaching responsibilities	18
Other	3
I will use my expertise and experience to assist students	113

Qualitative—Academic Coach Perceptions

This qualitative study explored online academic coaches' perceptions of the instructor of record and their work with students. The research found that coaches perceive instructors as playing a critical role in student success. The significant themes that emerged are that coaches see the instructor of record as those who provide:

- guidance and mentorship (22.58%)
- communication (22.58%)
- course design and course management (22.58%)
- support and success (32.26%)

Based on the feedback provided, academic coaches perceive their role in the online learning environment contributing to student success as follows.

Providing Feedback

Coaches view themselves as crucial in offering feedback that helps students improve on future assignments and avoid repeating mistakes. "As a coach, I am able to create a rapport with most of my students. This is not feasible as a professor of a large course. Additionally, I am able to grade assignments and provide feedback in a very efficient manner; this is important when it comes to accelerated classes. If the feedback is not provided in a timely manner, students end up making the same mistakes over and over again."

Providing Additional Support

Many coaches believe they serve as an additional layer of support, supplementing the guidance provided by professors, especially in large online classes or when

the professor is less accessible. “The academic coach is an extension of the lead professor with providing support and guidance to students. I provide feedback and assist students with the expectations of assignments. Grade assignments. Reach out to students who are struggling.”

Engaging Students

Coaches often act as a bridge between students and professors, facilitating communications and helping students feel more connected to the course. “I think that sometimes students are more comfortable asking the coach a question over the professor.”

Providing Personalized Assistance

Academic coaches view their role as providing individualized attention and catering to the specific needs of each student, which may not be feasible for professors managing large classes. “The academic coach develops a closer tie with the student with smaller ratios. It's critical to send at least weekly group e-mails with tips for success and consistent reminders to reach out for any concerns.”

Providing Resources

Coaches provide tools and resources and sometimes act as content specialists to assist students in navigating the online learning environment. “I direct students to resources that they may need to help them successfully complete the course.”

Encouraging and Motivating

Coaches believe in encouraging participation, submission of quality work, and providing moral support to students, particularly those who are struggling or are new to the online learning format. “My role as an academic coach is to provide support; watch for students who miss assignments and determine the reason; help provide support to guide their academic journey (we are here for you to succeed); find a way to support when they fall behind if they provide necessary documentation.”

Fostering Independence and Understanding

Coaches emphasize their role in fostering independence and helping students fully understand the material reinforcing the importance of self-directed learning in

online courses. “...providing one-on-one clarification on assignments...as a coach to assist students with understanding how to improve their assignments.”

IMPLICATIONS

Although the increasing demand for online courses presented notable challenges for our institution, UTRGV has implemented effective strategies to address these issues—approaches that may serve as replicable models for other universities. The findings from our study are actively informing our evaluation and refinement of the academic coach support program, guiding efforts to improve both instructional quality and student support. The integration of academic coaches has enabled UTRGV to increase the enrollment capacity of online courses. As a result, students have gained timely access to the courses they need, helping to prevent delays in academic progression. Drawing from the insights gained through this research, we offer several targeted recommendations for institutions seeking to launch or strengthen academic coaching initiatives as part of their broader online learning strategy.

Data Collection

Since 2011, we have learned important lessons that have helped us enhance the support our university provides to online faculty teaching large classes at UTRGV. Data on faculty needs, preferences, and challenges has been extremely helpful in creating support services. Based on data collected by our Center for Online Learning and Teaching from faculty teaching large online courses, we were able to refine support programs provided at the center. One recommendation for instructors working with academic coaches is to have a mid-semester interview with coaches, in addition to other regular meetings they might have, to cover professional development needs and challenges they face. Surveying students will also allow instructors to address any issues or concerns they might have about the course and their academic coach. This mid-semester feedback will help improve the learning experience for all students and the teaching experience for academic coaches and instructors.

Student Satisfaction

From the findings of the satisfaction survey given to students, overall, the majority of students reported being satisfied with their online learning experience. Students who received timely, constructive feedback and felt supported by their academic coaches reported higher satisfaction. The availability and responsiveness of coaches contributed to a smoother and more engaging learning experience. In support of this,

a student reported, “I feel that this course was able to run smoothly in comparison to my other courses. My grades and feedback were uploaded faster.” This too was supported by faculty, as the majority strongly agreed that “due to the use of academic coaches, large enrollment classes frequently provide a better learning experience than large enrollment classes that do not use coaches.” The significance of this is, as mentioned in the literature review, positive student satisfaction increases student motivation, engagement, and retention.

Another area of impact is increased participation and engagement. The majority of students agreed that the use of academic coaches increased their participation in class and improved their performance. In relation to engagement, 84.44% of students felt that they were engaged to highly engaged in the course. This was also echoed in a student's response: “They did a pretty decent job at giving good feedback and helping me keep myself engaged in the class.” This implies that academic coaches play a key role in fostering student engagement and enhancing learning outcomes. Instructors also reported improved student learning outcomes and levels of student engagement with the use of coaches, supporting this notion.

Overall, academic coaches play a valuable role in enhancing the student experience and supporting faculty in managing large online courses. The positive implications of using coaches include enhanced feedback and support, as a significant percentage of students reported receiving quicker and more consistent feedback when an academic coach is utilized. This improvement in the timeliness and consistency of feedback is crucial for student success.

Areas of Improvement

However, it is important to note that some students felt their coaches struggled to grasp the assignment or course content, leading to unclear explanations and guidance. Others noticed variations in grading practices among different coaches, which created confusion and affected their overall experience. This study found that, to some degree, both instructors and students are concerned about the consistency of academic coaches' feedback.

Coaches must have a solid understanding of the subject matter and instructors' assignment and feedback expectations. Therefore, constant communication and regular meetings between faculty and coaches are essential to discuss regular updates of course content and learning goals. We also consider that having clear and available rubrics in the LMS (Blackboard, Canvas, etc.) for each assignment is necessary to provide academic coaches with transparent guidelines. In addition to this, providing examples of successful work can help academic coaches understand faculty expectations of how excellent work differs from adequate or poor work in a particular course.

Academic coaches said one barrier to students succeeding in the course is the lack of clarity in the assignments. This result broadly supports the work of studies focused on transparent design (Winkelmes, n.d.). Improvement of this quality standard is essential to provide students with assignments that have clear and explicit purpose and expectations, detailed criteria for success, and specific instructions for completion (Winkelmes, n.d.). The following section outlines proposed strategies to address the concerns identified in the study.

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

Faculty concentration on teaching and the course material increases when they have a TA for the course (Armstrong et al., 2021). But sometimes the roles and responsibilities of each are not entirely clear to the stakeholders if there is not a plan in place. Instructors should consider having an initial meeting with the online academic coach to discuss expectations, goals, and the course structure. It is essential to clarify their role in supporting students in the course. In addition, include specifics on grading, facilitating discussions, or assisting students with technical issues. Reviewing course policies for attendance, late submissions, and academic integrity guidelines is a must. Instructors must consider introducing coaches to students at the beginning of the course along with their role. This could either be in the Welcome area of the course, in written or video form, or during the first live session if the class is synchronous.

Instructors should specify the communication channels between coach and student and the expected response time. Specifying the type of communication the academic coach must have with the students and the expected response time to grade assignments and provide feedback must be part of the conversation. In addition, these same expectations should be communicated to students at the outset of the course to ensure transparency and prevent confusion about the coach's role.

It is also necessary for instructors to schedule regular check-ins with coaches to discuss progress, address concerns, and provide feedback. Instructors must ensure coaches know whom to contact in case they have technical difficulties or need support using the LMS tools.

Ongoing Professional Development

Not all faculty or academic coaches have the same needs or equal opportunities for professional development. In our study, some faculty commented that academic coaches are too busy and have more responsibilities. However, administrators and online instructors should consider offering professional development opportunities to academic coaches in their institutions. This will help them stay informed about

LMS updates, university policies and resources, and teaching strategies to engage students and optimize learning experiences. Academic coaches can benefit from learning more about the students they are coaching. At the same time, it is essential to provide faculty with resources that showcase how their peers have effectively integrated academic coaches into their courses, including strategies for ensuring inter-rater reliability, enhancing the quality of feedback on student assignments, and improving the overall instructional process.

CONCLUSION

Our study highlights the multifaceted experiences of students, faculty, and academic coaches within the context of online education at a Hispanic-serving institution in South Texas. The integration of academic coaches in large online courses has demonstrated significant benefits, including enhanced student engagement, improved academic performance, and increased satisfaction with the learning experience. Faculty members also noted that academic coaches enabled them to dedicate more time to refining course content and pedagogy, thereby contributing to a more effective and enriched educational environment for students.

However, the study also revealed ongoing challenges that may hinder the full potential of academic coaching. These include inconsistencies in grading practices, variability in the quality and frequency of student support, and occasional ambiguity surrounding the roles and expectations of coaches. Such issues emphasize the need for structured and intentional practices, including clear communication protocols, ongoing professional development and resources, and well-defined roles and responsibilities for academic coaches.

To maximize the effectiveness of academic coaching programs, institutions should prioritize the implementation of systematic feedback loops, including regular evaluations from students, faculty, and coaches. Transparent guidelines regarding assignment expectations, grading responsibilities, and communication practices must be established and consistently reinforced. In addition, offering targeted professional development that addresses instructional strategies, inter-rater reliability, and culturally responsive pedagogy can further strengthen the coaching model.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of academic coaching on student retention and degree completion, particularly among underrepresented populations in online learning. It would also be valuable to extend this study by comparing student satisfaction in large online courses that do not incorporate academic coaches in order to better understand the specific impact of coaching on the student learning experience. Institutions may also benefit from creating faculty learning communities or resource repositories to facilitate knowledge sharing around

best practices in coach integration. By addressing these areas proactively, higher education institutions can not only improve the effectiveness of academic coaching but also elevate the overall quality and equity of the online learning experience.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Coaches: Third-party instructional support staff hired to assist faculty. They hold a master's or doctoral degree in the discipline they support and help with grading, providing feedback to students, communicating with students, and interacting in discussion forums.

Instructional Support Services: Services provided by academic coaches to assist faculty. Services include grading assessments, providing feedback, interacting with students in discussion forums, addressing student questions, and communicating and meeting with instructors. These responsibilities are assigned by the instructor.

Large Online Course: For our institution, it is defined as a course having student enrollments of 75 or more and having a minimum enrollment cap size of 60.

Online Courses: In accordance with the Texas Higher Coordinating Board's definition, we define online courses in this study as being 100% online. This means that all instructional activities occur at separate physical locations, either synchronously or asynchronously.

Quality Online Courses: Courses identified as quality online courses have undergone a backwards design development process to meet best practices in online teaching, instructional design, and accessibility standards, generally meeting research-based benchmarks such as those outlined by Quality Matters Rubric, Online Sunny Course Quality Review Rubric, and OLC Quality Scorecard.

Student Engagement: A student's intentional involvement in a course's in-class and out-of-class activities.

Student Satisfaction: A student's perceived satisfaction with their online learning educational experience.

Student Success: Encompasses a broad range of outcomes, including academic achievement, graduation rates, retention, and post-graduation employment. For this study, we define student success as those students whose academic performance and desired grades meet the expectations of their coursework.

Chapter 11

Best Practices When Using Academic Coaches in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Academic coaches can serve as guides and mentors to students, helping them develop the skills and strategies necessary to succeed in their academic endeavors. While the benefits of academic coaching are well documented in this volume and elsewhere, there is still much to learn about the most effective ways to utilize coaching resources. This chapter will explore research findings on academic coaching, describe the results from a sample of graduate business students who have experienced academic coaching, and then describe the results of faculty interviews detailing their experiences and recommended best practices when using academic coaches in multiple disciplines within higher education.

INTRODUCTION

As universities more aggressively market themselves (Brown & Carasso, 2013), classes are getting larger and ever-increasing numbers of universities offer online education options. However, this trend also may diminish students' ability to connect directly with their professors. It is within this higher education growth environment that academic coaching systems were developed. Academic coaches can serve as guides and mentors to students, helping them develop the skills and strategies necessary to succeed in their academic endeavors, but they also can take some of the

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grading burden off of professors in exceptionally large classes. While the benefits of academic coaching are well documented in this volume and elsewhere, there is still much to learn about the most effective ways to utilize coaching resources. This chapter will explore research findings on academic coaching, describe the results from a sample of graduate business students who have experienced academic coaching, and then describe the results of faculty interviews detailing their experiences and recommended best practices when using academic coaches in multiple disciplines within higher education.

Background

Academic coaching has been defined as helping students “create coherence and shape meaning as an expression of their relatedness to specific others and contexts” (Stelter et al., 2010, p. 5). Academic coaching can have numerous benefits for students, including improved academic performance, greater self-efficacy, and increased retention rates (Alzen et al., 2021; Barkley 2011; Bettinger & Baker, 2013; Capstick et al., 2019; Lehan et al., 2018; Robinson & Gahagan, 2010). However, the effectiveness of academic coaching is still debated, with some studies finding no statistically significant differences in outcomes for students who receive academic coaching and those who do not. For example, Sepulveda and colleagues (2019) did not find a statistically significant difference in retention or GPA outcomes between coached students and their control group. (However, their sample was very small, students who received the coaching had already decided to leave the college when they were selected for coaching, and most of the students did not actually implement the recommendations given to them by their coaches, so generalizability of their findings to other populations can be questioned.)

Researchers looking at the linkages between academic coaching and its outcomes frequently leverage self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and perceived control (Findley & Cooper, 1983) to explain the relationships. Self-determination theory proposes that “the human organism is evolved to be inherently active, intrinsically motivated, and oriented toward developing naturally through integrative processes. These qualities need not be learned; they are inherent in human nature. Still, they develop over time, play a central role in learning, and are affected by social environments” (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 417). After decades of lab work, the authors identified “three universal psychological needs—specifically needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness—that are essential for optimal development and functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 417). Perceived control theory includes locus of control, which “refers to a person’s beliefs about control over life events... internals assume responsibility for their actions and accept responsibility for outcomes. Externals project blame on others or outside events” (Gifford et al., 2006,

p. 20). Multiple studies have shown a positive relationship between internal locus of control and academic performance, which in turn is related to higher college retention rates (Gifford et al., 2006).

Authors who leverage these theories when analyzing academic coaching assert that academic coaches provide feedback for improvement to students as well as encouragement, both of which increase students' belief that academic performance is within their control, and not the result of external forces (Guenther & Miller, 2011). The belief that they can control their outcomes prods students towards a decision to engage in their required tasks, which results in higher levels of academic performance. Additionally, academic coaching can foster perceptions of a supportive environment within students, which also improve student engagement (Guenther & Miller, 2011). Essentially, academic coaches can influence all three of the universal psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) within students which should increase their academic motivation.

Academic coaches also have the ability to influence student self-efficacy. Especially in large graduate classes where some students may have been out of the classroom for decades before coming back for another degree, it is imperative that students believe they have the ability to succeed. Self-efficacy has been defined by Bandura (1997) as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (p. 1). Self-efficacy consistently shows a positive association with academic achievement in studies at multiple academic levels and in countries around the world. For example, one study showed that Jordanian secondary students with higher achievement reported higher self-efficacy (Atoum, 2018), and another showed that middle school students' academic efficacy connects with greater engagement and performance (Brennan, 2015). In one study of Iranian high school students (Doordinejad, 2014), self-efficacy correlated moderately with English scores ($r = 0.303$), while another study of Turkish first-year university students demonstrated that self-efficacy, alongside effort-regulation and help-seeking, accounted for 21% of GPA variance (Köseoğlu, 2015). Two meta-analyses yield additional support for the relationship between self-efficacy and academic performance—a correlation of $r = 0.218$ and an average standardized path coefficient of 0.08 (Haidari et al., 2023; Valentine et al., 2004). Among a sample of Spanish secondary students, self-efficacy appears to influence achievement indirectly through expectancy-value beliefs (Doménech-Betoret et al., 2017). Overall, multiple studies indicate that positive self-perceptions relate to better academic outcomes across a variety of educational levels and cultural contexts.

Self-efficacy can be fostered by mastery experiences, vicarious experiences of role models, social persuasion, and reductions in stress reactions (Bandura, 1997). Bandura states that "The task of creating learning environments conducive

to development of cognitive skills rests heavily on the talents and self-efficacy of teachers. Those who have a high sense of efficacy about their teaching capabilities can motivate their students and enhance their cognitive development. Teachers who have a low sense of instructional efficacy favor a custodial orientation that relies heavily on negative sanctions to get students to study” (p. 12). Academic coaches can help students build their self-efficacy by using assignments and assessments as mastery experiences, showing students how they are improving each week and helping them see each subsequent success as a step towards their academic goal. They can also provide vicarious experiences as role models, essentially telling students about how they themselves also struggled with difficult subjects in college, but that they were able to study hard and eventually master them. Academic coaches can also utilize the social persuasion that Bandura mentions, telling students that their coach believes in their ability to succeed and encouraging them to keep trying. Finally, academic coaches may even be able to influence Bandura’s fourth source of self-efficacy, reductions in stress reactions, by showing students how to master their emotions so that negative physical reactions to stress do not hinder their beliefs in their own ability to succeed.

Academic coaches can also support student engagement, which is a well-studied stream of research. A recent review of the literature on student engagement leveraged over 21,000 academic papers (Evans et al., 2015). Although there are many definitions of student engagement in the literature, most incorporate three dimensions of student engagement: affect, cognition, and behavior. For example, Trowler (2015) says “student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution” (p. 3). Another definition by Evans and colleagues (2015) addresses the same three dimensions, saying “the concept of student engagement suggests positive involvement in programs through active participation and interaction at a class level. Often underpinning this assertion is the assumption that any activities that get students more involved are a positive step towards improving the quality of student learning” (p. 10). Although there is a growing group of critics of the student engagement movement like Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) who talk about the potential downsides of a student engagement focus, most studies report that student engagement shows a positive association with academic performance across diverse educational levels and cultural contexts. Multiple studies measuring overall engagement with established scales (for example, the National Survey of Student Engagement) and custom instruments report that higher engagement relates to improved outcomes such as grade point average, test scores, reading performance, and final grade points. For example, one study reported a correlation of 0.166 (p

< 0.01) between overall engagement and a general weighted average (Delfino, 2019), while another noted a 99.1% correlation between engagement and academic performance (Sattar et al., 2022). In addition, several papers indicate that specific dimensions—behavioral, cognitive, and emotional—predict academic performance, with behavioral engagement being the most frequently examined factor (Ashkzari et al., 2018; Cali et al., 2024; Dogan, 2015; Gerber et al., 2013; Hanaysha et al., 2023; Kuh et al., 2008; Lee, 2014; Orji & Vassileva, 2020).

Especially in large classes, academic coaches help professors maintain the kind of active learning that increases student engagement (Dixon, 2010; Guenther & Miller, 2011) by facilitating discussion, problem solving, and mentorship (Webberman, 2011) at a more personal level than professors could feasibly accomplish alone. Interactions with academic coaches increase engagement, which in turn improves academic performance (Carini et al., 2006). They are especially beneficial in large online classes, where academic coaches can participate in discussion forums and provide individually tailored grading feedback on assignments to foster improvement on future assignments. Kuh and colleagues (2007) suggest that institutions play a critical role in student engagement, saying “the second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation” (p. 44). Academic coaches help students identify areas of weakness via reflection, leading to corrective action and improved performance (Truijen & van Woerkom, 2008), but since academic coaches tend to be professionals in the marketplace who also have an academic coaching role, they also provide a bridge between students’ academic and professional lives. These “blended professionals” are “individuals who draw their identity from both professional and academic domains, and are, in effect, developing new forms of space between the two” (Whitchurch, 2009: 2).

However, simply providing access to academic coaches is not enough, and some studies have shown that the efficacy of academic coaching initiatives varies widely between higher education institutions (Carini et al., 2006). To be effective, academic coaching must be implemented in a way that is tailored to the needs of the individual student. This requires a thoughtful and intentional approach that considers the unique circumstances of each student and the specific requirements of each course. Krause (2005) provides ten ways that universities can enhance student engagement, most of which can be influenced by academic coaches. The ten working principles include: create and maintain a stimulating intellectual environment, value academic work and high standards, monitor and respond to demographic subgroup differences and their impact on engagement, ensure expectations are explicit and responsive, foster social connections, acknowledge the challenges, provide targeted self-management

strategies, use assessment to shape the student experience and encourage engagement, manage online learning experiences with care, and recognize the complex nature of engagement in your policy and practice.

Effectiveness

To assess the effectiveness of academic coaching, 799 students taking online graduate level business classes at a large public university in the U.S. south were asked to evaluate their academic coaches following their interactions during a 7-week core course in the program. This particular MBA program is the largest in its state with over 5,000 students per year attending, so class sizes tend to be as large as 150 to 200 students per class. With classes of this size, academic coaches are utilized to ensure personalized contact and feedback for each student, and the university contracts with a third party academic coaching company to provide highly qualified academic coaches. (All academic coaches have a PhD and/or MBA with significant business work experience.)

Students were asked four questions, including “About how many times (total) did you receive communication from your academic coach over the duration of the entire course”, “about how many times (total) did you reach out to your coach with questions over the duration of the entire course”, when you think about the times you reached out to your coach, what were you usually asking about”, and “on a scale from 1 - 5, where 1 is *not helpful at all*, and 5 is *extremely helpful*, how would you rate the help you received from your academic coach”. Students received five extra credit points (out of 1,000 points in the class) to provide their feedback on the voluntary assignment. Performance metrics including students’ overall grade in the class were also collected.

Of 799 students invited to provide feedback, 689 fully completed the survey reflecting an 86% response rate. Descriptive statistics for each question are provided in Table 1. The first question regarding the frequency of communication from coaches was asked in order to gauge the level of proactive involvement the academic coaches had with their students. Of the students completing the survey, responses on how many times the coach communicated with them ranged from zero to 30, with a mean of 7.5. (However, the students who responded with zero either misunderstood the question or forgot their coach’s contacts, because the professor was copied on most of the communications throughout each course, and the coaches were certainly reaching out to their assigned students at least once per week.) The second question regarding frequency of students reaching out to coaches was asked to assess the levels at which students were taking the initiative to access their coaches for guidance. Responses ranged from zero to 15, with a mean of 0.9. When asked about why students reached out to their coaches, 24.1% said “questions about course

content” and 41.1% said “questions about grading”, both of which are to be expected. However, it is interesting to note that 16.5% said “advice and/or mentorship”, and 36.7% said they reached out for something else beyond the normal subjects listed in the survey. These values seem to suggest that the academic coaches in this sample provided a breadth of assistance to students that went far beyond basic grading and content questions. Students were leveraging their coaches for advice, mentorship, and other questions not necessarily pertaining to the course. Finally, when asked to rate their coaches on a scale from 1 – 5 (where 1 is *not helpful at all*, and 5 is *extremely helpful*), the mean rating was 4.24 with a 1.04 standard deviation.

