

Student Perspectives on the Value of Success Coaching

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Community College Students Weigh in on the Impact of Their Success Coaches

This brief explores the benefits of Success Coaching through the eyes of students across 10 North Carolina community colleges who were assigned to a Coach as part of the Carolina Works initiative. Elevating the student perspective on Success Coaching is critical as colleges and policymakers assess the value of this approach for helping students reach their goals. Perspectives from more than 50 students – gathered through focus groups conducted by DVP-PRAXIS LTD in Spring 2019 – point to the important role that Success Coaches play in students’ lives by serving as a:

-  Reliable, caring, and proactive personal connection
-  Mentor identifying barriers and building capacity
-  Source of encouragement and accountability
-  Bridge to resources and personnel
-  Guide to academic and career goals

Introduction

Colleges nationwide are increasingly investing in new and existing support services to improve student success and raise completion rates. One such support is Success Coaching, a model in which a dedicated staff person proactively engages with students, informed by real-time data, and connects them with personalized resources, services, and other personnel. This brief explores the benefits of Success Coaching from the perspective of more than 50 community college students who were assigned to a Success Coach as part of the Carolina Works initiative. Carolina Works aims to improve retention and credential completion outcomes for students at 10 North Carolina community colleges through the provision of proactive, data-informed Success Coaching (see box). Elevating the student perspective on Success Coaching is critical as colleges and policymakers assess the value of this approach for helping students reach their goals.

What is Success Coaching?

Success Coaching is part of a broader movement to take a more holistic, personalized, and proactive approach to providing support services to college students.¹ College students overall, and especially at 2-year colleges, are increasingly enrolled part-time; struggle with poverty, food insecurity, and homelessness; and balance their education with work, parenting, and other family obligations.² Juggling these challenges and responsibilities can make it especially difficult to successfully develop and navigate a multi-year education and career plan. Even for students that are able to overcome obstacles and reach their academic goals, community college students graduate with a nationwide average of 22 excess credits, a striking signal that too much of students' valuable time and money are spent in courses that do not move them closer to a quality degree or credential.³

Carolina Works

The Carolina Works study—led by Central Carolina Community College—is one of two validation grants awarded in 2015 by the U.S. Department of Education's First in the World program to test interventions for student success that are supported by previous evidence. The goal of the Carolina Works project is to increase student retention and credential completion across 10 North Carolina community colleges through the provision of proactive Success Coaching informed by a web-based early alert and advising system using predictive analytics called Aviso Retention.

This study includes a mixed-methods evaluation of both program implementation and academic outcomes led by evaluation and consulting firm DVP-PRAXIS LTD. The evaluation includes designing a randomized controlled trial in which more than 7,000 first-time students were randomly assigned to a Success Coach between fall 2016 and fall 2018. Preliminary evidence from the earliest cohort of students (fall 2016) points to the potential benefits of Success Coaching for students' longer-term retention. Final quantitative results for Carolina Works will be available in Fall 2020.

While there is no universal model of Success Coaching, at its core is the idea that Coaches develop personal relationships with students and leverage data to monitor student progress, help students manage their many responsibilities, and intervene when necessary to check-in and ensure that students remain on track to succeed. An influential 2014 study of Success Coaching suggests that students receiving services from a Coach are more likely to remain enrolled in college and complete their degree, compared to a control group of students receiving business-as-usual services.⁴

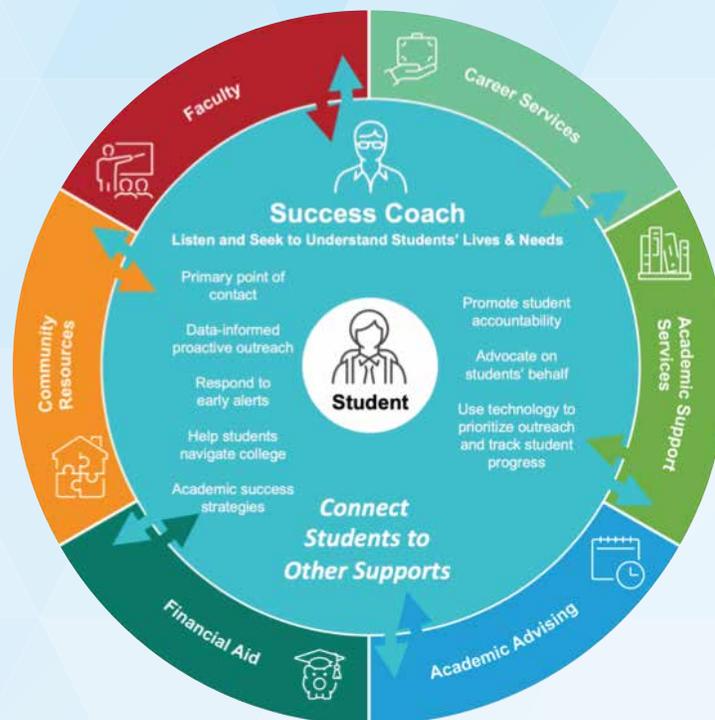
The graphic on this page, developed by JFF, summarizes key components of the Success Coaching model as operationalized in the Carolina Works project based on feedback from the Success Coaches themselves and from other project partners.⁵ Success Coaches are intended to serve as a main point of contact for students as well as a connector to other key supports and resources at the college and beyond. As indicated by the two-way arrows in this graphic, Coaches not only refer students to resources but also follow up with students after they have accessed them to help the student with any next steps. At each of the 10 Carolina Works community colleges, Success Coaches use a predictive analytics and case management software called Aviso Retention to monitor student grades, attendance, and other important information provided in real-time to help them target proactive outreach to students.⁶