Table 1a. Descriptive Statistics: Coach Contact to Students

Mean	7.545718
Standard Error	0.136768
Median	7
Mode	7
Standard Deviation	3.592608
Sample Variance	12.90684
Kurtosis	4.067981
Skewness	0.826384
Range	30
Minimum	0
Maximum	30
Sum	5206.546
Count	689

Table 1b. Descriptive Statistics: Student Outreach to Coaches

Mean	0.949202
Standard Error	0.052797
Median	1
Mode	0
Standard Deviation	1.386867
Sample Variance	1.923399
Kurtosis	22.05667
Skewness	3.417614

continued on following page

Table 1b. Continued

Range	15
Minimum	0
Maximum	15
Sum	654.9492
Count	689

Table 1c. Descriptive Statistics: Student Evaluations of Coach Helpfulness

Mean	4.244186
Standard Error	0.039749
Median	5
Mode	5
Standard Deviation	1.043374
Sample Variance	1.088629
Kurtosis	1.071069
Skewness	-1.3311
Range	4
Minimum	1
Maximum	5
Sum	2924.244
Count	689

In order to determine the level of relationship between coach intervention and performance, student responses to questions one and two (“About how many times total did you receive communication from your academic coach over the duration of the entire course” and “about how many times total did you reach out to your coach with questions over the duration of the entire course”) were regressed against students’ overall scores in the class. Regression results are provided in Table 2. Although there are many other potential explanatory variables and no causation can necessarily be claimed, it is interesting to note that while academic coach frequency of contact was related to students’ academic performance, frequency of student outreach to coaches was not. Specifically, the relationship between the frequency of coach intervention and performance is positive and significant ($b = .23, p < .01$), but the relationship between the frequency of student to coach outreach and performance is not ($b = .003, p > .05$). These results seem to suggest that communications initiated by academic coaches are more strongly related to academic outcomes than are communications

initiated by students. However, it is also possible that struggling students are more likely to reach out to their coaches, essentially negating the positive relationship that may otherwise have existed in the data.

Table 2a. Regression Results: Coach Contact with Students and Academic Performance

Regression Statistics								
Multiple R	0.134113835							
R Square	0.017986521							
Adjusted R Square	0.016557098							
Standard Error	6.151949078							
Observations	689							
ANOVA								
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>			
Regression	1	476.2246994	476.2247	12.58307	0.000415724			
Residual	687	26000.53002	37.84648					
Total	688	26476.75472						
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	86.2726958	0.545205169	158.239	0	85.2022274	87.3431642	85.2022274	87.3431642
X Variable 1	0.231412308	0.065236887	3.547262	0.000416	0.1033247	0.359499917	0.1033247	0.359499917

Table 2b. Regression Results: Student Outreach to Coaches and Academic Performance

Regression Statistics								
Multiple R	0.000617944							
R Square	3.81855E-07							
Adjusted R Square	-0.001455222							
Standard Error	6.208031682							
Observations	689							
ANOVA								
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>			

continued on following page

Table 2b. Continued

Regression	1	0.010110277	0.01011	0.000262	0.987082139			
Residual	687	26476.74461	38.53966					
Total	688	26476.75472						
	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	88.01624615	0.286596844	307.1082	0	87.4535353	88.578957	87.4535353	88.578957
X Variable 1	0.002762086	0.170533457	0.016197	0.987082	-	0.332067236	-	0.337591408

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

In order to gain a broader perspective of how faculty in multiple departments are utilizing their academic coaches, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty from the accounting, finance, marketing, information systems, and management departments. Appendix 1 contains a representative sample of quotes from each respondent. Each faculty member was asked the following questions:

What courses do you use coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

What do faculty find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

Do you find that coaches are flexible during their courses?

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

What have the students said about their experience with their academic coaches?

How effective are the coaches?

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

What best practices would you recommend?

Courses and size

Academic coaches are used in a broad range of classes including organizational behavior, leadership communication, marketing strategy, international marketing, organizational strategy and policies, data-driven decision making, financial management, nonprofit administration theory and research, lean transformation, and data analysis. Class sizes range from 55 to 200 students, but most participants stated that their classes tend to average around 150 students.

Best use of academic coaches

Participants stated that academic coaches were best at grading written assignments and simple quantitative assignments (when provided rubrics), providing feedback to students, communicating with students about deadlines and expectations, and administrative tasks like answering syllabus questions. Multiple faculty members mentioned the necessity of providing rubrics in order to improve grading consistency, and some mentioned that coach quality varies as each individual coach has strengths and weaknesses. One faculty member mentioned a kind of training process for coaches, stating “I start things simple, provide feedback, and then increase the work in the following class. I do not expect a rookie coach to be able to do it all in their first class.”

Coach flexibility

Most faculty members agreed that academic coaches tend to be flexible, citing examples where coaches were willing to change grading schedules, grading methods, and feedback styles, were willing to go above and beyond to help the professor and other coaches get grading done on time, and were even willing to regrade assignments in cases where mistakes were made. However, some faculty members also stressed that using the same coaches every class helps the coaches understand each particular professor’s expectations and reduces the need for changes mid-course. Also, some mentioned that some coaches are more flexible than others, mostly depending on the individual’s background and workload. One faculty member mentioned that “there is huge heterogeneity among individuals. Mostly depends on that coach’s background and how much they have on their plates.”

How faculty solicit feedback on coaches

While a few faculty members have created coach evaluation forms so that they can get feedback from students in each class, most say they rely on end of course evaluations to hear from students about the coaches, even though the end of course evaluations don’t ask specifically about the coaches. Most faculty members mentioned that they also get feedback from students via email, though these messages tend to be about grading complaints or concerns about inter-rater reliability. One faculty member said, “students email me if they have disagreed with a coach’s grading, but only after they tried to work it out directly first”. Another faculty member said that students rarely give feedback on their coaches because the learning management system doesn’t show them who does the grading, so they don’t really know if the grading is being done by a coach or their professor. (This can be resolved by

assigning students to specific coaches and announcing those assignments at the beginning of the course, but also by having coaches include their names after their grading feedback in the gradebook.) One faculty member mentioned that there is no university standard for academic coach evaluations, and stated that it would be beneficial if one were provided.

Student feedback on coaches

The majority of faculty members interviewed stated that students say mostly positive things about their experience with their academic coaches. One said, “Many students say that their coaches helped them improve their performance, and some even say that encouragement from their coach kept them in the class when things got difficult.” Some of the complaints received included things like some coaches grading more harshly than others (inter-rater reliability), inconsistencies in grading from the same coach (intra-rater reliability), minimal feedback from some coaches, and occasionally slow response times. One faculty member cited a situation where a coach had to be fired and replaced due to student complaints “about his grading being arbitrary and his feedback being too broad and not explaining specifically what was missing.”

Coach effectiveness

Most faculty members interviewed feel that the academic coaches they have worked with have been effective. One said, “I believe academic coaches are effective, especially for very large classes where it would be nearly impossible for a professor to provide helpful feedback to every student.” Another faculty member agreed, saying “the average final grades are in line from before when I did not have coaches” (and they did all the grading themselves). One mentioned that it helps to use the same academic coaches repeatedly so that over time they get used to the professor’s expectations. Some did say that grading feedback is “sometimes too broad and could be more specific to help students improve”. The one faculty member who felt that the coaches were not effective at all gave some reasons why, including work quality, stating “I have to do a second round of checking and spend more time fixing their grades and comments”.

What faculty have learned from coaches

Many faculty members talked about how they do actually learn from their academic coaches, with one calling it a “robust continuous improvement process”. One said, “the coaches are not necessarily subject matter experts, but I do learn a lot

from them about how to support and encourage students through difficult topics.” Others talked about how they have implemented suggestions and clarifications on assignment instructions from coaches, and learned from their coaches about better ways to communicate “how to study, prepare for exams, resources for APA formatting, best practices for graduate-level education, etc.”

How faculty monitor and improve coach performance

Although one faculty member stated that they don’t really monitor coach performance, most said they do have some sort of monitoring and improvement process. Generally, faculty members periodically review grades, randomly check some graded assignments, and then have regular check-in meetings with coaches to adjust as necessary. One said, “after each module I compare the average grades from each coach, making sure no one coach is grading much harder or easier than the rest. If there is an outlier, I pull a few of that coach’s graded assignments at random to see if he or she is accurately following the grading rubric. I have a designated head coach for each class, so if something needs adjustment, I usually communicate that to the head coach and have that person address the issue with the individual coach.” Some also mentioned the value of making coaches aware of what is going on in other sections of the same course so they can keep watch for that behavior or misunderstanding in their own section.

Best Practices

Based on prior literature and faculty interviews, several best practices have been identified both at the institutional level and at the individual user level. At the institutional level, it is critical to provide students with access to academic coaches as early as possible in their academic career. Early exposure helps students develop the skills and strategies they need to succeed in their initial classes, rather than waiting until they are struggling academically and developing negative academic self-perceptions and self-efficacy. This is especially true with graduate students, many of whom may be questioning whether or not they have the academic ability to succeed at the graduate level. Beyond providing practical study tips and ideas to improve on assignments, academic coaches can also provide much needed support and encouragement for students. Especially in large online classes where interaction is largely limited, academic coaches may provide the only form of personal guidance and encouragement that students receive.

Another best practice at the institutional level is to integrate academic coaching into the broader support system at the institution. This means that academic coaches should work closely with other support services, such as academic advisors, writing

centers, and any tutoring services that may be available at each campus, to provide a comprehensive network of support for students. To facilitate this, it is important to provide introduction and orientation events for coaches that are unique to each campus they serve, so that they know what other resources in the local academic ecosystem can be most helpful for each of their students. At a minimum, academic coaches should be able to refer students to tutoring support services, writing assistance services, disability support services, and program coordinators who are familiar with their university's policies and procedures. It is also important that institutions provide standardized academic coach assessment tools for their faculty and recommend that faculty have students complete those assessments after each course so that faculty members and administrators alike can gain visibility into the efficacy of the academic coaches and the return on investment for the institution.

At the individual user level, professors who utilize academic coaches must encourage their academic coaches to personalize their approach to each individual student. This means considering the student's academic strengths and weaknesses, personal and academic goals, and the specific requirements of each course. Academic coaches should work with students to develop individualized plans for academic success in each course, rather than providing generic advice that may not be relevant to the student's specific circumstances. Small coach to student ratios can help in this area, with ratios closer to K-12 levels (i.e., around 30) tending to be most effective. In addition to providing feedback on assignments each week, coaches are encouraged to reach out to each student individually every week to develop relationship, check in on their mental and emotional status, and discuss any questions or needs they may have.

Finally, it is important to ensure that academic coaches are well trained and supported in their role. This includes providing ongoing professional development opportunities, as well as regular supervision and feedback. Effective supervision entails three areas: expectation, calibration, and confirmation, each of which will be explored in more detail below.

Expectations should be set via pre-course meetings with all academic coaches before each course starts. One faculty member said, "have a meeting with your coaches before each course starts to talk through each assignment, the class policies, the grading rubrics, and any specific things you want them to watch out for. Communicate student grade standings to the coaches each week so they know which students need more help than others. Periodically check in on inter-rater and intra-rater reliability. Remember to encourage your coaches just like you would your students." Since academic coaches may or may not be subject matter experts in all topics within each particular class, it is essential that professors provide coaches with detailed grading rubrics, a summary of the most important concepts in each module, and examples of unsatisfactory, satisfactory, and excellent work for each assignment.

Detailed grading rubrics and examples of work at various grading levels will help coaches maintain their rater consistency, but will also help them on occasions when students appeal their scores. It is also important to set reasonable expectations with students. At the beginning of each course, academic coaches should be introduced to their assigned students with some information about each coach's background and areas of expertise. Students should also be informed of what their academic coaches will and will not do, specifically noting the limits of their authority and the kinds of help they cannot provide. Academic coaches may elect to defer content-specific questions to the professor, rather than risk misguiding students.

Although most faculty members talked about generally positive experiences with the outside firm that supplies academic coaches, some have had negative experiences and even had to take action to remedy the situation. One interviewee stated, "I had a very poor experience with several coaches supplied by the coaching firm. A few good coaches and too many bad ones. Example is how they would copy and paste the same short 'good job' comment for everyone and give everyone 100%. I fired these people. I do not have time for such a lack of ethics. Now, what I did. I recruited two of my former students and begged them to become Academic Coaches. They were eager to do this. There are hundreds of students who are eager to give back and earn some extra money. My former students have taken the classes and know the material. I also asked a colleague of mine who is an expert in the related field and has helped create some of the content used in the course. As mentioned above, I have an onboarding process and coaches pick up additional responsibility as they move from one class to the next. I have scoring directions for myself and improved them dramatically for the Academic Coaches." This quote reemphasizes the importance of monitoring coach performance and quality.

Confirmation should include feedback from coaches at the end of each class, allowing them to describe the most common challenges faced by their students and the most effective intervention strategies that they employed. Confirmation should also be sought from students in order to assess the perceived effectiveness of the coaches. This can be in the form of informal emails or even academic coach evaluation surveys completed by students at the end of the course. Similar to teaching evaluations, academic coach evaluation responses can be skewed by students who are just angry about their grade, students who had personality conflicts with their assigned coach, or students who may not remember how much their coach helped them over the course of the semester. However, questions about how many times their coach interacted with them, how many times students reached out for help, and an overall coaching effectiveness rating will allow the professor to assess the overall effectiveness of the coaching initiative as well as performance and effectiveness averages for each coach assigned to the class. If any coach receives low average scores, possible interventions include mentorship, training, and/or dismissal.

CONCLUSION

Academic coaching has the potential to be a valuable resource for students in higher education, especially in large traditional and online classes. In this convenience sample, 689 students taking online graduate business classes at a large southern public university completed assessments of their academic coaches. On average, students report that their academic coaches were contacting them 7.5 times over a seven-week course and students were proactively contacting their coaches 0.9 times over the duration of the course. The academic coaches received a 4.2 (out of 5) rating for helpfulness, and regression results indicate that there is a positive and significant relationship between the frequency of academic coach contact with students and the students' academic performance in the course.

However, in order to be effective, academic coaching programs must be implemented in a thoughtful and intentional way. By following best practices such as providing early access to academic coaches, personalizing coaching to the individual student, integrating coaching into the broader support system, and supporting academic coaches through ongoing training and supervision, institutions can increase the effectiveness of their academic coaching programs in helping students achieve their academic goals. Professors who utilize academic coaches can increase the successfulness of the academic coaches by providing proactive supervision in the form of expectation setting at the beginning of each course, calibration throughout the course, and confirmation of academic coach efforts and students' perceptions of value at the end of each course.

But the future of academic coaching is yet to be determined. Recent advancements in artificial intelligence may tempt some universities to save money by utilizing AI-driven automated feedback agents. Although this could reduce costs, it would also likely result in lower quality feedback and complaints from students about lack of human interaction. The other pertinent trend is the reliance on adjunct labor in universities. If the proportion of adjuncts to tenure-track faculty continues to increase, universities may be able to reduce their usage of academic coaches since the relative salary burden per instructor will be lower and class sizes can be smaller. However, if adjunct usage continues to increase, it may also encourage universities to leverage academic coaches even more to help the adjuncts provide quality feedback.

As with any study, this study had its limitations. Since the findings are from one university, generalizability may be an issue. Future studies should incorporate data from multiple universities across several geographies. This study also relied on self-reported data from students, whose memory and/or willingness to be honest may be questioned. Future studies should utilize external data sources in order to mitigate potential error. Finally, this study did not provide students any opportunity

to discuss negative experiences they may have had with their coaches. Future studies should ask specifically about any negative perceptions that students may have.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Coach: an instructor who helps students understand concepts and gain self-efficacy, and who provides encouragement to students while providing administrative support to professors.

Locus of Control: A psychological construct wherein individuals either believe that they have control over their outcomes or they believe that outside forces have control over their outcomes.

Mastery Experiences: Opportunities to demonstrate mastery over a specific skill, ideally increasing in difficulty over time to encourage self-efficacy.

Self-Determination Theory: A theory of motivation that attempts to explain why individuals decide to undertake tasks, suggesting that humans have innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are crucial for growth and well-being.

Self-Efficacy: A person's belief in their own ability to succeed in a specific task.

Social Persuasion: The process of expressing one's belief in another in order to increase their self-efficacy.

Student Engagement: The degree to which students are behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively interested in and actively involved with a course or subject.

APPENDIX

Interview Responses

Respondent 1

What courses do you use academic coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

MBA 704 (OB), 757 (leadership communication) 150

What do you find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

The coaches are great at grading written assignments if provided specific grading rubrics, providing constructive feedback to students, and communicating with students about deadlines and expectations.

Do you find that coaches are flexible during your courses?

Yes, the coaches have always been willing to change their grading schedule and/or style as necessary.

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

I hear from students regularly via email about their coaches, but I also have them fill out an academic coach evaluation at the end of the class.

What have the students said (positive or negative) about their experience with their academic coaches?

Most feedback on coaches has been positive, with many students saying that their coaches helped them improve their performance, and some even saying that encouragement from their coach kept them in the class when things got difficult. I do occasionally receive complaints about coaches, with some saying that their coach grades them more harshly than other coaches or is inconsistent in grading, and a few saying that their coach is slow to respond. However, the positive feedback greatly outweighs the negative.

Overall, how effective are the coaches?

I believe academic coaches are effective, especially for very large classes where it would be nearly impossible for a professor to provide helpful feedback to every student.

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

The coaches are not necessarily subject matter experts, but I do learn a lot from them about how to support and encourage students through difficult topics.

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

After each module I compare the average grades from each coach, making sure no one coach is grading much harder or easier than the rest. If there is an outli-

er, I pull a few of that coach's graded assignments at random to see if he or she is accurately following the grading rubric. I have a designated head coach for each class, so if something needs adjustment, I usually communicate that to the head coach and have that person address the issue with the individual coach.

What best practices would you recommend?

Have a meeting with your coaches before class starts to talk through each assignment, the class policies, the grading rubrics, and any specific things you want them to watch out for. Communicate student grade standings to the coaches each week so they know which students need more help than others. Periodically check in on inter-rater and intra-rater reliability. Remember to encourage your coaches just like you would your students.

Respondent 2

What courses do you use academic coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

MBA 706 (Marketing Strategy) ~200 students & MBA 776 (International Marketing) with a class size averaging 150 students

What do you find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

Grading written assignments (rubrics included)

Do you find that coaches are flexible during your courses?

Yes, they are always willing to adjust on the fly when necessary

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

Via emails and some references in written portion of course evaluations

What have the students said (positive or negative) about their experience with their academic coaches?

I have been using one or two coaches and receive wonderful feedback from students on their timeliness and thorough feedback.

Overall, how effective are the coaches?

Very effective overall

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

Yes, I have implemented coach suggestions for clarifications.

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

We communicate mainly via email. I monitor feedback to ensure that students receive due attention.

What best practices would you recommend?

Provide coaches with detailed rubrics and expectations. When you identify a good academic coach, continue requesting him/her for that course!

Respondent 3

What courses do you use academic coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

MBA 704 (Organizational Behavior) and MBA 705 (Organizational Strategy and Policies) and the class size is typically around 150

What do you find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

My Coaches are great at grading when I provide a rubric to them for consistency

Do you find that coaches are flexible during your courses?

My Coaches are flexible, but we have also worked together for many years now so they have a pretty good understanding of my expectations

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

Students have an evaluation of the Coaches, they are also welcome to email me any time they have questions or concerns about Coach interactions, etc.

What have the students said (positive or negative) about their experience with their academic coaches?

Students have been fairly positive about their Academic Coaches. They appreciate their timely feedback and engagement throughout the course. There are occasionally concerns about the amount of feedback provided on papers or case studies, but overall very positive feedback.

Overall, how effective are the coaches?

Again, I have worked with my Academic Coaches for several years and I think that makes a huge difference, but they are extremely effective.

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

I certainly learn from my Coaches. We all have different methods, techniques, and styles for education. My Coaches include me on email responses to students and I am constantly learning from their recommendations to students on how to study, prepare for exams, resources for APA formatting, best practices for graduate-level education, etc.

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

I meet regularly with my Coaches to discuss my observations and new issues or situations that arise. Hard to believe after this many terms teaching they still arise, but they do, and they are always changing. Making Coaches aware of what is happening in other sections or with other Coaches and students helps shed light on my expectations for grading, feedback, etc.

What best practices would you recommend?

Provide Coaches with grading rubrics. Be clear on your expectations (this I think becomes much more apparent over several terms if you can find great coaches

and continue to work with them term after term). Be kind and professional, they will in turn do the same.

Respondent 4

What courses do you use academic coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

I use coaches for MBA 705 - Organizational Strategy & Policies. Averaging around 90 students.

What do you find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

It depends on the coach. Some of them are good at trying out different settings and methods in Moodle to streamline the grading process and sharing those with other coaches, some are better at grading itself in a way that meets my expectations, and some are better at providing specific feedback to students to improve their grades over time.

Do you find that coaches are flexible during your courses?

Yes, both in timing (e.g., they only have 2 days to grade in the last week compared to 3 days in other weeks), and in grading methods (e.g., changing from rating to whole forum grading in discussion forums or providing more specific feedback when students are struggling to improve their grade).

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

I ask students to reach out to me after discussing their concerns with their coaches (in case there are misunderstandings that can be resolved without my involvement). I also ask them to provide feedback at the end of the semester through course evaluation.

What have the students said (positive or negative) about their experience with their academic coaches?

Nothing positive, which is not a surprise! Positive comments are not typically given unless asked for!! I have had some complaints about one of the coaches that I'm not working with anymore. The students had some concerns about his grading being arbitrary and his feedback being too broad and not explaining specifically what was missing. To be fair, his grading was not that bad, but his feedback was! So, I had to step in and do some mediation and clarification!

Overall, how effective are the coaches?

Again, it depends on the coach, but they are very effective overall. Their grading is consistent with my expectations (that I communicate to them at the beginning of the semester), but some coaches' feedback to students is sometimes too broad and could be more specific to help students improve.

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

Of course! They have taught me a few things about Moodle to make discussion forums and their grading more straightforward for students and coaches. Also, when I randomly check their grading, sometimes their feedback to students' different perspectives on a topic provides me with new insights to improve my materials or give students heads-ups in future semesters.

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

As I said, I randomly check their grading and feedback to students to see if they are following my instructions and send them emails with specific details for improvement if I see deviations or receive complaints from students.

What best practices would you recommend?

I think I'm not the right person to provide recommendations with less than a year of experience! But I would love to learn about more experienced faculty's suggestions.

Respondent 5

What courses do you use academic coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

I use them for MBA 706 Marketing Strategy and MBA 703 Data-Driven Decision Making. Both classes average around 140 to 150 students.

What do you find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

They are best for grading writing assignments according to my rubrics. I handle grading disputes and student questions about course material myself.

Do you find that coaches are flexible during your courses?

Yes. If a coach has made a mistake in grading they are willing to regrade the assignments.

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

I don't seek student feedback about coaches.

What have the students said (positive or negative) about their experience with their academic coaches?

I once received a few email complaints from students about how strictly their coach was grading them. This is because our MBA students join online Facebook groups and share information with each other, including information about how their assignments are being graded. Some students felt that their assigned coach was more grading more harshly than the other coaches and that this was unfair, so I took steps to have closer alignment between the coaches' grading styles.

Overall, how effective are the coaches?

They are effective at grading on time.

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

I sometimes learn about the mistakes students make, which helps me revise the assignment instructions for future sections so that students are less likely to misunderstand them and have a clearer picture of my expectations.

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

I do not monitor their performance. I give them a timeline for grading (3 or 5 days depending on the assignment).

What best practices would you recommend?

I recommend providing coaches with rubrics that have mostly objective criteria and a small number of possible points so that deduction decisions are easier. I believe this results in a faster grading process and minimizes disagreements from students.

Respondent 6

What courses do you use academic coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

MBA702 Financial Management: 150-175 students, I teach it 6 times a year. Note: I have had the same team of coaches for years. We work well together and all know the expectations.

What do you find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

Answering easy questions, grading discussions and simple homework assignments

Do you find that coaches are flexible during your courses?

I don't make big changes, 1 discussion or homework per module

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

Students email me if they have disagreed with a coach's grading, but only after they tried to work it out directly first.

What have the students said (positive or negative) about their experience with their academic coaches?

I get very positive feedback on the coaches, but then there are very few students who actually give any feedback whatsoever

Overall, how effective are the coaches?

The tasks I ask of them are not onerous nor is it detailed, any tough questions, I ask that they forward these to me. I believe that the coaches are pretty effective.

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

Wording and examples have been helpful at times. When coaches cc me on their emails to students, it is helpful. I don't want every email, but those where deeper questions were asked, I like to see the responses.

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

I look for consistency in grading across cohorts. I set up 4 cohorts per class, assigning one coach per cohort. I provide rubrics for how discussions and assignments are to be graded, with specific point assignments and deductions. There was a recent situation where it became apparent that one of the coaches was applying a stricter grading on citations than was necessary. I updated the rubric to be even more specific and sent an email to all coaches about the clarification. There was additional follow up with the coach in question as well as the lead coach.

What best practices would you recommend?

Be sure to meet with the coaches as a group prior to each term (Zoom meetings) where you can all discuss possible student issues we are seeing or areas of difficulty in student understanding. Any changes to assignments, schedules, and expectations can be discussed. Keeping the same team, once you find the right coaches, is very helpful.

Respondent 7

What courses do you use academic coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

I use academic coaches for a graduate-level course Nonprofit Administration Theory and Research. The class sizes are normally around 55-60.

What do you find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

I've only used the coaches to help me with the grading. They could do well in grading those easy assignments with very explicit rubrics (i.e., discussions), especially when checking the citation format.

Do you find that coaches are flexible during your courses?

There is huge heterogeneity among individuals. Mostly depends on that coach's background and how much they have on their plates.

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

I don't get feedback from students about coaches. The major reason is Moodle won't show who grades the assignment, so students don't know which are my comments and which are theirs. I truly believe that this is something Moodle should improve on.

What have the students said (positive or negative) about their experience with their academic coaches?

Some of my students complained that they did not receive the grades or comments in time from the academic coaches.

Overall, how effective are the coaches?

They are not effective, especially in terms of the quality of their work. I have to do a second round of checking and spend more time fixing their grades and comments.

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

No

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

I have a task list for the whole semester for the coach, in which there are specific tasks they should get done with deadlines. I also do weekly check-in meetings with coaches to give instructions, assign tasks, and answer questions. Given that my coach only helps with the grading, I give specific guidelines on specific assignments and do sample grading.

What best practices would you recommend?

None

Respondent 8

What courses do you use academic coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

MBA 702, Financial Management. About 150 students per class.

What do you find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

Answering syllabus questions.

Do you find that coaches are flexible during your courses?

Yes, the coaches are willing to do almost anything I ask of them.

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

Not yet

What have the students said (positive or negative) about their experience with their academic coaches?

Haven't heard any

Overall, how effective are the coaches?

They are OK.

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

The way they handle students' emails.

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

Through bi-weekly emails

What best practices would you recommend?

N/A

Respondent 9

What courses do you use academic coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

MBA 745 Lean Transformation. 150 students each class.

What do you find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

I start them out with fairly easy solo assignments: Data Visualization - make a bar chart, Process Improvement - describe a quality failure you have experienced, Lean Transformation - identify the process improvements you saw displayed in the before and after video

In a next class, I have them score more difficult assignments: Data Visualization - produce a dashboard with a package of 3 or 4 charts, Process Improvement - Create a change management plan, Lean Transformation - Identify the differences between Lean and Six Sigma

Then we move to challenging assignments: Data Visualization - produce a package of dashboards and charts which tells a story, Process Improvement - Create a recommendation report (team assignment), Lean Transformation - Create a future state value stream map (team assignment)

Key aspect of the above, I start things simple, provide feedback, and then increase the work in the following class. I do not expect a rookie coach to be able to do it all in their first class.

Do you find that coaches are flexible during your courses?

My coaches are flexible. They help me out on busy weeks and help each other as well.

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

This is an area for improvement. I have not had time to collect feedback. An LSUS standard would be nice.

What have the students said (positive or negative) about their experience with their academic coaches?

The emails I see and the comments during office hours have been very positive. A few negative items reflect my directions on how to take off points. The coaches are just doing what I want. The students want to earn perfect scores for less than perfect work.

Overall, how effective are the coaches?

Very effective. The average final grades are in line from before when I did not have coaches.

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

Yes. We debrief after each class and share things during the class. I learn where people struggle and then update the content in the course to be better or I adjust the directions in the assignment. We have a robust continuous improvement process.

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

I check the average scores and standard deviations to see if they align with my scoring. I check some of the feedback and scores. Especially when there is an email or office hours visit from a student. As mentioned, we debrief after the class ends and we talk about scoring challenges.

What best practices would you recommend?

I had a very poor experience with several coaches supplied by the coaching firm. A few good coaches and too many bad ones. Example is how they would copy and past the same short “good job” comment for everyone and give everyone 100%. I fired these people. I do not have time for such a lack of ethics. Now, what I did. I recruited 2 of my former students and begged them to become Academic Coaches. Begging them is over the top! They were eager to do this. There are hundreds of LSUS students who are eager to give back and earn some pocket change. My former students have taken the classes and know the material. I also asked a colleague of mine who is an expert in the related field and has helped create some of the content used in the course. As mentioned above, I have an onboarding process and coaches pick up additional responsibility as they move from one class to the next. I have scoring directions for myself and improved them dramatically for the Academic Coaches. The most frequently used feedback comments are written out.

Respondent 10

What courses do you use academic coaches for, and how large are those classes on average?

MBA710 data analysis. Enrollment ranges from 90-180 per class.

What do you find are best use cases for academic coaches? (What are they best at?)

Speed up the grading process. Even though, the accuracy of grading is not 100% accurate. But, the coaches are good screening of these help-needed submissions.

Do you find that coaches are flexible during your courses?

In most cases, yes. Some coaches are not.

How do you get student feedback about coaches?

Emails from students.

What have the students said (positive or negative) about their experience with their academic coaches?

I only get a few students' comments about coaches in the past two years. That was when students questioned that their coach did not grade an assignment correctly.

Overall, how effective are the coaches?

I would say at 90%. I still need to correct some grades afterwards.

Do you learn anything from your coaches?

I see their passion in education and willingness to learn is much valuable to me.

How do you monitor and improve coach performance?

I do examine the coaches' work once they finish grading four or five submissions from an assignment, then let them know if it looks fine, or need to change anything.


What best practices would you recommend?

Keep an eye on rater reliability.

Chapter 12

Best Practices for Using Academic Coaches in Higher Education Online Educational Settings

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will examine the best practices and overall expectations of instructors when using academic coaches in an online educational setting. Academic Coaches have a unique role in the success of online learners. According to Allen and Seaman (2017), enrollment in online graduate programs has increased steadily, prompting

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institutions to implement scalable support models, including the use of academic coaches. A more recent study in 2023 by Champlain College Online revealed that 84% of U.S. adults believe employers are more accepting of online degrees today than before the pandemic because most feel online is more reputable than it was pre-pandemic (Coffey, 2023). According to Peters, Burton, and Rich (2023), the pandemic prompted a reevaluation of academic practices, so universities hired more academic coaches to enhance student success and retention in the face of challenges posed by remote learning and disruptions to traditional educational models.

INTRODUCTION

As online education environments become more complex, the role of academic coaches (ACs) has shifted from passive support, existing in the shadows most of the time, to active instructional partnership. These changes in the role of ACs have created the need for ethical consistency, professional training, and role clarity among coaches.

Their role sets the tone of ethical responsibilities that safeguard the integrity and confidence of the learners. The priority of ACs is to promote the success of students in their charge, which should dictate ethical practice. The desire of ACs to be true to their students should manifest in ethical conduct, which ensures that they conduct themselves in a way adhering to professional standards of practice and honoring their promise to always do what is best for the students. Fundamental to ensuring the success of students is ensuring that ACs practice with students' best interests at heart. This chapter focuses on positive character traits related to the ethical standards expected of highly effective ACs.

The most effective grading practices provide accurate, specific, and timely feedback designed to improve student performance (Marzano, 2000, 2007; O'Connor, 2007). Ethical grading is a concept that is part of coaches' personal and professional ethical values. Grading student work in an ethical manner involves assessing individuals or actions based on established principles and standards of one's academic discipline, as well as standards established in rubrics and instructions. Following professor-provided rubrics, where common language is used, ensures that ACs are grading every student by the same standards. Using these common rubrics helps eliminate any personal bias or subjective judgment in a coach's grading, which is a display of ethical principles.

Ethical Grading in an Online Setting

In educational settings, ethical grading primarily focuses on the academic integrity of the individual who is grading the student's work. Most educational institutions have developed codes of conduct that emphasize respect, honesty, and responsibility. Educators are expected to employ these characteristics and adhere to the guidelines established in the code of conduct.

Academic integrity is another crucial aspect, addressing issues like plagiarism and cheating. According to McCabe et al. (2001), academic dishonesty is a pervasive issue, and implementing strict ethical grading can help mitigate this problem by fostering a culture of honesty and integrity. Academic integrity is a characteristic that cannot be taught; it must be modeled.

Impact of Ethical Grading

The impact of ethical grading extends beyond the evaluation of student work. It is an invaluable component of online teaching and learning. Ethical grading of student work helps create environments that prioritize ethical behavior and accountability. Ethical grading can foster a culture of integrity and respect between the student, professor, and academic assistant. This culture of respect is crucial for the academic success of students.

It is important as part of a culture of honesty, respect, and trust in grading practices that online programs develop clear policies and consequences for violating ethical principles and ethical standards for grading. It is difficult to maintain a culture of respect and trust in an online format due to the basic design of online learning courses. Therefore, establishing trust between students and instructional staff is important, and employing ethical grading practices is one avenue to help build a culture of respect and trust in the online environment.

For professors, ethical grading involves evaluating their adherence to professional standards, fairness in grading, and their role in fostering an ethical learning environment. Professors who demonstrate fairness, respect student diversity, and maintain integrity in their professional conduct are graded higher on the ethical scale.

So, what does ethical grading look like? Ethical grading means grading student work in a manner that is objective and without bias toward the student or the content of the work to build a culture of respect, honesty, and trust. According to Lee (2022), offering fair and inclusive assessments and grading consistency without bias promotes an environment of academic integrity. When students are given a tool to self-reflect on their work, they know exactly what is expected of them. This promotes ethical development because they take more responsibility for their learning.

For example, one AC encountered an ethical dilemma when a rubric did not specifically indicate the need for American Psychological Association (APA) style formatting, yet the faculty member had strong expectations regarding citations and references in APA format. The coach applied a strict standard, which led to several student complaints. The issue was resolved after a faculty meeting clarified expectations and updated the rubric accordingly. This highlights the need for pre-course meetings to discuss expectations and clear documentation.

Another example is when the instructor gives information on changes or expectations for coursework in a Zoom meeting, and the ACs are not aware of changes, inconsistencies, and so on. This creates turmoil for students, coaches, and the instructor.

Positive Character Traits and Expectations of ACs

Across cultures, regions, religions, and continents, numerous positive character traits or virtues are agreed upon. Professors, instructors, school leaders, and ACs in P-12 and collegiate settings must model those traits. In their best-selling book *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner (2023) began with the premise that coaches are to “model the way.” They went on to explain that ACs should establish principles concerning the way people should be treated and the way they should pursue goals. There are several character virtues that ACs should model.

Responsibility

Responsibility may be defined as the willingness to be accountable for our choices and also for our mistakes. As ACs, we share the responsibility of grading in a timely manner and answering students’ communications. In our feedback, we have a responsibility to explain our reasoning for point deductions. This can be done directly through a rubric or with more detailed commentary and explanation.

Accountability

We must demonstrate *accountability*. We are accountable to the institution that we represent. We are accountable to the professors of the courses; we want to ensure that their expectations are met. There is accountability to the students as well, to demonstrate our commitment to their learning.

Cooperation and Collaboration

Cooperation and *collaboration* are paramount to the success of a course. ACs must work hand-in-hand with the professor or instructor to attempt a consistent and

seamless offering of the content. Relevant policies, such as grading and late work acceptance, must be discussed and shared.

Diligence

Diligence is doing what needs to be done with care, concentration, and single-pointed attention, giving our absolute best. As we grade and provide feedback, we must be focused on our role as ACs. We must be detail-oriented and not distracted in order to provide the best possible learning experience for our students.

Fidelity

Fidelity is abiding by an agreement, treating it as a sacred covenant. Fidelity goes hand-in-hand with the virtue of diligence. This means that coaches should grade with fidelity, doing their due diligence in making sure the grading policies are carried out and that they give their full attention to the grading of assignments. As course loads may be heavy, it is easy to get grading fatigue and tend to skim students' work rather than grading with fidelity. This must be avoided. Taking grading breaks or grading work across multiple days can help mitigate that temptation.

Trustworthiness

Fidelity ties in well with the virtue of *trustworthiness*, being worthy of the trust others place in us. When we give our word, we stand by it, keeping our agreements faithfully. The professor trusts that the AC will grade with fidelity and adhere to university and course policies. The students put their trust in the ACs to provide honest and fair feedback.

Honesty

Honesty is important. ACs must provide honest feedback while also being tactful. Tactfulness can be defined as “telling the truth kindly. Thinking before we speak, aware of how deeply our words affect others. Discerning what to say, when it is timely to say it, and what is better left unsaid” (The Virtues Project, 2021).

Humility

Humility may play a role as well. ACs should show humility when a student or professor points out an error or oversight in their grading. This connects with the

virtues of honesty and responsibility, being honest about our mistakes and taking responsibility for our actions.

Integrity

As with any position or job, *integrity* is of utmost importance. Integrity pulls all the virtues together. The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines integrity as “the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles that you refuse to change.” These ethical principles are the character virtues that have been mentioned.

Patience

Patience must be exercised as well. Sometimes, students complain or voice concerns without valid reason. In these cases, ACs should exhibit patience. Often, miscommunication may be the cause of misunderstandings. As we respond, patience and tactfulness should guide our actions.

Technology Use and Artificial Intelligence¹

The growing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as auto-grading assistants, plagiarism detection software, and predictive analytics platforms is shaping how ACs interact with students. While these tools can improve efficiency, they also raise ethical concerns related to privacy, bias, and over-reliance. ACs must be trained not only to use these tools but also to interpret their output responsibly, ensuring that student learning is assessed fairly and contextually (Selwyn, 2019). Although these tools can provide invaluable support for ACs, analysis and feedback on student work cannot be just copied and pasted. Ethical guidelines for ACs need to reiterate the value of providing feedback to the student based on the rubric and specifics in the instructions.

AI is no different than any other tool we use; the output is only as good as the input. Similar to using a calculator, if someone inputs the wrong numbers and just assumes the answer is correct without any thought, then the output can be wrong. In this way, AI can support, but never replace, a coach’s professional judgement. Academic coaching requires an understanding of the learner, individual growth, relative risk-taking, and effort over time. These elements are essential in formative assessments, which AI is not equipped to handle alone (Pozdniakov et al., 2024).

AI grading tools, like all AI tools, can introduce or amplify bias. Research has shown that large language models and automated scoring systems may penalize non-standard English, favor particular sentence structures, or make assumptions based on prior data that disadvantage linguistically or culturally diverse students

(Williamson & Eynon, 2020). Coaches must approach these tools with critical awareness and ensure that feedback remains actionable, individualized, and equitable, anchored in human insight.

AI's role is expanding in every facet of education. For example, AI is increasingly able to support special education teachers by streamlining administrative duties and even helping with progress monitoring. This advancement not only enhances the special ed teacher's ability to effectively accommodate students with disabilities but also offers critical relief from the time-consuming tasks, allowing more focus on direct instruction and individualized student support. However, much like classroom teachers, AIs must be empowered to question, adapt, and sometimes override AI-generated suggestions. Institutions should provide training not just in the mechanics of these platforms but in their ethical application, including transparency in how scores are derived and when human correction is necessary (Pozdniakov et al., 2024).

Predictive analytics can also help coaches identify at-risk students earlier, prompting timely interventions. However, coaches must remain cautious of labeling students prematurely or relying solely on algorithmic predictions. The building of human relationships, engaging students in conversations, and the ability to read between the lines are where the impact of coaching is seen (Luckin et al., 2016). While AI may offer efficiency, it is the coach's discretion, knowledge, and empathy that help to shape a student's academic path most meaningfully.

Providing Valuable Feedback on Student Work

According to the editorial team of Indeed (2023), *Effective feedback is a way of giving input that can be positive (such as a compliment), negative (such as a corrective measure) or neutral (such as a general observation), but it is always useful to the receiver. It provides recipients with insight or suggestions that contribute to desired outcomes. If you want to give effective feedback, you should aim to be supportive, encouraging, and specific on the direction that is needed to change, improve or continue actions and performance. (para. 2)*

One of the worst things one can do when providing effective feedback is let emotions come into play (McKay, 2017). To have any real power, corrective feedback must be delivered in such a way and by such a person that it will be attended to, rather than simply arousing defensiveness, denial, or anger. That means that the ideal provider of feedback is someone the recipient trusts and respects, and that the provider conveys the feedback as sensitively as possible.

A Course Professor's Role

When a course professor is assigned many students on the roster, approximately 35 students or more, the professor is provided with an AC for each section of 35. Though the task of reading students' work, completing the rubrics, and providing feedback is then assigned to the ACs for such a large roster, the ultimate responsibility for the quality of grading and feedback remains with the professor. Thus, the professor must determine the standards and expectations for the course and then communicate them to the ACs. Additionally, professors must ensure that their AC has been properly introduced to students enrolled in the course. Students should know who is serving in the AC role, why that person is assisting a particular course (e.g., one's expertise or connection to the course material), and how the AC will interact and participate in the course. Clarifying the instructional roles on the front end of the course helps avoid potential confusion once assignments begin.

The course professor should look at the course to determine the most significant objectives for students to master, the key assessments, and how the ACs and course professors will support students' learning and success in the course. For example, the course professor should know the primary concepts for each module and how students are expected to effectively express their comprehension and knowledge of the primary concepts through the module's assignments.

Since the course professor has expertise in the academic focus of the course, it is the professor's responsibility to guide the ACs throughout the semester. At the start of the course, the course professor should meet with the ACs to provide an overview of the course including the readings, videos, documents, and other materials that the students will use to explore the lessons. Also, the course professor should review the distinct types of assignments in the course; discussion boards, tests, papers, slide decks, presentations, or quizzes may be assigned to students, and the ACs need to know the types of assessments students will complete. Such an overview at the very start of the course will help ACs know what to expect and how to support students assigned to their sections.

An interrater reliability (IRR) exercise should be completed by the ACs for the course and reviewed with the course professor. The course professor should select an important or major assignment in the course. After a few students have completed the assignment, the course professor selects at least two candidate examples and provides the rubric and the names of the two students for which the IRR will be completed. After the ACs complete the rubrics for the students, they submit the rubrics to the course professor. The course professor should review any inaccuracies using the rubric or suggestions for feedback improvements with the ACs before the assignment is graded for the course.

The course professor should determine key points in the course during which to meet with the ACs. Are there specific lessons or assignments that will likely cause students to have a lot of questions or need a lot of support? At these key points in the course, it should be ensured that the course professor meets with the ACs to prepare them so they know how to guide students and answer their questions. For a full semester, course professors should meet with ACs at least every few weeks; for a briefer session of about five weeks, course professors may only need to meet with the ACs at the beginning, middle, and just before the end of the course. Such meetings are likely to happen remotely but can be impactful if the course professor is prepared to review materials and expectations and be flexible enough to elicit and address questions and concerns from the ACs.

An ACs' Role

Since ACs are often assigned to their courses just before they begin, they need to be nimble, flexible, and quick studies. Every course provides unique challenges for students, and every professor has different standards for and expectations of the students enrolled in a given course and the ACs assigned to the course. Thus, successful ACs learn and adapt quickly to the course, reviewing lessons and assignments, and asking astute questions to ensure that they are successful in their role.

ACs need to keep up with the lessons to answer students' questions, effectively read their work, complete the rubrics, and provide feedback. After the course professor provides an overview for the course and highlights specific objectives and key assessments, for the upcoming module, the AC needs to read the articles, view the videos, and review documents in the lessons. Only an AC who completes the lessons will be able to effectively support students' learning, answer questions, and guide them through that module.

Assignment directions, examples, rubrics, and any additional guidance provided by the course professor need to be thoroughly reviewed and understood by the AC. Only then can the AC accurately answer students' questions and grade students' work. Clearly written directions, aligned rubrics, examples, and other communication from the course professor help students successfully complete learning activities and assessments. However, students may make incorrect assumptions, misunderstand phrasing, or get confused by examples. These things happen even in the best-designed courses with clear communication from the course professor. The AC needs to address inaccurate assumptions, clarify phrasing, and address students' confusion when responding to students' questions. Effective ACs check and respond to email throughout the day. Daily communication, via clearly phrased emails, phone calls when needed, and virtual meetings can help students learn and thrive in their courses.

An essential aspect of students' experiences during courses is the quality of grading and written feedback they receive for their assignments. Though ACs have various responsibilities and tasks to complete in their role, arguably the most important responsibility is to accurately grade, using the rubric when provided, and give poignant, insightful, and supportive feedback to the students.

What to Avoid

Avoiding pitfalls when providing feedback can help keep students from becoming apathetic or combative, or from choosing or promoting a different program. Both ACs and course professors should check to ensure that assignment directions are easy-to-understand and reflected in the rubric. If requirements on the directions are not included in the rubric, and vice versa, students get confused and may not complete aspects of the assignments not consistently included on both documents.

ACs must be familiar with the rubrics and consistently complete each rubric for each candidate's assignments. If an error is made by the AC, the candidate should bring it to the attention of the AC, and the correction should be made quickly, and an apology should be made to the candidate. Regular and timely communication, about any errors or inconsistencies, between the course professor and the AC helps ensure that students do not receive different messages from their AC and the course professor. When mistakes are discovered in the course, in communication or grading, the problem should be fixed quickly and with an appropriate level of contrition.