Students Weigh In

While researchers and evaluators continue to explore the quantitative impacts of Success Coaching on student outcomes and provide qualitative descriptions of effective Coaching practice, very few studies have directly and systematically engaged students in order to understand what Coaching means to them.

In spring 2019, DVP-PRAXIS LTD engaged in two-day site visits at each campus, meeting with faculty, staff, administrators, Success Coaches, and students from all 10 community colleges in the Carolina Works initiative. Across colleges, evaluators led semi-structured conversations with 17 groups of students; in total, 54 students participated in these focus groups, for an average 3 students per group. These confidential student focus groups were held in private locations; no college personnel were allowed to participate or listen in. Students were invited by their respective colleges for focus group participation, so while they are not a random sample of all students receiving the intervention, patterns across responses illuminate shared experiences by students across multiple institutions and Coaches.

Students were asked about their experiences and interactions with Success Coaches, the extent to which Coaches had impacted their college experience or their lives in any ways, and their perceptions on the benefits of having a Coach as well as any challenges or areas for improvement. While interview prompts were neutrally oriented, allowing the student to describe positive, neutral, or negative perspectives, students overwhelmingly described benefits their Coach provided.



Source: JFF, 2019

Based on a qualitative analysis of transcripts across focus groups, the following five themes were identified as the most common ways in which students described the role of their Success Coach.



Reliable, caring, and proactive personal connection

Coaches form a personal connection and cultivate trust between themselves and the student, forming an essential foundation for all other supports provided.



Mentor identifying barriers and building capacity

Coaches help students proactively identify and overcome barriers, alleviating problems and working with students to develop their own problem-solving capacity.



Source of encouragement and accountability

Coaches hold students accountable and provide positive encouragement, giving students added motivation to work toward their goals.



Bridge to resources and personnel

Coaches listen to the needs and goals of their students and provide direct connections to available resources and personnel, often making personal introductions between the student and college faculty and staff.



Guide to academic and career goals

Coaches help students explore and develop their academic and career aspirations and then work with them to create a roadmap to reach those goals.

The remaining sections of this report describe each of these five benefits in more detail, using the words of students to illuminate their perceptions of Coaches' support. The selected quotations are representative of the common themes emerging across all student focus groups and include student voices from all 10 Carolina Works colleges.



Reliable, Caring, & Proactive Personal Connection

The most common theme emerging across focus groups featured student descriptions of their Success Coach as a warm, trusted, and reliable contact. Students consistently portrayed their Coaches as a caring personal connection who sees the student as a “whole person,” expressing sincere interest in all aspects of a student’s life.

To illustrate this point, students provided examples of Coaches engaging them in a casual, friendly, and thoughtful way, inquiring about a student’s background, culture, emotional health, and personal life alongside typical academic concerns. They also described their Coach’s reliability and tendency to respond very quickly as a critical part of their relationship development.

Students’ perceptions of their Coach’s sincere commitment and interest in their lives and well-being appears to facilitate strong trust-building, as many students reported discussing with their Coaches not only academic issues, but also sensitive personal issues. This personal connection and trust between student and Coach form an essential foundation for all other supports provided.



Student Voices

“I was scared when I decided to go to college but after meeting with my Success Coach, the college did not look so big – a friendly face goes a thousand miles. Knowing you have this person, this go-to person, made college easier for me. It was no longer overwhelming, having a Coach was calming.”