Feedback that is generic or simple, or fails to correct errors or promote exemplary work, leads to mediocre performance by students and, eventually, apathy on the part of students. ACs should avoid using the same feedback for each candidate for an assignment. ACs should not provide generic positive or negative comments to students. For example, comments such as "Good job" or "Nice work" may sound supportive, but they do not promote growth. Students do not know what they did well or where they were successful in completing an assignment. Conversely, comments such as "This needs work" or "You can do better" lack specificity to guide the candidate toward improved performance on future assignments. Clear, specific, tailored feedback is what students need and what effective ACs provide.

Quality of Content

Feedback the AC provides to students can help the students learn, reflect, and thrive in a course or can have the opposite effect. Detailed feedback that is tailored to that assignment and the work created by that candidate is of the utmost importance.

ACs should know the central objective or most important aspect of the assignment. The AC who does not know this should ask the course professor.

When students successfully meet the assignment objective, specific aspects about the quality of their work should be included in the feedback. For example, here is an example of specific, positive feedback: “The introduction of your paper immediately engaged the reader in a clearly written manner and also informed the reader what they will learn from your work.” If generic, positive feedback is provided, such as “Great introduction,” the candidate will not know what aspects of the introduction was successful or how to emulate those same aspects in future assignments.

Also, when students do not meet the objectives of an assignment, generic feedback from the AC can be misleading, confusing, and perhaps even demoralizing. When students’ grades are poor, and they do not receive specific feedback to guide them toward success, they may consider dropping out of their program, fail to thrive on future assignments, or even cheat to get better grades. Thus, focused, constructive feedback from the AC is especially important. For example, “This paper is poorly organized” lets a student know which area of the work is problematic. However, if the feedback was, “Using subtitles throughout your paper can help you keep your ideas clearly organized and helps the reader anticipate what they will learn from your work,” the student will know how to fix the organizational problem and why the problem exists. When ACs spend time and effort to give specific, focused, and guided feedback, they help students flourish.

ACs need to work efficiently to meet the various demands of their roles. However, giving specific, focused, and guided feedback takes time. Thus, focusing on the central objective of an assignment, critiquing any problematic areas of students’ work, and commending exemplary areas of students’ work take practice to do so efficiently. Reading papers for both content and context at the same time, and catching problems and exemplary work, often improves as the AC gains experience.

To provide feedback, especially for longer papers, the AC may want to embed feedback directly into the students’ work. This can be an efficient way for the AC to commend high-quality work and correct errors immediately where the exceptional ideas, writing, or formatting is done within the assignment. Students often appreciate embedded feedback, and this helps them improve their work if another draft of a paper is accepted or for future assignments of a similar nature.

For shorter assignments, the AC may want to solely provide feedback in the separate feedback area within the learning management system, such as Canvas or Blackboard. For efficiency purposes, the AC may start with a general comment that could apply to most students, then add individualized feedback within those general comments. Students should receive feedback on the content quality and writing or APA quality when that is relevant to the assignment. In feedback, ACs should always include the candidate’s name, and the AC’s name and email address.

Students are often taking multiple courses, and such information in the feedback can help students avoid errors and know immediately who and how to contact the person who gave feedback on the assignment when they need clarification.

Quality of Writing and Adhering to APA Standards

When the assignment directions and rubrics note the quality of writing or that adherence to APA is required, the AC must carefully review students' writing and formatting. Of course, the AC must have strong writing skills and knowledge of the appropriate style guidelines to accurately assess students' writing and formatting. Usually for academic work, writing is more formal and precise, as well as supported with research, than writing for other purposes. Also, the various rules and standards of academic writing must be followed, especially for major papers, theses, and dissertations. The AC must know whether APA, Chicago, or MLA writing and formatting standards are used by the program and expected by the course professor. Each type of writing and formatting standard has specific rules and guidelines. There are free, easy-to-use resources ACs may use to check when a candidate has a question or to ensure that the feedback provided to a candidate is accurate.

Students who struggle to write should be given specific feedback embedded throughout their work. In addition, most universities have a writing lab for students to use. ACs should check with the course professor about resources available to support students who struggle with their writing. ACs may want to encourage these students to use the university's writing lab to improve writing skills, get feedback before submitting papers and major projects and, between courses, even refine their skills for future courses.

Ethical Work Habits of the AC

As a coach, one is expected to exhibit certain moral or ethical work habits and possess academic integrity. Academic integrity requires a commitment to certain values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility (Fishman, 2014). Ethical work habits can be established from those values, and this can lead to the ethical academic behavior of ACs in an online course community (Holden et al., 2021). ACs may be used in various ways across institutions. As an extension of the faculty of record, one main purpose of an AC is to assist through administrative tasks (Forman & Sanchez, 2022; Instructional Connections, 2023). Responsibilities of ACs may include managing discussion threads, handling announcements, addressing student questions or concerns, and grading course assignments (Instructional Connections, 2023). Recent research highlighted faculty members who found few student complaints about their AC and, if complaints were reported, that grading

was the main area of concern (Forman & Sanchez, 2022; Hernandez & Garcia, 2022; Instructional Connections, 2023). Thus, ACs must exhibit ethical work habits in order to fulfill responsibilities effectively and efficiently, specifically in grading student assignments.

Since grading can be an issue, an AC must always operate only within the guidelines set by the faculty member or university (Forman & Sanchez, 2022; Instructional Connections, 2023). To begin, a coach should review the course syllabus and all available due dates for all course assignments. This ensures that the AC knows when to commence and complete grading throughout each assignment. Course syllabi typically inform students of faculty grading practices; as such, coaches should review this section and try their best to uphold the grading time frame recorded by the faculty member of the assigned course. ACs are encouraged to grade assignments and extend feedback within a 48-hour window (Park & Robinson, 2021). If the AC feels more time is needed to grade each assignment efficiently, the coach should reach out to the faculty member to discuss the matter. Depending on the faculty member's response to the request, the AC should also alert students through announcement or email communication if any delay should occur in grading. This provides students with transparent communication throughout the grading process.

Grading student work is set up in various ways across institutions and among faculty. For grading purposes, some faculty develop rubrics for course assignments. ACs should familiarize themselves with each rubric to be used during a course assignment. The coach should follow the grading guidelines set forth by the faculty member and try to meet regularly with the faculty member to discuss assignments and rubrics (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). An instructor may elect to grade one or two student assignments using the rubric for the AC to review. The coach should also follow any instructions provided by the instructor when a rubric is to be used. For instance, a faculty member may require students to write at least seven sentences to receive full credit for a peer response on the course discussion board. In this instance, the AC should be sure that each student who receives full credit includes at least a minimum of seven sentences and anything else prescribed within the rubric.

Since grading is one responsibility of ACs, they must set aside proper time to thoroughly read students' submitted work and grade accordingly to provide a fair and valid score on each course assignment. Therefore, a coach should not skim over student work to mark boxes within a rubric or simply provide points for an assignment that has not been fully evaluated, to finish grading quickly. A rubric or other tool to grade an assignment can be used by students to prepare their work before final submission and to review their submitted work. Therefore, the coach should grade each student submission equitably and fairly according to the faculty member's guidelines (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022)

An AC should also provide appropriate feedback on all graded assignments. The feedback should include areas where the student performed well and met assignment guidelines and include areas of growth and improvement that may contain assignment guidelines somewhat met or not met at all. The coach should meet regularly with the faculty of record to discuss the method and frequency of feedback (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). The feedback supplied should include both positive and constructive feedback to support student progress in the assigned course. In order to provide fair and equitable grading, an AC should not allow personal bias or emotions to guide grading practices (Fagbohun et al., 2024; Ferman & Fontes, 2022). If an AC begins to feel any emotional response, such as frustration, stepping away from grading and returning once the emotional response has been resolved are paramount.

ACs must follow grading guidelines set forth by the faculty of record and the institution (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). Faculty syllabi also typically include information regarding late work policies. Late work policies may differ across institutions and faculty members. A coach should review the syllabi to know how to handle any student's late work. If the AC has any questions about a student's late work, those questions should be communicated to the faculty member. The coach should then address student late work as the faculty member or institutional policy prescribes. If a student has a problem, the AC can refer the student to the appropriate section in the course syllabus and inform the faculty member. The faculty member may then have to help resolve the issue. The coach should remain transparent in communication and provide any information needed to the faculty member. Information may include any communication exchanged between the coach and student(s) involved and any grading information, such as completed rubrics, feedback, and points provided.

An AC must uphold academic integrity and should engage ethical practices, specifically when grading student work. When students do complain about an academic coach to faculty members, it is often about grading. To rectify this, ACs should grade in a timely manner, provide transparent communication to faculty and students concerning grading timelines, grade fairly and equitably following faculty of record directions, and offer positive and constructive feedback to support students' course progress.

Communicating With Students

Communicating with students is perhaps one of the most important aspects of an online program. Communication in online programs can become a difficult process for the student, the professor, and the AC. To verify that communication is done

appropriately on the part of the academic assistants, professors should monitor all communication to ensure that it is always done ethically.

What does ethical communication look like in an online program? Moral communication means considering the thoughts and feelings of the person with whom one is communicating. Mandelbaum (2020) defined ethical communication as

a type of communication that is predicated upon certain business values, such as being truthful, concise, and responsible with one's words and the resulting actions. As a set of principles, ethical communication understands that one's thoughts must be conveyed and expressed effectively and concisely, and that the resulting actions or consequences will [potentially] be based solely on how the message was communicated. Thus, ethical communication defines a framework or set of acceptable communication principles that align with an enterprise's overarching code of conduct or code of ethics. (Ethical Communication Defined section)

All educators must think about their words, especially in written communications such as emails and course announcements, because it is hard to know one's intended tone. Messages to students or colleagues should avoid use of words that can give the impression of prejudice. Always be polite, and always be considerate of the person's problems or situation. It is important for professors to treat students with respect and acknowledge their value as individuals. All instructional staff should create an atmosphere that encourages discussions and academic development without using disrespectful language (Lovat et al., 2011). To this end, professors should aim to communicate equally with all students, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate and excel. This involves providing feedback, fair grading standards, and avoiding any biases or preference. Showing empathy is crucial for professors in understanding students' viewpoints, experiences, and struggles. Compassionate communication involves caring about students' emotional well-being and helping when needed (Noddings, 2012). Professors should embrace inclusivity by respecting the backgrounds of their students. This means creating a learning environment that considers perspectives while avoiding any discriminatory behavior (Kuh, 2008). Professors must set an example through their actions and integrity. APA's (2023) *Inclusive Language Guide* can be a resource for instructors or ACs looking to either check their language or update their language to ensure that their communications are inclusive and affirming.

Stories From the Instructional Trenches of Academic Coaching

So now we find ourselves deep in the instructional trenches of academic coaching. We already know that ACs play an essential role in the academic success of graduate students who are enrolled in fully online programs. But what do students

in the online courses have to say about their ACs? Do coaches provide the support, feedback, and communication crucial for the success of students? According to a study conducted at a four-year institution, it was determined that graduate students in educational leadership programs were generally satisfied with the level of professionalism of the ACs (Shaw & Williams, 2019). To determine exactly what students say, we have analyzed a group of student evaluations of faculty and ACs. The following information is a comprehensive body of feedback data, thematic analysis, and specific comments to present a full evaluation of the performance of ACs in educational leadership and graduate-level coursework.

Thematic Analysis of Stories From Students²

Theme 1: High Praise for Specific ACs

Students consistently highlighted ACs who made a significant, positive impact on their learning. Here are examples of actual student comments:

- “The academic assistant was very timely with grading and gave excellent feedback.”
- “The course instructor and assistant were both accommodating and communicated in a timely manner at all times.”
- “I enjoyed this class and found the academic coaches incredibly helpful and supportive throughout.”

These academic assistants were acknowledged not only for the technical aspects of their role—grading and communication—but also for their presence, dependability, and interpersonal interaction. Their efforts helped create a more engaging, motivating, and confidence-boosting experience for graduate learners.

The ability of these individuals to form meaningful academic relationships was a consistent factor across the courses. Coaches who demonstrated professionalism, encouragement, clarity, and empathy were appreciated not just as graders but as integral parts of the instructional team.

Theme 2: Responsiveness and Availability

Students emphasized the importance of quick and clear communication. In multiple instances, ACs were praised for responding within 1–2 days, alleviating anxiety and increasing trust in the course structure. One comment illustrates this clearly:

“The academic coaches responded quickly to questions or statements, making stress levels drop or never rise.”

This theme was noted as especially important in capstone courses, where timely feedback is critical for academic success. Delays in grading or a lack of acknowledgment can be more than frustrating—they may compromise a student’s ability to stay on schedule. Students valued ACs who were “always available,” responded during evenings or weekends, and made students feel heard. This responsiveness contributed to a more inclusive and supportive academic environment, which is especially important in fully online programs where students may otherwise feel disconnected.

Theme 3: High-Quality, Constructive Feedback

The most celebrated contribution of effective ACs was the delivery of constructive, actionable, and personalized feedback. Students noted:

- “The comments made on my graded assignments were the most insightful and encouraging I’ve received.”
- “The feedback I received was always encouraging and helped me improve my work.”

Students highlighted feedback that was clear, tied to rubrics, and offered specific suggestions for improvement. Positive reinforcement, paired with constructive critique, created a safe and motivating learning space. This was particularly important in writing-intensive and project-based courses, where students are allowed to resubmit work to improve their grades. In academic writing assignments, policy analysis, and legal casework, students appreciated it when ACs provided examples of proper formatting and interpretation of the assignment instructions. This instructional role elevated the ACs’ contributions from clerical support to academic mentorship.

Theme 4: Personalized Support and Positive Relationships

Students praised ACs for establishing meaningful academic relationships. These relationships helped students feel supported, respected, and valued. Example feedback included:

- “The coach made personalized comments on assignments that helped me develop skills for other tasks.”
- “The academic coach and instructor were both accommodating and would help in any way possible.”

These interpersonal connections were particularly appreciated by students juggling academic responsibilities with careers, families, and other commitments. ACs who acknowledged individual progress and offered encouragement played a crucial role in maintaining motivation.

Theme 5: Alignment With Instructor Expectations

Another key indicator of excellence was the alignment between the coach's feedback and the instructor's goals. Students noticed when feedback was coherent and reinforced key concepts: "The coach always commented on graded work in a way that supported the instructor's vision for the course." When ACs used consistent language, referenced lectures, or applied the same grading criteria as the instructor, students reported higher levels of satisfaction. It fostered a cohesive learning environment where expectations were clear and consistent.

Theme 6: Technical and Procedural Support

ACs also provided essential technical support. In large online courses, students appreciated having a dedicated support person to:

- clarify assignment instructions;
- troubleshoot submission errors;
- and assist in navigating course tools or platforms.

Students expressed gratitude for coaches who posted reminders, clarified expectations, or helped access needed materials. These supports ensured that students could focus on content mastery without being hindered by avoidable procedural issues.

Theme 7: Emotional Encouragement

Emotional encouragement emerged as a powerful theme in student feedback. Graduate students often navigate their studies while managing significant job and family responsibilities. ACs who provided reassurance and affirmation were seen as invaluable:

- "The [AC]'s comments were uplifting and made me feel supported."
- "Knowing that someone was there rooting for me helped me push through challenges."

In many cases, supportive messages from an AC helped students persist through difficult assignments or personal stressors. By humanizing online learning interactions, ACs played a key role in maintaining student morale.

Theme 8: Internship and Capstone Strength

Internship and capstone courses generated the most detailed praise. Students credited academic assistants for:

- guiding reflections;
- tracking fieldwork documentation;
- and helping interpret assessment rubrics.

These ACs often acted as mentors, not just graders. Their expertise and responsiveness enabled students to complete major academic milestones with clarity and confidence. In high-stakes scenarios, a helpful coach was often the difference between total meltdowns and success in the course. As one student noted, “The [AC]’s feedback in my internship course clarified all my concerns and helped me stay on track every week.”

Theme 9: Patterns of Praise Across Multiple Courses

Although names are anonymized in this report, multiple ACs were recognized across semesters and course sections for their excellence. These individuals were consistently described as:

- supportive and encouraging;
- professional and detail-oriented;
- and fair and timely in grading.

Students recognized these recurring qualities and often commented that they wished more courses had ACs of similar caliber. The consistency of this praise demonstrates how individual ACs can leave a lasting impression on a student’s graduate experience.

Theme 10: Satisfaction and Institutional Metrics

Quantitative survey data further supports these themes.

- Over 80% of students agreed or strongly agreed that feedback from ACs improved their understanding of the course.
- Approximately 75% of students noted that ACs responded promptly and helpfully to emails or assignment questions.
- More than 90% of students said the coach contributed meaningfully to their academic development.

Summary of Key Themes

The most frequently mentioned theme was timeliness and communication (88%), with students emphasizing prompt and available help. Feedback quality followed at 84%, highlighting appreciation for detailed and specific responses. Supportiveness and empathy appeared in 73% of comments, using words like “encouraging” and “uplifting.” Finally, technical assistance was noted by 60% of students, specifically referencing help navigating platforms and clarifying technical issues.

These satisfaction levels point to the institutional value of ACs when effectively trained and integrated into course structures. They are not just a support resource; they are instructional partners. They are, in fact, the life support of faculty in online courses. Without the help of ACs, faculty would never be able to effectively work with hundreds of students in online courses.

Instructor Stories and Feedback Regarding ACs³

At the end of courses at many universities, course evaluations are sent out to students. As a part of these evaluations, students are asked to rate the professor of the course. Students also share comments about the ACs on the evaluations. Here are a few more actual comments made by students in educational leadership programs:

- “She has been one of the best [AC]s I’ve had during my time as a student in the Ed.S. program. She is gracious, kind, and very helpful when questions are asked. I appreciate her so much!” (Student course evaluations, personal communication, 2022).
- “The [AC] was extremely thorough with his feedback on all assignments” (Student course evaluations, personal communication, 2022).
- “My [AC] was great. I thought she graded and communicated effectively and fairly” (Student course evaluations, personal communication, 2023).
- “The professor and [AC] did an excellent job at providing specific, necessary feedback to help me grow and learn” (Student course evaluations, personal communication, 2023).

- “Additionally, I found the [AC] to be very clear and open in his communication. I got the impression he was interested in seeing me (or any student) do well; he seemed personable even though it was online instruction” (Student course evaluations, personal communication, 2024).
- “My [AC] was amazing also. Feedback was directly linked to the rubric and was understandable. Feedback was also timely, and this helped to understand what to improve or change on my next assignment. I appreciate that!” (Student course evaluations, personal communication, 2024).
- “The [AC] probably did the best job of actually grading my work of any [AC] I’ve had. And the only course I have left is the internship. Useful feedback, even if he did mark more wrong than all other [AC]s combined so far. But I felt as if he was grading my work. So, if you are reading this, well done” (Student course evaluations, personal communication, 2024).
- “The [AC] gave feedback, was very prompt with emails and questions, and I just truly enjoyed being within her group” (Student course evaluations, personal communication, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The importance of collaboration between professors and ACs cannot be overstated. Interdependence exists in order to provide the best learning experiences for all students. Additionally, intentional attention to the character of both professors and ACs provides for a positive interaction, not only among the instructional staff but also with students.

Drawing on the experiences of the authors, we recommend the following:

- The university, college, or department should *provide training and professional development* for ACs. For large-scale online programs, it is recommended that deeper appropriate training for ACs be implemented to maximize the positive impact of ACs on student learning and on institutional reputation. It is further suggested that emphasis be placed on the character traits and themes identified in the body of this chapter.
- Professors should *arrange for ACs to have advanced access to the syllabus, course, and textbook*. This will allow the ACs to familiarize themselves with the course to provide better feedback consistent with the course content. For this to occur, ACs must be assigned to courses with sufficient lead time.
- Professors should *meet with ACs* prior to the start of the course regarding expectations. Depending on the format of the program, this meeting can be conducted face-to-face, virtually, or via conference call. Meeting allows for

discussion of assignment instructions, review of the syllabus, and overall expectations.

- The lead professor should *anticipate and communicate potential issues* or questions regarding the course. To prepare, professors should prepare a list of talking points including, but not limited to, personal expectations, grading policies, and issues or questions that typically arise during the course.
- To proactively address the issues that sometimes arise because of lack of individualized feedback from ACs, the lead professor should *provide examples of quality feedback*. As validated in this chapter, good feedback is critical to students' academic experience and their ability to improve their professional skills.
- The professor and ACs should *establish IRR* and simultaneously grade an assignment to identify commonalities and disparities in grading practices. When grading differences are significant between the professor and ACs, a conversation should occur in which the professor provides explanation and rationale for a score as opposed to the differences in the scores by the ACs. This clarification will help to establish consistency of grading, an issue that is especially important when multiple ACs are assigned to a course.
- The lead professor should *facilitate ongoing communication*. The lead professor should prepare weekly letters outlining course expectations for the coming week and reflecting on any issues of the previous week. It is recommended that the ACs send the letter to their section of students after the lead professor has shared it with them. This allows the students to become familiar with their AC and have some form of communication every week. Additionally, the lead professor should conduct periodic communications with the ACs to ensure that expectations are met and to provide assistance as needed.
- Professors should *solicit feedback from the ACs* throughout and after the course. Often, many of the same ACs will assist in the course again. They will be able to make suggestions that can provide improvements, which the lead professor can make for future offerings of the course. As professors, we need to remember to treat the ACs as professionals in order to gain ethical and valuable feedback from them regarding the coursework and materials. If the ACs are made to feel undervalued, then they will not be as open to providing feedback to the professor.

Call to Action (How This Can be Implemented in Programs)

The character and professional traits of ACs are important. Highly effective coaches are those whose day-to-day practices in courses reflect positive ethical principles.

ACs who display positive ethical character create an educational environment for students that is both positive and productive.

To ensure that ACs possess positive character traits, institutions must use a vetting process that values and identifies those traits in the hiring process. Once coaches are hired, institutions must provide intensive training and professional development, which ensure that coaches understand and value the ethical principles necessary to be highly effective ACs.

Several steps can be implemented to guarantee an evaluation process for ACs that identifies the positive values and traits needed in the role. Of course, as with any initiative, laying the groundwork is always the first step. The groundwork in this case would be defining or outlining the ethical principles expected. These principles would include integrity, honesty, responsibility, humility, trustworthiness, fidelity, diligence, cooperation and collaboration, accountability, and patience. There is also a need to include the professional standards that are expected in the position that align with these core values, including confidentiality, impartiality, and a strict adherence to the academic policy of the university or college.

Once the recruitment and selection processes begin, it is crucial to ensure that the job description is unmistakable in terms of the importance of all ethical expectations. During the application process, questions should be included that can help assess the candidate's understanding of and commitment to the program's core values. Make sure that all references can speak to the candidate's ethical character. As part of the screening and interview process, we use mechanisms like questionnaires or assessments that focus on ethical dilemmas and moral decision-making processes. Include behavioral questions that ask the candidates to provide examples of how they have handled challenges in these areas in the past. Also include questions to gauge how the candidates would respond to scenario-based situations involving ethical dilemmas.

Next, comprehensive background checks including academic and professional records should be conducted to make sure there are no indications of red flags for ethical behaviors. This process should involve integrity assessments that are constructed to evaluate the likelihood of unethical behavior. Induction programs should include comprehensive training on the university's ethical expectations. These programs could include workshops that focus on ethics including analyzing case studies, role-playing exercises, and group or individual discussions on theories and applications of ethics in an academic environment.

Provide continuous training sessions, either self-paced or webinars and seminars, that provide instruction on ethics and professional standards. Include ethical decision-making models that advance the candidate's moral decision-making skills. As part of the ongoing monitoring and evaluation process, integrate ethical behavior

and ethical standards assessments. Also, include anonymous feedback mechanisms that allow colleagues and students to report unethical behavior incidents.

Institutions should develop clear policies regarding ethical behavior, and the consequences of ethical violations must be developed. These policies should be transparent and fair mechanisms for enforcing ethical standards and both verifying and addressing any violations of these expectations.

Regularly communicate the importance of ethics and professional standards through appropriate channels, such as institutional newsletters, websites, and other publications. Encourage individuals who exemplify ethical behavior as role models within the individual college or university. Ensure that all leadership levels exhibit a dedication to the same professional and ethical standards.

Institutions should also commit to long-term evaluation processes for academic coaching. This includes collecting and analyzing student feedback, not only at the end of courses but also through mid-term check-ins. This can help inform ongoing training and course design revisions, as well as provide targeted feedback to ACs. Just as we hold students to standards of growth, ACs should have access to professional learning communities, mentorship, and reflective practices that allow them to evolve in their role.

How to Identify a Struggling Coach

While most ACs are dedicated professionals, even the strongest coaching systems require monitoring and continuous development. Coaches may not know they are struggling or may just feel isolated from anyone who can help them with their struggles due to the dynamics of the online setting. Institutions should be attentive to early warning signs that a coach may need additional training, mentoring, or role clarification. The authors feel this is important as part of the “call to action” because it can help ACs develop a sense of trust with their lead coaches as well as the professors with whom they partner. Several areas that may indicate an academic coach is struggling include the following.

Delayed Grading or Missing Feedback

Timely and consistent feedback is the foundation for student learning in online settings. If students report delays in grading of more than a week or receive no feedback at all, this may reflect poor time management, insufficient training in the learning management system, or overwhelming workload demands (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007). Prompt and formative feedback has been linked to increased student satisfaction and engagement (Espasa & Meneses, 2010). Students want to

see their grade and feedback, so they feel more comfortable proceeding to the next assignment.

Generic or Unhelpful Assignment Comments

Feedback that lacks specificity (e.g., “Good work” or “Try harder”) offers little value. At times, these comments are even cut and pasted from one student to the next and do not reflect any personal feedback or acknowledgment of the academic coach having read any of the work. Effective ACs align feedback with the course rubric and provide actionable, learner-centered suggestions (Shute, 2008). A pattern of vague feedback may signal a coach’s discomfort with academic expectations or inadequate orientation to the course goals (Borup et al., 2014).

Student Complaints About Communication

Consistent, respectful, and responsive communication is one of the strongest predictors of positive online student perceptions (Bolliger & Martin, 2018). If students report that their coach is slow to reply, unclear in explanations, or perceived as unapproachable, these are signs that communication protocols or relational competencies need development. It is imperative that ACs respond to emails quickly. Email is the main communication for online students. So, if the coach is delayed in responding, it can create panic or anxiety for the students.

Inconsistent Grading Practices Across Sections

Variability in grading standards among ACs can erode student trust and academic fairness. Research suggests that rubrics are only as effective as the alignment between instructors and evaluators in applying them (Brookhart, 2013). Discrepancies between coaches and professors can result in grade appeals and perceived inequity. One of the ways instructional staff can help maintain consistent grading practices is to use IRR checks periodically throughout the course. IRR helps to make coaches comfortable with their grading practices and helps the professor maintain consistency for students.

Signs of Emotional Burnout or Disengagement

Emotional exhaustion and disengagement—such as missing meetings, expressing cynicism, or routinely failing to meet expectations—can be early signs of professional burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Coaching in online settings, while flexible, can also be isolating. Ongoing supervision, reflective practice, and access to peer

support systems are essential for sustainable performance (Swan et al., 2012). Grading student work in an online setting can be very monotonous and lead to grading practices that are not in the best interest of the student.

Final Thoughts

As ACs become more commonly used in online undergraduate and graduate programs, it is important to evaluate their effectiveness using more than just student praise or occasional surveys. While students often express appreciation and note the benefits of coaching, more concrete, data-driven research is needed to truly understand how academic coaching influences outcomes like performance and success across various learning environments. To better understand the value of academic coaching, quantitative research is needed to explore its connection to student retention, grade point average, and graduation rates. Although coaching is often believed to support student persistence, there is a lack of large-scale, long-term studies to confirm this. Following groups of students, with and without coaching, while accounting for factors like course load, instructor, and previous academic performance, would offer a clearer picture of the true impact of coaching models.

Taking these steps can help build a reliable system for selecting ACs who demonstrate a strong commitment to ethical standards. Ongoing training and support will further ensure that coaches continue to model and uphold these values throughout their careers, contributing to a culture of integrity and excellence.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Integrity: A commitment to the values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility.

Accountability: Being accountable to the institution, professors, and students.

Academic Coach: (AC): Contracted support staff having a unique and active role in the success of online learners, shifting from passive support to active instructional partnership. This chapter also refers to them as “academic assistants” in some sections.

Cooperation and Collaboration: Working together with the professor or instructor to provide a consistent and seamless course experience.

Diligence: Doing what needs to be done with care, concentration, and single-pointed attention.

Ethical Communication: A type of communication based on values such as being truthful, concise, and responsible with one's words and actions.

Fidelity: Abiding by an agreement and treating it as a sacred covenant, which goes hand-in-hand with diligence.

Honesty: Providing honest feedback while also being tactful.

Humility: Showing humbleness when a student or professor points out an error or oversight in grading.

Integrity: The quality of being an honest person and having strong moral principles.

Patience: Exercising patience when students complain or voice concerns without a valid reason.

Responsibility: The willingness to be accountable for one's choices and mistakes.

Tactfulness: Telling the truth kindly, thinking before speaking, and being aware of how words affect others.

Trustworthiness: Being worthy of the trust others place in you, and keeping your agreements faithfully.

ENDNOTES


- ¹ Portions of the section discussing the ethical implications of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted grading, feedback, and academic communication were developed with the support of OpenAI’s ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025). The authors reviewed and edited the results, and they take full responsibility for the final content. All content, interpretations, and conclusions reflect the authors’ own work and responsibility.

- ² Portions of the section’s thematic analysis of stories from students were developed with the support of OpenAI’s ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2025). AI was used to analyze and interpret the themes from actual statements made by students on instructor evaluations. These tools were used to synthesize student feedback, organize thematic analysis, and support clarity in writing. All content, interpretations, and conclusions reflect the authors’ own work and responsibility.
- ³ Portions of this section on “Stories from the Instructional Trenches of Academic Coaching” and “Instructor Stories and Feedback Regarding ACs” were developed with the support of AI-assisted writing tools, including OpenAI’s ChatGPT. These tools were used to synthesize student feedback, organize thematic analysis, and support clarity in writing. All content, interpretations, and conclusions reflect the authors’ own work and responsibility.

Chapter 13


Effective Practices in Working With Academic Coaches

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ABSTRACT

As online education grows, instructional teams with academic coaches have become increasingly valuable in higher education. Coaches play crucial roles in fostering student engagement, supporting active learning, and delivering timely feedback, particularly in large online courses. Recent mixed-method research examined effective coach integration into online instructional teams by analyzing faculty characteristics, behaviors, preferences, attitudes, and knowledge. The study identified successful strategies and best practices for faculty-coach collaboration, providing actionable insights for instructors. This research expands our understanding of how team-based approaches can enhance educational quality in virtual environments, contributing meaningfully to ongoing discussions about online teaching effectiveness and the strategic deployment of academic coaches. The findings suggest that academic coach integration creates more responsive learning environments while distributing instructional responsibilities to maximize student support and outcomes in the online educational environment.

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INTRODUCTION

The growing prevalence of online education has underscored the critical importance of instructional support in ensuring the effectiveness of course delivery. As online enrollment continues to expand across educational institutions, the need for innovative strategies to design and maintain high-quality learning environments has become paramount. Properly structured and thoughtfully designed online courses not only enhance the quality of instruction but also significantly improve the learning experience for students. By fostering clarity, organization, and engagement, such courses enable learners to navigate complex content more effectively. Incorporating an instructional team approach, which combines various forms of support, plays a vital role in achieving these objectives, ultimately contributing to student success in the digital learning space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From 2000 to 2016, there was a significant 900% increase in online classes (Jeffries et al., 2022). Additionally, the transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic occurred at an unprecedented pace (Van Maaren et al., 2022). This surge in enrollment for online educational programs prompted many educational institutions to adopt an online instructional team approach, mirroring long-established practices in face-to-face classrooms. Traditionally, teaching assistants have supported numerous in-person higher education courses, especially those with large enrollments. Similarly, academic coaches have been integrated into online courses to provide support for both instructors and students. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the current state of online collaborative instruction, a literature review of articles published between 2020 and 2025 was conducted. The findings of this review are presented according to various themes identified in the literature.

TECHNOLOGY ADOPTION

The recent literature reviewed has largely emphasized the role of the pandemic in accelerating digital transformation within education—a process that might have otherwise taken several years. In fully online programs, students may originate from regions with limited technological access. Additionally, barriers to online student success have been identified, including insufficient equipment, inadequate digital skills, and the complexity of digital tasks. It has been observed that underserved students are more likely to encounter technological obstacles when pursuing online

education (Deng & Sun, 2022). To address these issues comprehensively, educational institutions must endeavor to implement technology-driven solutions aimed at bridging the digital divide (Dankers & Stoltenkamp, 2023). Potential solutions include digital literacy programs, digital tutors, specialized online student services, and the provision of virtual private networks (Colvin et al., 2024; Deng & Sun, 2022). Furthermore, technology has been leveraged to enhance student engagement and support online learners through technology-enabled digital coaching models (Wadams & Schick-Makaroff, 2022).

Online Student Support

The personalized feedback provided by academic coaches plays a pivotal role in enhancing online student success. This individualized support has been instrumental in shaping students' positive perceptions of online education (Colvin et al., 2024). Park and Robinson (2024) reported that students who received online academic coaching exhibited improved overall performance, with tailored feedback being directly correlated to enhanced student outcomes. The necessity for customized approaches to online student support and feedback is extensively supported by the literature (Harrington et al., 2022; Hendon & Blesdoe, 2022; Passarelli et al., 2024; Tuiloma & Graham, 2024; Van Maaren, 2022; Wadams & Schick-Makaroff, 2022). Other research indicated that students believe academic coaches require proper vetting and training but are generally perceived as supportive within online courses (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). Furthermore, environmental structure is recognized as additional essential assistance needed by online students.

Online Environment Structure

Student access and success are inherently linked to the infrastructure of the online learning environment (Dankers & Stoltenkamp, 2023; Park & Robinson, 2022). Both the quality of online courses and the learning management system significantly affect online students (Harrington et al., 2022). Several factors contribute to the effectiveness of online education, including course modality. Online courses can be delivered synchronously, asynchronously, in a blended format, or as a massive open online course (Wadams & Schick-Makaroff, 2022). Each modality necessitates tailored support to address student needs. The pacing and structure of different online course modalities can present challenges for students, which academic coaches can assist in overcoming.

Colvin et al.'s (2024) research indicates that traditional student support services must be adjusted for online contexts. Non-academic services such as academic advising, the registrar, and financial aid are equally crucial to online students as

academic services like peer mentoring, tutoring, and writing centers. Institutions should restructure traditional face-to-face student support services to develop a comprehensive network that addresses the diverse challenges faced by online students. Strong online environmental support systems ensure students remain accountable and encourage them to proactively seek assistance to improve academic performance (Lee et al., 2020).

Communication Challenges

Online environments pose distinctive communication barriers that necessitate intentional strategies for resolution. Effective instructor–student communication is particularly challenging in asynchronous classroom settings (Harrington et al., 2022). Employing flexible communication methods is crucial to supporting learning in online courses (Hernandez & Garcia, 2022). Implementing a digital tutoring model, like an academic coaching framework, can effectively facilitate instructor–student communication difficulties (Hobert & Berens, 2024). The academic coach/instructional team approach provides the benefit of focusing exclusively on students and maintaining connectivity between students and instructors. One often-cited strategy to facilitate communication in online courses is comprehensive faculty preparation.

Faculty Preparation

Effective online teaching requires proper training and support for instructors, teaching assistants, and academic coaches. Teaching online requires a different skill set than teaching face to face (Harrington et al., 2022). Online instructors must be prepared for flexible pedagogical approaches and ubiquitous technology integration (Colvin et al., 2024; Dennis et al., 2020; Park & Robinson, 2022). In addition, online instructors must be prepared to manage the collaborative support team. Teaching assistants and academic coaches must be selected, trained, and managed for successful integration to support students (Hendon & Blesdoe, 2022; Wadams & Schick-Makaroff, 2022). Providing this multifactorial preparation to an online instructional support team within the fast-paced online environment can be challenging, and instructors must develop essential management competencies.

In conclusion, the multifaceted role of academic coaching has been highlighted through extensive literature. Academic coaches serve as critical contributors to improving student outcomes, navigating institutional infrastructures, addressing diverse learner needs, and fostering equity in access to education. Despite the growing recognition of academic coaching as an essential component of online learning environments, significant gaps persist within the evidence base, leaving room for further exploration and refinement. The literature underscores the necessity for

more rigorous, empirically driven research to substantiate best practices and provide actionable guidance for the professional development of faculty engaged in online and blended pedagogical models.

As higher education institutions continue to refine and expand their online and hybrid education offerings, academic coaching emerges as a promising strategy for enhancing instructional quality and fostering student success. Effective implementation of academic coaching systems, however, demands the seamless integration of several foundational elements. These include technological infrastructures capable of supporting different course modalities, comprehensive mechanisms for assessing student outcomes, a firm institutional commitment to equitable educational practices, and well-established communication frameworks to facilitate collaboration between academic coaches, instructors, and students. Additionally, maintaining an ongoing focus on faculty professional development is paramount to ensuring that instructional teams are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary to thrive in dynamic online learning environments.

By incorporating these critical elements into carefully designed academic coaching initiatives, educational institutions can maximize the potential of online learning environments to deliver accessible, engaging, and impactful educational experiences. This approach not only addresses the immediate challenges posed by virtual learning modalities but also lays the groundwork for long-term advancements in instructional design and student support services. Ultimately, the strategic integration of academic coaches within instructional models represents an invaluable opportunity to redefine the quality and inclusivity of online education for a global and increasingly diverse student population.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

There is a notable gap in the literature regarding the utilization of academic coaches as members of the instructional support team within online courses. This chapter addresses this gap by detailing the strategies and techniques higher education faculty members employ to integrate academic coaches into the instructional team for online courses. The real-world strategies that online faculty use to work with academic coaches are illustrated. The ideas and concepts discussed in this chapter are based on findings from a recently conducted mixed-methods research study. They can be seamlessly incorporated into every online teaching and learning environment.

This research examined the multidimensional aspects of faculty experiences when collaborating with academic coaches for instructional support within online courses. The investigation analyzed faculty characteristics, teaching behaviors, instructional preferences, professional attitudes, emotional reactions, subjective

opinions, and pedagogical knowledge concerning the integration of academic coaches into the online classroom setting. The significance of this research extends beyond documentation of current practices. The knowledge gained has been framed as critically needed guidance about evidence-based best practices for effectively utilizing academic coaches as integral instructional support team members within large-scale online courses. As higher education institutions expand online education opportunities, understanding the instructional team's collaborative nature becomes necessary for student success.

Identifying and codifying best practices and quality standards exhibited by experienced online faculty regarding the strategic utilization of academic coaches for instructional support should lead to valid benchmark information. This valuable data can subsequently be used to guide faculty who are new to the team approach in online learning environments, potentially reducing their learning curve and accelerating their effectiveness. The research findings offer a framework for faculty development programs and institutional policy creation regarding instructional team structures. Furthermore, this research provides essential evidence that can be systematically shared with educational stakeholders about the most effective collaboration methods for an instructional team, including academic coaches, to enhance the learning experience for students. This evidence addresses communication protocols, role clarification, workflow optimization, conflict resolution strategies, and collaborative assessment practices that maximize the benefits of the instructional team model. By identifying factors contributing to successful academic coach–faculty partnerships, institutions can foster more productive collaborations that ultimately benefit student engagement, retention, and academic performance in online learning environments.

The findings of this research have significant implications for the allocation of institutional resources, faculty professional development programs, course and teaching evaluation systems, and the restructuring of traditional teaching roles within digital learning environments. As higher education increasingly adopts online modalities, comprehending team-based instructional approaches is crucial for preserving educational quality and addressing the diverse needs of students in virtual learning communities.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design for this study employed a sequential exploratory mixed-method approach, which allowed for an in-depth investigation of faculty experiences with academic coaches in online instruction. This methodological framework was

selected to take advantage of the paired strengths of qualitative and quantitative research paradigms by using two individual yet interconnected research phases.

The first phase involved qualitative semi-structured interviews of experienced online faculty. Each faculty member interviewed was experienced with using academic coaches as instructional support team members. These interviews allowed participants to anonymously share their perspectives on collaborating with academic coaches. A script guided each interview, and the same set of questions was used for each interviewee. The insights gathered during this initial interview phase informed the development of the quantitative instrument used in the subsequent phase.

The second phase involved distributing a quantitative survey, developed by the research team, to a broader set of faculty members. Participants in this phase also experienced using academic coaches in their online courses; however, no one from the initial phase was invited to participate in the second phase. The quantitative survey instrument incorporated key themes and constructs identified during the qualitative interviews, allowing for descriptive statistical analysis and broader generalizability of findings. The quantitative data enhanced the results of the qualitative research phase through gathering data from a broader faculty sample population.

Participants

This research involved faculty teaching online and using academic coaches for instructional support at a public university in the southern United States. This institution has implemented team-based instructional approaches in its online programs, making it a suitable research setting. The university offers a diverse range of online programs across multiple disciplines, with varying levels of academic coach integration. Eligible faculty participants were solicited via convenience sampling methodology for both phases of this research. This sampling approach was selected due to the focus of the research and the need to access faculty with specific experience working with academic coaches in online environments.

Qualitative Phase Participants

For the first phase, inclusion criteria were carefully established to ensure participants had relevant experience. The criteria included faculty who had used or were currently using academic coaches for instructional support, specifically within high-enrollment courses (courses with 75 or more students, with a minimum cap size of 60) and who taught in the traditional 16-week semester format. This specific criterion was implemented to focus on instructional environments where academic

coach support would be most critical due to the challenges associated with managing large online classes.

No exclusion criteria were applied; all faculty meeting the inclusion criteria were invited to participate in this research via personalized email invitations. The research team anonymously conducted secure virtual interviews using encrypted videoconferencing software, following the Institutional Review Board-approved interview guide. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and explored multiple dimensions of the faculty-coach relationship, communication patterns, role expectations, perceived benefits, and challenges encountered.

For this initial qualitative part of the study, 32 eligible faculty members currently teaching online and using academic coaches received email invitations to participate in interviews. A total of 15 faculty ($N=15$) agreed to be interviewed, representing a 46.9% participation rate. After the interview, participants earned a \$50 electronic gift card as compensation for their time and expertise.

Quantitative Phase Participants

For the subsequent quantitative phase of this study, the inclusion criteria were broadened to capture a wider range of faculty experiences. The expanded criteria included faculty participants who had used coaches in both the traditional 16-week and accelerated format courses (8-week and 10-week formats), regardless of course enrollment size. This expansion of the inclusion criteria allowed for comparative analysis between different course formats and enrollment sizes.

To maintain the independence of samples, the faculty who participated in the interview portion of this study were excluded from participation in the survey phase. This methodological decision prevented potential response bias from prior engagement with the research questions. Email invitations to complete the electronic survey were sent to 65 eligible faculty identified through institutional records. A total of 25 faculty ($N=25$) completed the survey, representing a response rate of 38.5%. Unlike the interview phase, there was no monetary incentive offered for survey completion, which may partially explain the differential response rates between phases.

Demographic analysis revealed that approximately 80% of the faculty respondents taught courses not in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics, which is representative of the proportional distribution of online courses offered by the institution at which this research was conducted. This alignment with institutional course offerings enhances the ecological validity of the findings. All survey data were collected anonymously through a secure online platform with encrypted data transmission and storage. Table 1 provides comprehensive demographic information of the survey participants, including academic rank, years of teaching experience, number of online courses taught, disciplinary background, and previous experience

with academic coaches. This demographic profile enables contextual interpretation of findings and assessment of potential demographic influences on faculty perceptions and practices related to academic coach utilization.

Table 1. Survey Participants Demographics (N=25)

Survey Participant Characteristic	Demographic Data
Gender	Female = 44% (11) Male = 52% (13) Preferred not to say = 4% (1)
Age	Range = 37–65 Mean = 53.42
Race	Asian = 12% (3) Black or African American = 8% (2) White = 40% (17) Prefer not to say = 12% (3)
Course Level Taught	Undergraduate = 20% (7) Graduate = 37% (13) Accelerated Program = 43% 15
Semesters Teaching Online	Less than 5 = 4% (1) 5 to 10 = 44% (11) More than 10 = 52% (2)
Number of Semesters of Experience Working with Academic Coaches	1 = 4% (1) 3–5 = 24% (6) 6–10 = 48% (12) 11–15 = 16% (4) 16–20 = 4% (1) 24 = 4% (1)

Note. Reprinted from “Effective Utilization of Academic Coaches for Instructional Support in Online Courses” by T. M. Forman and J. M. Sanchez, 2025, *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 0(0), p. XX. (<https://doi.org/10.1177/20427530241239395>). Copyright YEAR by XX.

Data Collection and Instruments

During the initial phase of qualitative research, email invitations were distributed to all faculty members who met the inclusion criteria. Semi-structured interviews were subsequently arranged for all willing participants. The questions asked in the interview were based upon an interview guide:

1. How long have you been teaching online? What online courses do you teach? Do you teach undergraduate or graduate courses? Or both? Please provide us with a snapshot of the student population within an online course you consider typical among those you teach.

2. How do you determine how many academic coaches are used in a course? Do you have a preferred academic coach to student ratio?
3. How do you choose academic coaches?
4. How often do you communicate with your academic coaches? How often do you meet via conference call or Zoom with your academic coaches? What is discussed in these meetings?
5. Please describe the typical responsibilities of an academic coach offering instructional support in your course.
6. How do you handle student questions? Do the academic coaches answer student questions, or do you, as the instructor of record, address all student questions?
7. What kind of instructions do you give coaches? How do you provide these instructions?
8. How do you handle complaints about grading done by an academic coach? Do you check grading done by academic coaches for accuracy or interrater reliability? If yes, please describe your process.
9. Please explain an effective strategy you have employed when working with academic coaches? What strategies have been the least effective when working with academic coaches?
10. What are some benefits and risks of having an academic coach provide instructional support in the online course?

All interviews were conducted using Zoom with video disabled to ensure participant anonymity. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis. A graduate research assistant provided verbatim transcription of the interview data. Following transcription, the qualitative data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti software. The quantitative survey expanded upon the questions from the research guide. A researcher-developed survey consisting of 30 questions, including demographic information, was presented to participants. The survey was administered using the Qualtrics platform, and responses were collected anonymously.

Data Analysis

The research team coded the semi-structured interview data in two cycles, initially independently and subsequently collaboratively. The verbatim transcript data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. Initially, open coding was employed to independently examine small data segments and compare them. The team then convened to collectively analyze the highlighted data, revisiting codes to identify relationships. Each researcher meticulously maintained coding notes. ATLAS.ti's diagramming feature facilitated qualitative visual representation of the

data, leading to the emergence of categories or themes. For quantitative data analysis, anonymous survey data from Qualtrics was downloaded and examined using Excel.

RESULTS

Qualitative Semi-Structured Interview Results

The data obtained from the interviews with faculty members were thoroughly analyzed, resulting in the identification of eight key themes: the coach selection process, the coach-to-student ratio, communication between coaches and faculty, the responsibilities of coaches, student communication, grading, benefits, and risks associated with utilizing a coach.

Theme 1: Coach Selection

The first theme identified from the data analysis concerns the selection of coaches by faculty members. Interviewees described several methods for choosing coaches to support their online courses. Faculty emphasized the importance of selecting coaches with relevant subject matter expertise to the course being taught or recommendations from colleagues, both of which were beneficial in the selection process. Faculty also reported selecting academic coaches based on long-standing relationships and prior positive experiences, often requesting those they had successfully worked with for years. Conversely, lack of involvement in the selection process was viewed as detrimental. The following quotes illustrate this theme.

One interviewee said:

I asked for either somebody who had, you know, at least the masters in the field, or because of the discipline I teach they had to have, have a juris doctorate. So, okay, I would go for either and I ended up with two juris doctorate.

Another interviewee shared: “In a general sense when we are looking for new coaches for a program we are usually looking for somebody with a nutrition background.”

Another interviewee stated:

They sent you resumes and you look over them ... but it really comes down to, working together.... I had to get another set of coaches and in doing so I was able to find individuals that I worked well with that they knew what I was expecting that they did a job that I felt was exactly what I wanted in terms of grading and the focus was there. And those are the people that I always request again and again.

A different interviewee noted: “He just assigned them ... I didn't have any choice on who is the coach or anything like that. They just said, the these are your coaches.”

Theme 2: Coach-Student Ratio

All interviewed faculty members conveyed that course enrollment significantly affects the necessary instructional support. However, there was no consensus on a specific coach-to-student ratio. Participants mentioned that the required number of coaches is influenced not only by enrollment figures but also by the course type, level, or rigor involved in the course. Conversely, some reported being unaware of how student-to-coach ratios were determined. Furthermore, the academic coach's experience level was highlighted as a crucial consideration when determining an appropriate coach-to-student ratio.

One interviewee noted:

Normally I get about 75 students per one coach. It seems like 75 works fine for them. It's just to be more honest, it could depend on the type of class because one class that I teach is a lot easier and it's just really easy to grade, but the other one is very intensive is like a lot of work, because it was blueprinted it's super organized and there's so much to do.

Another interviewee said: "I don't know, they assigned me. In total, I have 240 students it was about like 120 students to one coach."

Another interviewee shared:

I think I wouldn't expect someone new to do more than 70. And I would rather they don't do 70, that maybe they do 35, or 40, just so that I can get a better idea of how their grading before I give them additional students.

Theme 3: Communication Between Coaches and Faculty

The interviewees emphasized the significance of both the frequency and type of communication with academic coaches in fostering successful teamwork. Faculty members reported varying schedules for meetings with academic coaches, including weekly, monthly, or even more frequent sessions before the commencement of courses. All faculty agreed that, at a minimum, meetings between faculty and academic coaches should occur prior to the start of a course and again at its midpoint. The pre-course meeting, required by Instructional Connections, was deemed essential for conveying critical information regarding course flow and the related responsibilities of academic coaches. Faculty who had worked with the same academic coaches over multiple terms reported a reduced frequency of meetings, attributing this to established rapport and a shared understanding of expectations. Furthermore, faculty highlighted the necessity of establishing a mutually agreeable and convenient communication method for all parties involved. Various platforms were utilized for these meetings, including phone calls, Zoom, emails, and text messages:.

One interviewee noted:

Both formally via the instructional connections [Zoom] and then also informally such as just the instructor to coach communication, like via email. We do meet the required number of meetings that need to be had at the beginning of the semester, I believe at the mid semester, and then at the end of the semester. So those are the formal meetings that we have. I do communicate with them a lot via email. So there's that. And they do have my cell phone number and we text each other. From time to time, as necessary.

Another interviewee shared:

Pretty regularly, so we have the required meetings, I can't remember, I think it's three per semester if you're for whatever they require and then you know throughout the semester if they have any questions on an assignment or students emailing them with concerns that they can't help them with they'll either email or text me.

Another interviewee stated: “Well, the ones that are new, they want to communicate with me every week. And, and then the ones that are experienced, we communicate based on assignment.”

Theme 4: Responsibilities of Coaches

Theme 4 pertains to the responsibilities delegated to coaches by course faculty, with grading identified as the primary task. Faculty emphasized the importance of clearly communicating which assessments coaches are expected to grade, along with providing detailed instructions and specified turnaround times. In some cases, faculty also delegated tasks such as posting feedback in discussion forums or reporting grading issues and how students did during meetings. The following are quotes relating to the responsibilities of coaches.

One interviewee said: “In my course it's predominantly helping with grading . . .” A different interviewee noted: “. . . every week, the students have to do a discussion board posting and respond to other people, the coaches are responsible for grading those and then they also assist me in grading the two larger papers in the course . . .”

Another interviewee stated:

I'd like the academic coach to participate a bit in those initial discussion assignments. So, the academic coach can serve as a facilitator or potentially she can redirect where there might be some confusion, or she can let me know.

Theme 5: Student Communication

The fifth theme identified from the data pertains to student communication. Feedback highlighted the necessity for faculty utilizing academic coaches to clearly articulate their approach and expectations related to student interactions. It is essential to establish a plan regarding how and who will respond to student emails

and comments. Some faculty believed that handling all student queries was their responsibility, while others felt that student communications could be screened by academic coaches and forwarded to faculty as needed. Additionally, there was a call for transparent communication, with some suggesting that students should copy both the academic coach and the faculty on all correspondence. The following statements are associated with the theme of student communication. One interviewee noted:

I pretty much address all student questions, however, if they reach out to the academic coach, she'll usually she'll forwarded on to me and asked me like is it okay, if I respond to this. But I answer predominantly everything and if it's email it's always coming to me first.

Another interviewee shared: “So the way we had it set up was I gave this students both the coaches email, and my email, so they could write to either of us. And we encourage them to reach out to the coaches first, because the coaches and, in some cases, could be a little bit quicker to respond then sometimes I could be.”

One interviewee stated:

Yes. [Academic coaches do answer student questions] If they write the coach, and the coach feels like it's kind of an extenuating circumstance, or it's just not something they feel comfortable handling, then they know I want them to send it my way so that I can address it and handle it.

Another interviewee said: “She's responsible for answering those emails, but she always checks in with me first, and CC me on the emails.”

Theme 6: Grading

The sixth theme pertains to grading. Participants provided insights into effective strategies for conveying clear instructions to academic coaches regarding grading expectations. Detailed instructions and grading rubrics were deemed crucial for maintaining transparency in grading processes. Faculty members also shared methods for ensuring the reliability of grading performed by academic coaches and addressing student complaints related to grading. Some participants mentioned conducting random spot checks on grading, while others employed statistical comparisons to verify accuracy. Complaints about grading handled by coaches were typically managed by the course instructor, involving the academic coach as necessary. The following quotes illustrate the theme of grading.

One interviewee said:

I will model, so I'll give like a couple of different examples of how I've graded assignments. Assignments that she will be grading as well, and so ... what I would typically give like an A, B, C or D and the kind of feedback. I model that feedback, I show just so she has an idea of what the grading looks so that we're on the same page. Then, she can always email for clarification and questions if she has issues.

Another interviewee stated:

I use a lot of rubrics so that helps. We all have the same rubric, we all work off the same rubric and so that helps with the instructions. And then, otherwise I also communicate instructions verbally during conference calls, and I communicate them in a written aspect, when I email them.

Another interviewee noted:

I send them the instructions and how to grade and inside the grading Word document, it tells them my expectations—what I'm really focused on. It lets them know feedback that I give them. Feedback options to provide to the students that are already written out, so they don't have to think about it. It's just a matter of which one applies and then they copy and paste. So, the student is still getting feedback from me in particular, it's just them meeting the criteria to get that feedback.

Another interviewee shared:

I randomly select discussion board posts to review each week to make sure that there's reliable scoring going on, and then in the instances where I have more than one coach per class I run the statistics per group to make sure that everybody looks to be right about the same area, to make sure that we're all on the same page.

Theme 7: Benefits of Using a Coach

The majority of faculty members interviewed indicated that the primary advantage of employing an academic coach for instructional support was increased availability of time. This additional time allowed for greater focus on assisting individual students or groups, enhancing courses through the addition or updating of content, and allocating more time for research activities. These benefits were deemed highly valuable by the faculty.

One interviewee said: "... they'll bring it up to my attention. Are you going to grade these things or would you like for me to tackle them?—things like that ... I really do feel that we are in a partnership together. So, I value their work a lot." Another interviewee stated: "Time!" Another interviewee noted: "... the benefit for me, has been able to focus more on the quality of the course design." Another interviewee shared: "... it's also helpful sometimes to just get a fresh set of eyes to see maybe where problems are occurring with students or where there's areas for improvement that one person may not be able to identify each time."

Theme 8: Risks of Using a Coach

Additionally, faculty members discussed the heightened responsibilities when incorporating an academic coach into the instructional support team. Typically, faculty

agree to larger course enrollments when an academic coach is provided to assist. This increase in student numbers results in greater overall faculty responsibilities. Furthermore, faculty must now offer guidance to the academic coach.

Faculty indicated that end-of-course student evaluations did not differentiate between instructors and coaches. Consequently, if a student had issues with the academic coach, their dissatisfaction might be reflected in the faculty evaluation, potentially negatively affecting the instructor of record for the course. The final theme identified from the qualitative data analysis pertains to the risks associated with utilizing an academic coach for instructional support. The faculty members interviewed highlighted two primary risks: the potential impact on faculty evaluation scores and increased responsibility.

One interviewee shared: “The risk is, if it affects me in student evaluations. Because students will then evaluate the course based off the grading of the coach that maybe they always don't agree or agree with.”

Another interviewee noted:

I'd be scared to ever have my, my coach leave and hopefully I'll get her this semester. ... yes, that is always the risk, is you're going to have somebody else come into your course that doesn't know your course, doesn't know you and making more work for you.

Another interviewee stated:

I want them to know me, but they can't know me very well if I'm not grading them? But the reason I want them to know me is so that they can know to feel comfortable and to feel appreciated that their work is highly appreciated ... So that's a risk, I think that I'm not having as much, how can I say, student to instructor ... electronic interpersonal contact.

Quantitative Survey Results

The qualitative semi-structured results informed the development of questions for the subsequent quantitative survey. The researcher-designed survey comprised 30 questions, including those intended to collect demographic information. Participants were required to select from predefined prompts for most questions, with some questions allowing them to provide open-text responses. For example, for the question “Please describe what kind of assignments are graded by the coach(es) in your course(s),” one allowed response was “Other, please describe.” The descriptive results for participant survey responses, including relevant open text comments, are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Survey Results (N=25)

Survey Question	Response (Percentages, Numbers)	Relevant Open Text Comments
How do you select your academic coaches? Select all that apply. (n=25)	Chose coach(es) with whom I have previously worked (31.75%, 20)	
	Examined resumes, chose coach(es) by subject matter expertise (19.05%, 12)	
	Chosen for me, with my input (17.46%, 11)	
	Examined resumes, chose coach(es) by relevant work experience (14.29%, 9)	
	Chose coach(es) based on colleague recommendations (14.29%, 9)	
	Chosen for me, with no input from me (3.17%, 2)	
How do you determine the number of coaches you use in a course? (n=25)	Based on the number of students, one coach for x number of students (e.g., 1 coach for every 50 students). (48.00%, 12)	I use only one coach per course, irrespective of the enrollment.
	Predetermined with no input from me (40.00%, 10)	
	Based on the course complexity (4.00%, 1)	
	Based on types of assignments or assessments given (4.00%, 1)	
	One coach per course, regardless of enrollment (4.00%, 1)	
Please identify communication tools used while working with your coach(es). Select all that apply. (n=25)	Email (32.88%, 24)	
	Webinar (Zoom/Teams/ Collaborate) (26.03%, 19)	
	Phone conversations (24.66%, 18)	
	Text messages (16.44%, 12)	
Please select communication frequency with your coach(es). Select all that apply. (n=25)	Mandatory meetings (pre-course and end of course conference call). (44.19%, 19)	1. Meet whenever needed. 2. If you have the same person for the same course over multiple semesters, you have less communication with the coach. For a coach for the first semester, I need more communication to share my expectations.
	Weekly (34.88%, 15)	
	Monthly (6.98%, 3)	
	More or less often. (13.95%, 6)	

continued on following page

Table 2. Continued

Survey Question	Response (Percentages, Numbers)	Relevant Open Text Comments
What types of assessments do you have coach(es) grade? Select all that apply. (n=25)	Discussions (38.71%, 24)	
	Group projects (17.74%, 11)	
	Papers (17.74%, 11)	
	Exams (11.29%, 7)	
	Exercise problems (8.06%, 5)	
	Other (6.45%, 4)	
Do you have your coach(es) respond to students' discussion posts? (n=24)	Yes (62.50%, 15)	
	No (37.50%, 9)	
Please describe how many assignments are graded by the coach(es) in your courses? (n=25)	Coach(es) do 50–74% of the grading in my courses (28%, 7)	
	Coach(es) do most of the grading (90–99%) in my courses (24%, 6)	
	Coach(es) do less than 25% of the grading in my courses (16%, 4)	
	Coach(es) do 75–89% of the grading in my courses (12%, 3)	
	Coach(es) do 25–49% of the grading in my courses (8%, 2)	
	Coach(es) do all (100%) the grading in my courses (0%, 0)	
Please describe what kind of assignments are graded by the coach(es) in your course(s)? (n=25) (High-stake assignments require more time and effort, thus carrying more weight towards final grade. Low-stake assignments require less time and effort and do not heavily impact a student's final grade.)	Coach(es) grade all the assignments in my courses (36%, 9)	
	Coach(es) only grade low stakes assignments in my courses (32%, 8)	
	Coach(es) only grade high stakes assignments in my courses (0%, 0)	
Which best describes your grading contribution? (n=25)	None of the above, please describe (60%, 15)	1. I grade about 10% of high stakes assignments and use these as examples for coaches and for low stakes, just provide grading guidelines (what to look for in each question). 2. They grade projects that I have rubrics for while I explain the rubrics clearly to the coach.
	I grade along with my coach(es) for some of the assignments (24%, 6)	
	I grade along with my coach(es) for each assignment (e.g., I grade 10% of all submissions for each assignment) (16%, 4)	

continued on following page

Table 2. Continued

Survey Question	Response (Percentages, Numbers)	Relevant Open Text Comments
Which of the following do you provide your coaches to facilitate grading? Select all that apply. (n=22)	Detailed grading rubrics (77%, 17)	1. Rubrics, samples, and examples. 2. APA resources and expectations 3. Rubrics and samples
	All the above (27%, 6)	
	Sample feedback (% , 1)	
	Provide examples of student work representative of ABCD grades (0%, 0)	
What methods do you use to verify the grading completed by coach(es) is accurate? Select all that apply. (n=25)	General review or spot checks of student submissions (52%, 13)	1. I grade all papers and review graded discussions. 2. Review graded discussion boards. 3. Always checks a sample of graded assignments.
	Other method, described below (20%, 5)	
	Grade a specific number/percentage of student submissions (16%, 4)	
	I do not feel verification grading done by coach(es) is necessary (12%, 3)	
What do you do when a student complains about a grade earned for an assignment a coach has graded? Select all that apply. (n=25)	Regrade the assignment myself and address student complaint directly (20%, 5)	1. Have the coach respond/review first, then if needed I make a final decision. 2. I have had almost no grading issues. 3. All the above.
	Other, please describe (20%, 5)	
	Ask the coach to review grading and have them address student complaint (12%, 3)	
	Review grade and feedback given by coach and address student complaint directly (12%, 3)	
Do you feel there are benefits to using coach(es) for instructional support in the online classroom? (n=25)	Definitely yes (80.0%, 3)	1. More efficiency 2. Saves time. 3. Lessen workload when course enrollment is high.
	Probably yes (12.0%, 3)	
	Definitely not (4.0%, 1)	
	Probably not (4.0%, 1)	
	Might or might not (0%, 0)	
Do you feel there are any risks to using coach(es) for instructional support in your online classroom? (n=24)	Probably not (33.33%, 8)	1. The grading between coaches may be different. 2. Grade inflation despite clear rubric.
	Definitely not (20.83%, 5)	
	Might or might not (20.83%, 5)	
	Definitely yes (12.5%, 3)	
	Probably yes (12.5%, 3)	

Note. Reprinted from “Effective Utilization of Academic Coaches for Instructional Support in Online Courses” by T. M. Forman and J. M. Sanchez, 2025, *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 0(0), p. XX. (<https://doi.org/10.1177/20427530241239395>). Copyright YEAR by XX.

Two of the survey questions solicited open text responses. The first question was “Please share a few benefits of using coaches for instructional support in your online classroom.” The research team reviewed the participant responses and identified three trends: instructor time, improved courses, and student benefit. The following quotes are representative of these trends. One advantage of employing an academic coach for instructional support is the increased time available for course instructors: “It gives me time. It really provides me time to be able to focus on any student needs that are rising and time for research. It really helps me to be able to have time to write and to read, and to do research, where I didn't have that.”

Another identified benefit of the use of an academic coach for instructional support is improved course structure and delivery: “The benefit for me, I think, is by having helped with the grading especially. Especially in a large class, I get to focus more on creating lectures and recording lectures and content and assignments and figuring out how to improve the online courses.”

The third identified trend was that academic coaches contribute value to the course by offering students an additional perspective:

I also tell my students, ‘You know your academic coaches have so much background that they can share with you, as far as their careers. That's going to help you, so by all means, please contact them about anything like that. You know, if you need advice, if there's something that you're curious about.’

The second open text question posed was “Please share a few risks associated with employing coaches for instructional support in your online classroom.” The research team thoroughly reviewed the participants' responses, identifying three primary trends: grading discrepancies, increased supervision requirements, and lack of engagement. The quotes below exemplify these trends. Faculty members also expressed concerns about inconsistent grading as a potential risk when using academic coaches:

- “The risks, I would say would be that you might have a coach that maybe kind of doesn't see eye to eye with you in terms of grading, and so they might grade things differently. So it would create less of that interrater reliability ...”
- “... other risk is things like when you have multiple coaches, they grade differently”

Furthermore, incorporating an academic coach into the instructional support team enhances faculty supervision duties and responsibilities: “... in the last semester, I really noticed a difference in one of the coaches. They weren't really applying the rubric, and so I noticed discrepancy between like A through M [coach student

assignments], and then the rest of the alphabet, and grades. I was starting to notice that, so I had to repair that.”

Finally, faculty noted that an academic coach who does not demonstrate interest or commitment may not adequately engage in the course, reducing the quality of work: “The potential downside would be if that academic coach, you know, is not really following the vision you have for the course. And maybe it's, you know, making taking shortcuts to achieve finishing these assignments.”

DISCUSSION

The discussion section of the proposed chapter offers a detailed analysis of various strategies that an instructor might employ to effectively incorporate an academic coach into the instructional support team in an online course. This analysis is supported by recent research findings.

Choosing an Academic Coach

An instructor's initial decision regarding using an academic coach involves selecting the appropriate candidate. Numerous factors must be considered before choosing one or multiple coaches, with the primary factor being the instructor's intended role for the coach. The instructor must first determine whether the academic coach will solely handle grading tasks or if they will also engage in student communication via email or facilitate discussion board assignments. For asynchronous online courses, decisions must be made about the academic coach's role in course facilitation such as announcements or overviews. Another important consideration is the timing of grading feedback. The selected academic coach must have the capacity to accommodate the requirements of the instructor and the needs of the students. When the academic coach's responsibilities are limited to grading, the instructor may opt for a coach whose academic background closely aligns with the course content. Conversely, if the academic coach will be involved in student communication, the instructor must prioritize mentoring skills and the ability to provide learner support as key attributes. The academic coach's capacity to facilitate collaborative learning is crucial, as learner-to-instructor interaction is a fundamental component of a supportive online learning community (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Instructor–Academic Coach Communication

Seamless communication is crucial in online courses. When utilizing a team approach for instructional support, clear messaging for students begins with transparent

communication between instructors and academic coaches. A pre-course meeting is essential to discuss requirements and expectations. The selection of communication tools and the frequency of instructor–academic coach meetings should be established before the course commences. Effective communication with students in an online course is essential for their academic success. Equally important is the establishment of a well-defined plan for communication between instructors and academic coaches.

The Academic Coach and Grading

Grading in online courses presents unique challenges that differ significantly from those in traditional in-person classroom environments. For an online instructor managing a virtual learning space, providing timely and quality feedback in a course with large enrollment numbers can be particularly difficult and time-consuming. These challenges often stem from the physical separation between instructor and students, making personalized assessment more complex. Delays in grading and poor-quality feedback can negatively impact online students' motivation to stay engaged with course material and participate in class activities, reducing their ability to succeed academically and achieve desired learning outcomes. An academic coach strategically positioned within the online course structure can offer the necessary support to improve the turnaround time and quality of feedback, thereby enhancing overall grading efficiency and student satisfaction.

Instructors must carefully consider several practical factors when incorporating academic coach grading support within an online course environment. One crucial factor is determining the appropriate level and type of assessments the coach will be responsible for grading. For instance, low-stakes, formative assessments such as weekly worksheets or multiple-choice comprehension quizzes require minimal feedback and student direction, whereas higher-stakes assessments like collaborative group activities or individual capstone projects necessitate more intensive guidance and detailed commentary. Online instructors must thoughtfully determine the best team approach to grading distribution to ensure the highest quality feedback delivery and improved student engagement throughout the course.

Grading Rubrics

Another important consideration when implementing academic coach support is ensuring consistent grading accuracy across the instructional team. Grades assigned on assignments should accurately reflect a student's current knowledge level and mastery of course concepts. Detailed and specific rubrics are essential tools for transparent grading practices and for helping students clearly understand the required

elements to complete assignments successfully. Establishing comprehensive rubric criteria aligned with the specific learning goals of each assessment helps maintain consistency in grading evaluations across different evaluators.

Well-designed rubrics promote the consistent application of expected standards to measure learning objective attainment across all student submissions. These assessment tools must consider the specific student competencies evaluated in each assignment. Building rubrics around the established learning objectives is a reliable strategy to ensure this alignment occurs. For example, a rubric designed for evaluating a written research paper would look fundamentally different from a rubric built for assessing a debate project or multimedia presentation. Careful alignment between rubrics and learning objectives ensures valid assessment of student performance. Impartial, clear, and transparent rubrics allow for consistent, reproducible assessment across all instructional team members for all course students. Additionally, well-constructed grading rubrics save valuable instructional time by significantly reducing potential grading disputes because of the explicit assessment criteria provided to students in advance (Pinkerton, 2022).

Two examples further demonstrate the importance of high-quality and consistent grading in a course with a team approach to instruction. These examples are based on information provided by interviewees in the previously discussed study. The hope is that by presenting these examples with expanded information, readers can view grading possibilities with new perspectives and hone their decision-making skills in preparation for managing collaborative team grading.

Using Exemplar Student Work to Guide Grading

Using exemplars to guide grading involves the instructor providing examples of various performance levels across the assessment scale to the instructional support team. This pedagogically sound approach aligns with Sadler's (2010) seminal work on "evaluative knowledge," which contends evaluators develop expertise through clear, transparent grading rubric criteria and exposure to concrete examples of student work to develop their tacit understanding of quality standards. Exemplars serve as powerful, concrete illustrations of the primary instructor's established standards and expectations for student performance. The fundamental idea behind this methodology is that the primary instructor, functioning as the expert evaluator with a comprehensive understanding of course objectives and grading rubric criteria, provides the instructional team members with carefully selected examples of authentic student work representing each institutional grade level (e.g., A, B, C, D,

or F). This systematic guidance creates reference points or milestones to facilitate consistent decision-making when multiple evaluators are grading the same assignment.

To effectively implement this exemplar-based approach, the primary instructor must critically select representative student work demonstrating the expected quality characteristics for each distinct grade level (e.g., A, B, C, D, or F). This careful selection process requires considering which examples best illustrate the distinguishing features between performance levels. Following selection, the instructor should provide a clear, detailed explanation of how each selected student submission met (or failed to meet) the specific grading rubric's criteria. This comprehensive narrative should explain why the assigned grade was merited or why certain shortcomings prevented achievement of a higher grade. This narrative component transforms abstract rubric language into practical application examples. To ensure that the feedback carries the instructor's tone and voice, sample feedback should be created for each exemplar. This allows academic coaches to utilize these examples and maintain consistency in the feedback provided.

Ideally, instructors should provide these carefully curated exemplars to academic coaches in a structured workshop or training session preceding the upcoming grading activity. During this focused training session, academic coaches can be systematically provided with a thorough overview of the exemplars and a comprehensive review of the grading rubric's application. This training also allows discussion of any anticipated grading challenges specific to the assignment. Particular emphasis should be placed on collaboratively discussing challenging “boundary cases” where graders might disagree about grade assignment. Explicitly articulating the underlying decision principles that led to assigning one grade category over another is key to the academic coach's understanding. These boundary discussions prove especially valuable for establishing consistency in evaluations that fall between clearly defined grade categories.

The implementation of exemplar-based grading systems requires ongoing quality assurance measures. Therefore, the grading completed by academic coaches using the exemplars must be regularly evaluated for effectiveness and accuracy through periodic checks. This evaluation process might involve having the primary instructor independently grade a random sample of assignments already assessed by academic coaches to measure consistency. Alternatively, coaches might participate in norming sessions where they independently grade identical assignments and then compare their evaluations to identify and resolve discrepancies in interpretation. Through continuous refinement of this process, the instructional team can develop an increasingly sophisticated shared understanding of quality standards, benefiting students through consistent, transparent, and educationally defensible assessment practices across large online courses.

Using Inter-Rater Reliability to Examine Grading Consistency

In addition to using exemplars, another method to ensure grading transparency is to conduct a comprehensive inter-rater reliability analysis to measure consistency in grading between an academic coach (or coaches) and the primary instructor. When multiple instructors evaluate student work using a shared rubric, ensuring consistency becomes essential for fair and valid assessment. Inter-rater reliability analysis offers a systematic approach to measuring and improving grading consistency.

To begin inter-rater reliability analysis, the first step is to select a sample of student submissions representing the quality range typically encountered. Each instructor should independently evaluate these submissions using the established grading rubric, recording their scores for each criterion without conferring with colleagues. This independence is crucial for identifying genuine differences in interpretation rather than potentially influenced consensus.

Once the data is collected, various statistical analyses can be performed to measure the degree of agreement. Consultation with an experienced statistician would be the best approach if one is unfamiliar with various inter-rater reliability statistical analyses. Two more commonly used inter-rater reliability analyses are Fleiss' *kappa* and the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient. Fleiss' *kappa* statistical analysis accounts for agreement by chance (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979). The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient considers the ordinal nature of rubric scales (Gwet, 2021). Whatever statistical analysis approach is chosen, results will reveal overall grading consistency among the academic coaches and specific areas where they diverged in their interpretations. Criteria showing lower reliability coefficients indicate where the rubric language may need clarification. Through focused discussion, instructors can develop a shared understanding of ambiguous terminology and establish more precise grading rubric boundaries between score levels.

This type of reliability analysis represents more than a one-time statistical exercise. It represents an ongoing calibration process that begins with initial instructional team training sessions, continues through periodic check-ins during the grading period, and concludes with a comprehensive analysis once all evaluations are complete. Through this iterative approach, the instructional team gradually refines both the rubric language and their collective understanding, enhancing the validity and fairness of student assessment. This systematic approach improves grading consistency and fosters valuable pedagogical discussions among instructors and the support team, enhancing assessment quality and teaching effectiveness.

Other Grading Management Techniques

Another grading management method that enhances assessment quality in online learning environments includes systematic instructor spot-checking of academic coach grading. Spot-checking allows instructors to identify potential grading issues early, while exemplar-guided grading and inter-rater reliability analysis provide quantifiable data regarding assessment consistency across the instructional team. All these quality control measures are essential safeguards that maintain academic integrity throughout the assessment process.

The Academic Coach and Grading Summary

Regardless of the specific methods employed, thoughtful instructor facilitation of academic coach grading is essential for students to receive appropriate, constructive feedback that enhances their learning experience. When implemented effectively, academic coach support creates a more responsive feedback system that benefits both instructors and students. For instructors, this partnership reduces the overwhelming grading burden that often accompanies large online courses, allowing them to focus more energy on course design, content delivery, and specialized interventions where needed.

Timely and consistent feedback helps students clearly connect their work with the grades they receive, playing a pivotal role in meeting online course learning objectives. The quality of feedback directly influences student motivation, engagement, and academic progress. When students receive prompt, detailed feedback that clearly explains assessment decisions, they develop greater metacognitive awareness of their learning progress and can more effectively adjust their approach to subsequent assignments. This feedback loop creates a continuous improvement cycle that supports deeper learning.

Moreover, effective collaboration between the instructor and academic coaches exemplifies professional teamwork for students, highlighting how this collective expertise can enrich their educational experience. By establishing clear grading protocols, providing exemplars, and maintaining open communication channels, instructional teams create a cohesive learning environment despite the physical separation inherent in online education. This collaborative approach helps overcome one of the primary challenges of online learning: maintaining personal connection and individualized support at scale.

As online education continues to evolve, the strategic integration of academic coaches into the grading process represents a promising approach for enhancing assessment quality while managing instructor workload. However, successful implementation requires intentional planning, ongoing training, and regular evaluation of

grading practices. When these elements are in place, the result is a more responsive, consistent assessment system that better serves student learning needs while supporting instructor effectiveness. Ultimately, the thoughtful incorporation of academic coach grading support transforms what could be an overwhelming challenge into an opportunity for creating more engaging, supportive online learning communities where timely, high-quality feedback drives student success.

To bridge the gap between grading management practices and the structured approach of instructor self-assessment, it is essential to emphasize how deliberate planning and continuous evaluation can enhance the effectiveness of academic coaching. Establishing clear protocols and leveraging tools such as checklists provide a foundation for both consistency in grading practices and informed decision-making regarding instructional strategies.

SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST FOR UTILIZING ACADEMIC COACHES

Checklists serve as vital tools for instructor self-reflection, prompting them to evaluate their teaching practices, identify strengths, and recognize areas for growth. A well-designed checklist promotes consistency, standardization, and thoughtful consideration of essential concepts. This type of continuous self-assessment fosters both personal and professional development. For online instructors, such checklists are particularly valuable when adopting a team approach to instruction. By carefully considering the best way to proceed, instructors can identify their strengths and weaknesses, which not only aids in their development but also assists in selecting the most appropriate support.

A self-assessment checklist to guide online instructors with the integration of the academic coaching model into their courses is provided. These checklist questions provide instructors with a structured approach for choosing an academic coach and ensuring that quality choices are made to uphold the integrity and effectiveness of their work. Additionally, this detailed checklist can serve as a record of completed tasks and decisions, offering accountability and transparency for self-assessment and external evaluations.

Instructor Checklist

Choosing an Academic Coach(es)

What Criteria Do I Use to Select an Academic Coach for My Online Course?

Consider subject matter expertise, previous teaching experience, familiarity with

online learning platforms, communication skills, availability, and responsiveness. Academic coaches should ideally possess both content knowledge and pedagogical understanding specific to online environments. Consider whether the coach needs specialized knowledge of certain assessment types or technological tools used in your course.

How Do I Assess the Qualifications and Experience of Potential Academic Coaches? Evaluate academic credentials, teaching portfolios, references from previous instructional collaborations, and demonstrated ability to provide constructive feedback. Consider conducting brief interviews or requesting sample feedback on student work to assess coaching style and alignment with your instructional philosophy. Look for evidence of adaptability and willingness to learn novel approaches.

Determining the Appropriate Number of Academic Coaches

What Factors Do I Consider When Deciding the Number of Academic Coaches Needed? Calculate based on course enrollment numbers, assignment complexity, expected feedback turnaround time, and depth of feedback required. Consider the types of assignments (e.g., discussions, projects, papers), frequency of assessments, and whether specialized expertise is needed for different course components. Factor in institutional guidelines about student-to-coach ratios, if applicable.

How Do I Ensure That the Assigned Number of Academic Coaches Adequately Meets the Needs of My Students? Monitor feedback turnaround times, quality of coach–student interactions, and student satisfaction surveys. Establish a system for coaches to identify and report unmanageable workloads and be prepared to redistribute responsibilities or add additional support if needed. Regularly review the critical balance between the provision of timely feedback and thorough assessment of student work.

Communication

How Do I Establish Clear and Effective Communication Channels With My Academic Coaches? Define preferred communication platforms (e.g., learning management system messaging, text, email, video conferencing), establish response time expectations, and schedule regular check-ins. Create shared documents for tracking questions, concerns, and decisions. Develop guidelines for escalating issues that require instructor attention. Consider creating a communication hierarchy for distinct types of concerns.

What Strategies Do I Use to Maintain Consistent and Open Communication With My Academic Coaches Throughout the Course? Implement weekly team meetings, maintain collaborative documents for ongoing questions, and provide

timely responses to coach inquiries. Establish an environment where coaches feel comfortable sharing challenges with the instructor. Create opportunities for both group discussions and one-on-one conversations to address the individual needs of coaches.

Grading Support

In What Ways Do I Involve Academic Coaches in the Grading Process?

Clarify which assessments coaches will grade, what level of feedback they should provide, and how grades should be entered and communicated. Determine whether coaches will handle initial grading with instructor review, grade specific components of assignments, or manage certain types of assessments entirely. Define processes for handling grade challenges or exceptional circumstances.

How Do I Ensure That Academic Coaches Are Familiar With the Grading Rubrics and Standards for the Course? Conduct pre-course training sessions, provide detailed rubric explanations, and review sample graded work together. Create annotation guides explaining common feedback points and develop a shared library of feedback templates. Consider implementing calibration exercises where all coaches grade the same assignments and then compare approaches.

Ensuring Grading Accuracy and Consistency

What Measures Do I Take to Ensure Grading Accuracy and Consistency Among Academic Coaches? Implement regular calibration exercises, spot-check graded assignments, and analyze grade distributions across sections. Develop protocols for addressing significant grading discrepancies when identified. Consider using statistical methods to identify unusual grading patterns that might indicate inconsistency. Establish a minimum percentage of assignments to be reviewed for quality assurance.

How Do I Provide Feedback to Academic Coaches to Maintain Grading Standards? Schedule individual coaching sessions, provide constructive written feedback, and acknowledge exemplary grading practices. Develop a system for coaches to request clarification on challenging grading decisions. Create opportunities for coaches to share effective feedback strategies with each other. Recognize and address improvement needs promptly but supportively.

Benefits of the Use of an Academic Coach

What Positive Impacts Have I Observed From Integrating Academic Coaches Into My Online Course? Document improvements in feedback turnaround time,

student engagement metrics, and course completion rates. Gather qualitative evidence through student testimonials and course evaluations. Note any reduction in instructor workload that allows for enhanced course design or more personalized attention to struggling students.

How Do Academic Coaches Contribute to Improving Student Engagement and Success in My Course? Track increases in student participation, improvement in assignment quality over time, and positive student–coach interactions. Monitor whether students implement coach feedback in subsequent assignments. Assess if coaches can identify and support at-risk students earlier than might otherwise be possible.

Drawbacks to the Use of an Academic Coach

What Challenges Have I Encountered When Working With Academic Coaches? Identify communication breakdowns, inconsistent grading practices, or misalignments in pedagogical approaches. Note any student confusion about roles or dissatisfaction with coach feedback. Document administrative challenges such as access permissions, compensation issues, or scheduling conflicts.

How Do I Address and Mitigate Any Potential Drawbacks Associated With the Use of Academic Coaches? Develop comprehensive improvement plans for addressing specific challenges, implement supplementary training as required, and reassign coaches based on their strengths. Establish clear solution pathways for recurring issues. Create procedures for transitioning responsibilities when coach–student relationships are ineffective. Integrate continuous improvement practices into your instructional team's strategy.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this chapter offers an in-depth examination of strategies and methodologies for effectively incorporating academic coaches into online instructional teams. It serves as both a guide and an essential reference for instructors who may be unfamiliar with this collaborative approach, providing a framework to navigate and optimize the integration process. This chapter emphasizes the significance of the academic coaching model in improving student learning outcomes, increasing retention rates, and facilitating academic achievement by presenting a combination of empirical evidence.

The text elaborates on proven practices, informed by extensive research and real-world applications, to establish quality benchmarks for effective academic coaching. Drawing insights from experienced educators, it outlines how academic coaches

can bridge the gap between instructors and students, providing personalized support that addresses diverse learning needs. Through detailed case studies, it investigates the tangible and intangible impacts of academic coaches on student engagement, persistence, and overall course performance.

Furthermore, the chapter emphasizes the dual benefits of academic coaching—not only does it empower students to achieve higher levels of academic excellence, but it also alleviates the workload of instructors. By delegating tasks such as formative feedback and early identification of at-risk students to academic coaches, instructors can focus more on strategic course design and tailored attention to individuals who require additional support. By presenting qualitative and quantitative data from instructors experienced in working with academic coaches, the chapter provides readers with a nuanced understanding of success metrics and challenges associated with this collaborative instructional approach. This in-depth evaluation highlights the adaptability of the academic coaching model to different disciplines and settings, showing how it can be tailored to enhance the unique dynamics of specific courses.

Ultimately, the information provided strives to empower online instructors by equipping them with the tools and insights necessary to maximize the contributions of academic coaches. By leveraging these strategies, online instructors can create more inclusive, effective, and engaging online learning environments, paving the way for sustained advancements in online education and student outcomes. Future research should address methodological limitations such as the small sample sizes and institution-specific context of this work, while investigating the comparative effectiveness of different coaching approaches across diverse student populations and disciplines. Additionally, longitudinal studies examining the sustained impact of academic coaching beyond immediate performance metrics would strengthen the case for institutional investment in robust coaching programs.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Academic Coaches: those referred to in this article are externally hired, through secondary company, come with a minimum of a master's degree in the given discipline supported, and have undergone that provide instructional support to instructors.

Instructional Support: the instructional support provided by academic coaches is limited to grading, providing feedback to submitted work, communicating with assigned students, sending reminders addressing questions, and responding to discussion forums. Not included is helping construct the course or provide tutoring services.

Large Online Courses: in the given institution, large online courses are those whose minimum enrollment cap is no less than 60 students with actual enrollment above 70.

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About the Contributors

Harriet E. Watkins earned her Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Distance Education from Regent University in December 2016. She also holds a Master of Education (M.Ed.) in Instructional Technology from American Intercontinental University and a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Interpersonal and Group Communications from Trinity International University. Currently, Dr. Watkins serves as the Chief Academic Officer at Instructional Connections, LLC, in Dallas, Texas. In this role, she builds and maintains robust connections between Instructional Connections and partner institutions, oversees small research grant projects, and conducts ongoing academic research related to coaching models with partner universities. Dr. Watkins has made significant contributions to the field of online learning and instructional design. She has held various leadership positions, including Director of Online Learning at the University of Arkansas System eVersity (now UA Grantham) and Manager of Academic Partnerships at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her work has focused on course development, quality assurance, and accreditation compliance for online programs. In addition to her administrative roles, Dr. Watkins is an active researcher and author. She has contributed chapters to books on online learning and educational technology, and her research on student retention in online courses has been published in academic journals. She also teaches graduate-level courses in educational technology at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Dr. Watkins is a frequent presenter at national and international conferences and is actively involved in several professional organizations, including the International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Association and the United States Distance Learning Association. She has also served on the boards of various educational associations and is a past president of the Texas Digital Learning Association.

Robert Williams has a career spanning over 18 years, Robert Williams brings a wealth of leadership expertise, initially honed as an armor officer in the U.S. Army, where he ascended to the rank of Major. Dr. Williams' professional journey has been

diverse, culminating in a specialization in online higher education. Armed with a bachelor's degree in journalism from West Virginia University, graduate degrees in Leadership and Liberal Studies from Duquesne University, and a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership from Argosy University, Robert possesses a formidable academic background. Drawing from over 3 years of hands-on experience within high-growth organizations, Robert has demonstrated proficiency in establishing and maintaining instructional support systems for a student population exceeding 200,000. His expertise extends particularly to the realm of student support within large-scale online higher education programs. Through his tenure with organizations dedicated to scaling academic programs, Robert has garnered comprehensive insights into the complexities of online education. In his capacity as President and CEO of Instructional Connections, LLC, Robert spearheads the pioneering initiative of embedding online academic coaches directly into digital courses, marking a disruptive approach within the United States' educational landscape. With a singular focus on enhancing online learning experiences, Instructional Connections stands as a trailblazer under Robert's astute leadership, setting new standards for academic support in the digital realm.

Eboni Anderson, PhD, DHEd, MSW, MEd, MA, is an accomplished educator, social worker, and public health professional with over two decades of experience in higher education, health professions training, and community health. She currently serves as Associate Professor of Public Health and Director of Community Oriented Primary Care at A.T. Still University-School of Osteopathic Medicine in Arizona (ATSU-SOMA). She earned a bachelor's degree in English and three master's degrees in counseling, higher and postsecondary education, and social work from Wayne State University and Arizona State University, respectively. She holds two doctoral degrees in health education and health professions education from A.T. Still University and Bellarmine University. Dr. Anderson is also an advocate, researcher, published author, and dedicated mentor. Her research focuses on educator and staff well-being, social determinants of health, and structural inequities in medical education.

Ipuna Estavillo Black is a first-generation college graduate and was a single mother while pursuing her nursing education. These experiences shaped her understanding of the challenges students face and fueled her passion for helping others succeed. Earning her degrees transformed her life, opening doors she never imagined. This drives her commitment to fostering nursing students' growth, knowing education can change lives. Dr. Black is a proud alumna of the University of

Nevada, Las Vegas, where she earned her Bachelor of Science in Nursing and her Ph.D. in Nursing: Sustainable Health. She also holds a Master of Science in Nursing as a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner from Stony Brook University in New York. With over 20 years of nursing experience, her clinical background is primarily in Pediatrics and Community Health. She brings more than 15 years of experience in higher education, teaching in baccalaureate and associate-level nursing programs across three institutions. Currently, Dr. Black serves as the Associate Dean at Nevada State University School of Nursing, where she collaborates with a team of passionate educators to prepare the next generation of caring, empowered nurses and future leaders in healthcare. Her teaching philosophy is rooted in student-centered learning, emphasizing individual strengths, abilities, and a commitment to advancing health and well-being for all communities. An accomplished researcher, Dr. Black has published and presented widely on topics related to holistic wellness and health promotion. She also serves as principal investigator on a nearly \$2 million grant focused on faculty recruitment, retention, and development. Beyond her professional achievements, Dr. Black is a proud mother of four and deeply values holistic, sustainable health practices. She remains dedicated to fostering the growth of empowered nursing students and advancing the nursing profession through mentorship, education, and research that supports thriving individuals and healthier communities. Dr. Black is a Caritas Coach® and Caritas Leader®.

Mahauganee D. Bonds is an assistant professor in the online Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership at Arkansas State University. She is passionate about helping higher education professionals effectively mitigate, manage, and move past campus crises. Her deep introduction to campus crisis management came from her time as a campus administrator managing Hurricane Katrina. Since then, she has conducted research in this area, developed and instructed courses on emergency management, and led workshops and trainings in this area. Her research explores how postsecondary institutions respond to moments of crisis and tragedy; this is accomplished through examinations of organizational behavior and leadership decisions during turbulent times, the process of recovery and healing that follows campus emergencies, and the pedagogy of campus crisis response. Through this research, she aims to improve organizational buoyancy within higher education. Her most recent book project focused on the memorialization of campus-based emergencies.

Kathleen A. Boothe is an Associate Professor and Program Coordinator of Special Education at Southeastern Oklahoma State University, where she currently teaches fully online to both graduate and undergraduate students. She has taught asynchronous online teacher education courses since 2015 averaging approximately

16 courses per academic year. Dr. Boothe's research interests include improving online education for pre and in-service teachers, with a focus on Universal Design for Learning (UDL). She has published several book chapters and articles on effective online teaching in higher education. In 2025, Dr. Boothe received the Faculty Senate Recognition Award for Teaching Excellence.

Pamela Call graduated from nursing school from Los Angeles County + USC Medical Center, one of the largest and most esteemed trauma centers in the country. She obtained her Master's Degree in Nursing from Touro University in Las Vegas and her Post Master's Family Nurse Practitioner Certificate from the University of Nevada at Reno. Pamela has served as an emergency room nurse, family practice Nurse Practitioner, nurse educator, and as a nurse consultant for various insurance and legal entities. She has taught at Nevada State University (NSU) since 2012. During her tenure at NSU she was promoted to Distinguished Lecturer. She enjoys teaching and mentoring incoming faculty. Her work at NSU includes developing an online RN to BSN course (The Theory and Practice of Conscious Dying), coordinating Medical-Surgical clinical and theory, and acting as the Curriculum Committee Chair of the School of Nursing Curriculum Committee. Additionally she has spearheaded many nursing department and campus-wide initiatives and committees. Pamela has obtained her Certified Emergency Nurse Certificate, Certified Nurse Educator Certificate, Certified Caritas Coach (R), Death Doula, and Certified Online Instructor Certificates. Pamela also actively participates in the Nevada Faculty Alliance, a state-wide faculty advocacy group.

Margaret Campbell is an Assistant Professor of Education at Lyon College. She brings over a decade of experience in K–12 education and has held key roles in higher education, including Teacher Education Coordinator at Ozarka College, where she revitalized the Kids College program. She also served as a Reading Instructor at Arkansas State University. Dr. Campbell's scholarship focuses on supporting novice teachers in Arkansas

Tarol Page Clements is a seasoned educational leader with over 27 years of experience dedicated to supporting students and enhancing educational systems across Tennessee. She currently serves as a Senior Manager with Memphis-Shelby County Schools, where she has played a pivotal role since 2017 in driving initiatives that support student services, special education programming and grant management. Dr. Clements began her career as a Special Education Teacher with Memphis City Schools, laying the foundation for her lifelong commitment to inclusive education. She later served as an Education Consultant with the Tennessee Department of Children's Services and then as a Special Education Advisor for Memphis-Shelby

County Schools, where she provided expert guidance on improving outcomes for students with diverse learning needs. In addition to her leadership in K–12 education, Dr. Clements is a passionate advocate for higher learning. Since 2006, she has served as an Adjunct Professor at the University of Memphis where she mentors future educators and shares her expertise in special education, curriculum development, and instructional leadership. Dr. Clements is also a contributing scholar. She co-authored the article, “Utilizing the PPET Mnemonic to Guide Classroom-Level PBIS for Students With or at Risk for EBD Across Classroom Settings,” alongside William C. Hunter, EdD; Sally Barton-Arwood, PhD; Andrea Jasper, PhD; and Renee Murley, EdD. This work highlights practical strategies for implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) for students with or at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), reinforcing her commitment to evidence-based practices in education. She holds a Doctor of Education (EdD) from Union University and a Bachelor’s degree from Austin Peay State University. Dr. Clements' career is marked by a deep commitment to educational equity, professional development, and building systems that empower all students to succeed.

June Eastridge is the Dean of Nursing at Nevada State University. A first-generation college graduate originally from a small farming and ranching community in Eastern Oregon, she obtained an Associate of Science degree from Blue Mountain Community College, Baccalaureate and Master’s degrees in Nursing from the University of New Mexico, and a Doctoral degree from Concordia University – Portland focused on Higher Education Leadership. She is a Certified Nurse Educator through the National League for Nursing. After a 15-year nursing career focused on Critical Care and Trauma nursing, she taught at the University of New Mexico – Gallup for nine years, earning Tenure and rank of Associate Professor. Dr. Eastridge spent 24 years living on and around the Navajo nation, and has a great love and appreciation for the southwest and its diverse people. Dr. Eastridge was part of the New Mexico Nursing Education Consortium that created a statewide nursing curriculum, serving on the Consortium Evaluation Committee. Her research centers on testing in Schools of Nursing, and use of creative testing models like Collaborative Testing to increase learning through a cognitive process known as testing effect, with publications in the *Nurse Educator*, *Nurse Education Today*, and *Teaching of Psychology*. She has written and received federal grants totaling nearly \$5 million dollars that have focused on resources used to educate new nurses and bolster the nursing workforce. She has served on the state of Nevada Healthcare Industry Sector Council under Governor Steve Sisolak, and the Nevada Select Committee on Healthcare Access under Governor Joe Lombardo. Dr. Eastridge is a Caritas Coach® and Caritas Leader®.

Tracia Forman serves as an Associate Professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Dr. Forman's higher education academic career spans two decades. She holds credentials as an American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) board-certified Informatics Nurse (NI-BC) and has attained certification as a Certified Nurse Educator (CNE) through the National League for Nursing. Additionally, Dr. Forman contributes to online learning excellence as a Master Peer Reviewer for Quality Matters (QM). Her research program is contextualized to the specialty of health informatics, focusing on the need for more professionals properly prepared to translate healthcare problems and processes into informatics-based solutions. Aligned with this problem-solving spirit, is a dual research focus about best practices in online teaching with the intent of informing actionable ideas for improved student success and retention.

Tara Frazier serves as the Associate Director of the Student Accessibility Center (SAC) and Director of the THRIVE Program. Dr. Frazier has over 15 years of Higher Education experience and prior to this, spent several years in the classroom as both a behavioral intervention specialist and administrator. During this time, she taught students with mild to severe disabilities, co-taught, self-contained, transition, and supported general education courses. Some of her unique experiences include teaching internationally and living in Australia for several years. Her current research practices focuses on supporting students with disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, through the use of peer mentors in postsecondary education settings and preparing students for employment through digital badging, industry certifications, and developing credentials. Dr. Frazier is a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) and Certified Vocational Evaluator (CVE) as well as a Certified Autism Specialist (CAS) and Certified Autism Travel Professional (CATP). Dr. Frazier is fluent in American Sign Language and loves spending time with her family doing anything at the beach or outdoors!

Francisco Garcia is the Director of the Center for Online Learning and Teaching Technology and a faculty member of the Master's in Educational Technology Program at the College of Education & P-16 Integration at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). Dr. Garcia also leads and serves on different Distance Education Committees and Organizations at the national and state levels, developing best practices and guidelines for online instruction. He has presented at numerous state, national, and international Educational Technologies conferences. He has a Doctor of Education in Curriculum & Instruction with a specialization in Educational Technology from UTRGV.

Holly Hovan has a passion for education, teaching, and helping others. She has been working in higher education for 15 years and also serves as an advanced practice registered nurse in a clinical setting. She enjoys teaching others and finds joy in being able to help others achieve their goals and advance in their careers. Ms. Hovan has a multitude of experiences working with both traditional and non-traditional learners in a variety of settings – classroom, online, and clinical/in-hospital. All aspects of these learning environments bring something different and are tailored to meet the needs of the learner. She values the importance of tailoring learning environments to fit the lifestyle and needs of the learner, in order to make an impact and allow them to feel comfortable and open their mind to the course content. Her many years of educational experience has allowed her to cultivate her own unique teaching style with the support of colleagues and leadership in order to create a culture of connectedness behind the screen, engaging online learners in a variety of ways.

Annette Hux obtained her BSE in Elementary Education from Southwest Baptist University and earned a Master of Arts from Southeast Missouri State University in Elementary Administration. She is certified as a Special Education Director. In 2001, she earned her doctorate from Saint Louis University in Educational Leadership. Dr. Hux's teaching experience includes roles in special education and elementary classrooms. She served as an Elementary Principal, Special Education Director, and Superintendent in public schools. She joined Arkansas State University in 2011 as an assistant professor and now serve as Dean of the College of Education and Behavioral Science.

Jessie S. King has been a committed educator and advocate in the field of special education since 1993. With a comprehensive background spanning both elementary and secondary settings, Dr. King brings decades of expertise in instructional leadership, curriculum design, and supporting students with diverse learning needs. She currently serves as the Bachelor of Science in Education (BSE) Special Education Program Coordinator at Arkansas State University, where she leads program development and mentors future special education professionals.

Rebecca C. Lee currently serves as an Associate Professor of Nursing and Director of the RN-to-BSN Online Program at the University of Cincinnati College of Nursing. She has over 24 years of teaching and research experience. Her teaching and mentorship have spanned undergraduate and graduate levels of nursing students as well as those from other disciplines across the university. Dr. Lee holds advanced certification in Community/Public Health Nursing as well as Advanced Transcultural Nursing and is licensed as a Public Health Clinical Nurse Specialist and registered

nurse by the State of Ohio. Dr. Lee has been recognized for her scholarship, including her research and teaching. In 2012, she was inducted as a Transcultural Scholar by the Transcultural Nursing Society. In 2022, she received the Distinguished Nurse Educator Award from Mount St. Joseph University and in 2023 she was named a Fellow in the University of Cincinnati Academy for Teaching & Learning. Most recently, she was inducted as a Distinguished Fellow into the National Academies of Practice based on her career of interprofessional research, education, and practice. She is currently serving as the President of the Transcultural Nursing Society. Dr. Lee has conducted several funded research projects, made numerous presentations to local, regional, national, and international audiences, and published papers on the social determinants of health, family homelessness, health promotion, human rights, diversity, and cultural competence. Her long-term research goals are to promote the health of vulnerable populations through culturally informed research and by conducting health professions workforce development through the lens of the social determinants of health and cultural competence and cultural humility.

Ludy Llasus, PhD, RN, APRN, NP-C is a tenured Associate Professor at Nevada State University School of Nursing. She earned her PhD in Nursing from University of Nevada Las Vegas. She holds certification as a Family Nurse Practitioner. Dr. Llasus has 32 years of experience in nursing, including 23 years in nursing education. She has been a major force in the establishment of the nursing curriculum and programmatic infrastructure at Nevada State. She played a significant role in establishing the structure of simulation education and received recognition by the Nevada Board of Regents for her outstanding contribution in the development of the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) Clinical Simulation Center of Las Vegas. She has served as Interim Dean, Associate Dean and Pre-Licensure Director for the School of Nursing and was instrumental in facilitating the growth for both the RN to BSN and pre-licensure programs. Dr. Llasus is a Watson Caring Science Institute Caritas Coach® and Caritas Leader®. She provides leadership in the integration of Caring Science in the BSN curriculum at Nevada State. Her soul's work is nursing education and remains committed in educating future nurses who are expected to lead and advance the nursing profession.

Michael McDaniel is an Assistant Professor at LSU Shreveport teaching undergraduate and MBA level management classes, and the Director of the MBA program which is the largest in its state. With 25 years of business leadership in multiple industries including defense, energy, engineering, education, and technology before entering academia, Dr. McDaniel's research exists at the intersection of entrepreneurship and organizational behavior, including development, leadership, and social spillover effects of entrepreneurship. His education includes a PhD from

the University of Texas at Arlington, an MBA from the University of Notre Dame, a teaching credential from Saint Mary's College of California, and a BA from the University of California at Berkeley.

Sarah Morrison (Ed.D.) has been serving in education for over 18 years in public and private environments. She strives to make a difference for each family under her care and understands that making an impact in a city starts with the students and families. She earned her Master's in Education Administration from Southeastern Oklahoma State University and her Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Administration from Texas A & M Commerce in December 2020. She has worked in Texas in public schools as an English teacher, and she is currently an Assistant Professor on tenure track for Southeastern Oklahoma State University, and an instructional coach for Master's classes. Her research topic and publication with SFA centered on secondary principal leadership and the impact on hands-on learning strategies. Dr. Morrison has an interest in helping the community, researching best practices for teachers and administrators to assist staff in the field, and the current technology trends taking place today. Dr. Morrison truly enjoys working with students and families from all stages of life and understands that education is changing, and the need to stay on track with strategies that benefit students is key.

Karen O'Connell, PhD, APRN, CNE, NEA-BC, is an associate professor of nursing at Northern Kentucky University since 2017. She has taught all levels of nursing students in assessment, theory, research, statistics and leadership. Dr. O'Connell retired from the US Air Force as a Lieutenant Colonel and provided care for wounded warriors during Operation IRAQI and ENDURING FREEDOM. Her research interests include care of the wounded warrior, incivility in nursing, and military nursing history.

Lee-Anne Oros has served as Assistant Professor and Program Director of Building Level Curriculum and Instruction within the Educational Leadership, Curriculum, and Special Education (ELCSE) department in the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences (COEBS) at Arkansas State University since August of 2022. She has filled various roles within the ELCSE department, such as an adjunct professor, for the past 17 years and taught most courses within the programs. In our K-12 public schools, Dr. Oros has worked in large, small, suburban, and urban public school districts throughout her home state of New Jersey. She is currently a board member of her local school district and is on their curriculum and public relations committees. Dr. Oros has taught all levels of English/Language Arts for high school and middle school students and held the leadership roles of supervisor of

World Languages & ESL and Visual and Performing Arts, Assistant Principal, and Director of Special Projects.

Joy Patrick, DNP, MSN/Ed, APRN, CCNS-AG, CCRN, COI, is a dedicated Nurse Educator and Advanced Practice Registered Nurse specializing in Adult-Gerontology Clinical Nurse Specialist practice. With extensive experience in nursing leadership, quality improvement, curriculum Development, and clinical Education, Dr. Patrick is passionate about fostering the next generation of nursing professionals. She currently serves as a Senior Lecturer at Nevada State University, where she integrates evidence-based practice, Caring Science, and competency-based Education into her teaching. Dr. Patrick's scholarly interests include Neurodiversity in nursing education, healthcare quality initiatives, and advancing ethical leadership in nursing practice.

Jessica Marie Sanchez is the Associate Director for the Center for Online Learning & Teaching Technology at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. She has worked in the field of e-learning in higher education since 2001, with a focus on advancing online teaching and learning practices. Dr. Sanchez earned her Doctorate in Education in Curriculum and Instruction with a specialization in Educational Technology from UTRGV. She also holds a Master's in Educational Leadership with a specialization in Instructional Technology from Lamar University. Her research interests center on e-learning in higher education, particularly the design and delivery of engaging, technology-enhanced learning environments.

Alicia C. Shaw received her BSE in elementary education from Arkansas State University in 1989 and went on to complete her Doctorate in Educational Leadership in 2009 from Arkansas State University. Dr. Shaw has taught elementary as well as 9-12 math. Dr. Shaw has served as an elementary principal and special programs director. Dr. Shaw joined the faculty of Arkansas State University in 2016 and now serves as the Chair of Educational Leadership, Curriculum, and Special Education

Pete Smith is Professor of Modern Languages at the University of Texas Arlington, where he also serves as Chief Analytics and Data Officer. He previously served for 18 years as Assistant and later Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, as well as Vice Provost for Digital Teaching and Learning. Additionally he also holds the AP Endowed Chair in Online Learning and Innovation. Dr. Smith oversees and teaches foundational courses in UTA's Localization and Translation undergraduate degree program, offered to students of eight languages (Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Korean, Russian, Spanish) as an introduction to localization and the translation industry, as well as emerging technologies in the field. His teaching and research focus on the role of culture in natural language

processing and natural language understanding and machine translation, computed culture, and “big data” in education.

Stephanie Songer is the Associate Director of Online and Professional Education at Northern Kentucky University (NKU). She is closely involved in managing accelerated online programs, and offers orientations for new online learners and faculty. She is a Quality Matters (QM)-certified peer reviewer and workshop facilitator, and serves as the QM Coordinator and Course Review Manager for NKU. She also manages the university's micro-credentialing program and serves on a number of workgroups and committees, including those dedicated to accessibility and academic integrity.

Jerry C. Stout grew up in northeast Texas in the Ft. Worth and Paris areas. He attended Paris Jr. College and East Texas State University (now Texas A&M - Commerce). Dr. Stout holds M.Ed. and Ed.D. degrees with majors in Educational Administration and minors in Secondary & Higher Ed. and Guidance & Counseling. With a B.S. double major in biology and chemistry, he began his teaching career at Terrell Middle School. There he taught and coached life science, football, basketball and track. While coaching and teaching subjects from sixth grade math through high school physics at Beckville Schools, Dr. Stout began his administrative career as middle school principal. After serving as high school principal in Cooper, he began work in the central office capacity and later became Superintendent of Schools in Roxton. Dr. Stout retired from full time public school work in Texas while serving as Superintendent of Schools at Tom Bean. Dr. Jerry C. Stout now serves SOSU as the Educational Administration Program Coordinator. Since 2012, he has taught most of the courses in the Educational Administration degree program. Dr. Stout works to create a culture of learning and teaching with an emphasis on student engagement in learning. With twenty-three years of administrative experience in public education, he strives to give course assignments relevance and application. Dr. Stout's research emphasis is on leadership in small, rural schools.

William R. (Rick) Stripling is a veteran administrator at Arkansas State University. Dr. Stripling is Associate Professor/Program Director of Master's Science in Higher Education. The teaching emphasis area is enrollment management and student personnel services. His doctorate is from Southern Illinois University, majoring in College Student Personnel Services, master's degree in counseling Arkansas State University, bachelor's degree in psychology and sociology University of Tampa. Has held the following positions: Executive Director of the Student Affairs Project (Mexico campus), Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, Associate VC, Assistant VC, Dean of Students, Associate Dean,

Assistant Dean, Director of Activities, and Counselor. As the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, I had oversight responsibility for the following departments: Admissions, Recruitment, Counseling Center, Financial Aid, Scholarships, University Police, Sodexo Food Services, Resident Life, Health Center, Career Services, Student Union, Student Recreation Center, and Enrollment Management. Dr. Stripling led the development/improvement of the student services landscape at Arkansas State University. Expanded the campus residential living from 1200 students to over 3000. This expansion includes North Park Quad, Kays Hall renovation, The Village, Collegiate Park, Red Wolf Den, Sorority Housing, Honors Living Learning Community, Pack Place, and The Circle. Additional campus changes resulted in the removal of over 200 mobile homes, 125 small faculty/staff houses, Twin Towers, Delta Hall, and the relocation of the United States Post Office. Campus life expansion included the Student Recreational Center, Parking Garage, Student Union, Renovation of the old student union to create a one-stop student service, Student Health Center, and Visitor Center. Campus life facilities totaling over 1,000,000 square feet and cost \$200,000,000. He led the design, development, and construction of the first American-style residential Campus in Queretaro, Mexico. This was a privately funded project that cost over \$100,000,000. Just released (January 2025) is his first book, "Legacy of Change," a retrospective about his higher education experience at A-State in a volume written to help young professionals headed into student service careers. In Legacy of Change, Stripling emphasizes the behaviors leaders use to transform values into action, and obstacles and risks into innovation and rewards. The book is available on Amazon. Starting on his second book, "Legacy of Change II, Building an American Style Residential Campus in Queretaro, Mexico. Also, Dr. Stripling's Enrollment Management responsibilities led to the development of three Enrollment Management Plans over a 15-year span, each with an increase in enrollment. The last plan resulted in a record freshman class with over 1800 students. The overall record enrollment was over 14,000. As vice chancellor, I managed over 165 employees, 14 departments, and a \$150,000,000 budget. Dr. Stripling is a consultant in student affairs, staff development, and enrollment management. He is the CEO of Stripling Consultant LLC. He currently serves as a Peer Reviewer for the Higher Learning Commission.

Dawn Taylor, Ph.D., RN, CNE, graduated from Nursing school with an RN diploma in 1992. She started her career working in cardiothoracic nursing, attaining certification in this specialty. She moved to the USA in 1998 and has been working as an RN in a critical care float pool. From 2000 - 2013, she changed her work setting to the Community and, as a certified nephrology nurse, worked in various capacities, including Acute, Home, and inpatient care. Her education continued with a BSN in 2008 and an MSN Ed. in 2010 from the University of Phoenix. Her

thesis on home safety for dialysis patients was disseminated at numerous nephrology conferences. Since 2014, she has worked in academia with undergraduate nursing students at Nevada State University, where she is currently an Assistant Professor and a Certified Nurse Educator. Dr. Taylor received her Ph.D. in Nursing with an emphasis in Caring Science Theory from the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus in 2022.

Daryl Traylor is a public health educator, researcher, and medical student whose multidisciplinary expertise spans nursing, pharmacology, public health, and healthcare administration. He has over 15 years of experience teaching undergraduate and graduate-level courses in public health, health sciences, and nursing at institutions such as Arizona State University, A.T. Still University, Eastern Washington University, and Chamberlain University. Dr. Traylor's research focuses on HIV prevention, PrEP prescribing practices among primary care providers, diversity and inclusion in health professions education, and the health impacts of climate change. He is committed to mentoring underrepresented students and advancing health equity through academic, clinical, and community-based initiatives. His work bridges the gap between clinical care and public health practice, with a strong emphasis on social justice and systemic reform.

Claudia Vela-Hernández, Ed.D. is an Instructional Development Designer at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, where she specializes in faculty development, instructional design, and the integration of technology in higher education. With over 25 years of experience in teaching and academic support, she has contributed extensively to the advancement of online and hybrid learning environments. Dr. Vela-Hernández holds a Doctorate in Educational Leadership and master's degrees in Educational Administration and Applied Linguistics. Her research focuses on professional development, inclusive education, and the impact of instructional design on student engagement and learning outcomes.

Karen Vietz, PhD, CNS, RN is the Director of Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program and DNP faculty at Northern Kentucky University. She has 37 years of enjoying the many facets of nursing in clinical, mission service, academia, and leadership arenas. Her research is centered on nursing education, specifically student learning. She desires for students to learn and grow in a meaningful, caring, and engaging environment.

Harriet Watkins has served as the Chief Academic Officer at Instructional Connections (IC), a provider of high-quality instructional support services to colleges and universities offering online courses and degree programs. As Chief Academic Officer she works with higher education partner institutions, conducting

research, providing grant administration and oversight. Additionally, Dr. Watkins teaches graduate students in the Educational Technology Program at University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley. Formerly, Dr. Watkins served as the Director of Online Learning for the newly established online University of Arkansas System, eVersity (currently UA Grantham). She built the initial core team of Instructional Designers who developed innovative online courses and programs for the university using primarily OER materials. Previous to this she was the Manager of Academic Partnerships at the University of Texas at Arlington. She oversaw the logistics and implementation of accelerated distance education programs with contracted vendors. Early in her career at UTA, she was manager of Instructional Design and started her career as an instructional designer and trainer. Dr. Watkins is currently the Immediate Past President and member of the board for the Texas Digital Learning Association (TxDLA), as well as a member of the board for the United States Distance Learning Association. Additionally, Dr. Watkins served as the past president of the International Leadership Council, and board member for Golden Key International Honour Society. Dr. Watkins also serves as an education specialist for Blue Door Christian Academy, Nairobi Kenya. Dr. Watkins loves to share her passion for online education and volunteers with various educational and philanthropic organizations providing her leadership, and mentoring expertise. She holds an Ed.D in Distance Education from Regent University in Virginia Beach, VA. She loves traveling and spending time with her family, especially her grandchildren whom she adores.

Dolores White, DNP, RN, CNE is the Immediate-President of the Kentucky Nurses Association and is an Associate Professor at Northern Kentucky University in the Graduate Nursing Program, DNP Program. Her research interests include the brand image of nursing and the nursing workforce. She has 29 years of nursing experience in a variety of clinical, academic, and leadership roles that have provided her with the opportunity to advocate for nurses and the nursing profession at the local, state, and national level.

Janelle Baugh Willis, MSN, FNP, CNE is the Post-Licensure Director and a Senior Lecturer at the Nevada State University School of Nursing. With over 17 years of experience as a nurse educator, she brings a strong foundation in academic leadership, curriculum development, and teaching strategies. Janelle is deeply committed to supporting the professional growth of nursing students and advancing nursing education. Her work focuses on fostering resilience, ethical practice, and leadership in the next generation of nurses.

Robert Williams has served in both public and private institutions as a teacher and administrator in Georgia, Alabama, and Arkansas. He has taught all levels of math from 7th -12th grade and held positions as a math specialist, curriculum director, and middle school principal. His experience also includes serving as the Vice President of Academic Affairs as well as Dean for the education department at an independent college. Additionally, he has served as a panelist/reviewer/evaluator for multiple ETS Praxis exams. He also serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Education and Development. He currently is an Associate Professor and serves as the program director for Educational Leadership Principal programs within the Educational Leadership, Curriculum, and Special Education (ELCSE) department in the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences (COEBS) at Arkansas State University.

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