“I think it’s great to have someone that you can meet with. [Your Success Coach] is always right there. You don’t need to wait days to get a response. I always get a response within a day or two. It’s a great resource. I didn’t have that when I was here before and it probably would have helped... The instructors are awesome, but they have classes and students.”

“I think we should have more people like [my Coach], because she’s awesome, she cares about students academically and personally. If we had more of [her] it would be really good. She helped me do a 180. My first semester was really horrible, I got into academic probation, but she helped me turn it around. Now I’ve been on honor roll two semesters in a row.”

“When my mom passed away [my Coach] was right there. A lot of people want to help but don’t know what to do. She let me cry in her office, gave me hugs. [Meeting with her] is something I look forward to, she’s a real friend.”



Mentor Identifying Barriers & Building Capacity

Having a reliable personal connection is the foundation of the Coach-student relationship, and that foundation enables Coaches to identify barriers and engage in personal development with the student. Students were remarkably candid about serious struggles that their Coach helped them through. These challenges varied widely, and included balancing school with work, navigating mental health issues, managing a learning disability, dealing with hurricane damage, and experiencing family illness, among many others.

Many of these personal issues were extremely impactful and salient for students and may not otherwise have been identified and addressed by other college services. Due to the trust and personal connection developed between student and Coach, the student was comfortable enough to discuss these sensitive challenges, enabling the Coach to provide crucial guidance and support to help students stay on track.

Not only did the Coaches help students identify barriers, but many students also provided examples of how Coaches went out of their way to help the students build their own capacity to solve problems. Examples from students ranged from Coaches working with them to complete graduation paperwork and appeal grades to helping students build social confidence and self-advocacy. Coaches are not just problem-solvers, but also mentor students to develop meaningful, lasting change for themselves.

Student Voices

“I have a mental illness. [My Coach] instantly connected with me when I told her that. I’ve never had a counselor do that. When I was afraid to go into a room with other people, she guided me and made me feel not that scared.”

“[My Coach has helped me] learn to be honest with myself and be persistent. We often lie to ourselves and make excuses when bad things happen. When you lie to yourself you build an excuse to mess up next time. For me, it used to be that – if everything did not fall into place perfectly – then I was done. She taught me that nothing is perfect and there will always be things to overcome.”

“Last year was rough for me due to [family and mental health issues] – [my Success Coach] was a savior for me. My program was discontinued, and I wanted to quit but she gave me options for what I could do. I was not going to walk at graduation, but she told me she would come get me to make sure I would walk.”

“[My Coach] showed me how to dispute my grades. I didn’t know how to do that! He showed me the steps to do it instead of doing it for me. He sent me steps in email and said, ‘hey here is something to have in your back pocket.’ I thought that was really cool, because now I can help somebody else do it.”



Source of Encouragement & Accountability

When describing the substance of Coaching interactions, students were quick to describe the ways in which their Coaches motivate them and encourage self-discipline. Examples of this proactive outreach ranged from sending occasional emails with a motivational quote, to a congratulations on a high test score, to a check-in asking how the student is doing.

Student feedback also suggests that Coaches imbued many students with a sense of accountability that supplements their own self-discipline. By virtue of having a respected connection monitoring their attendance and grades, students described a sense of not wanting to let their Coaches down. Many indicated that they struggled in general with holding themselves accountable, but that they were able to stay on track because they felt accountable to a personal connection who knows them and cares about their success.



Student Voices

“I feel more confident that I can work, and take classes, and take care of my grandma, and apply for university, and be an artist. [My Coach] reminds me I have done this before and I will get through it again. I feel like she has helped me stay in school through that little extra support, that little bump in confidence.”

“It doesn’t matter where I am on the planet, her door is always open. Since day one if I need to be invigorated, [my Coach] is where I go. She knows me probably better than I know myself. She knows how to pick me up and get me going.”

“[My Coach] sends me reminder emails, and uplifting emails. She makes you feel like you are the only student in the world. I don’t know how she does it... It’s amazing. It’s always like she is there waiting for me.”

“For me, it changed my attendance and my grades. I went to two community colleges, and this is the best experience I’ve ever had. I’m actually coming to school when I need to come to school. She’ll stay on top of me. She’s really helped me stay on track.”

“When something happens with grades or you miss a class – even if you’re just late – [my Coach] is reaching out.”



Bridge to Resources & Personnel

In addition to being a reliable personal connection, source of motivation, and an advisor and confidant for dealing with personal issues, Coaches also serve as a connector to needed services and resources both on and off campus. Navigating a wide range of available resources and knowing where to go and when can be overwhelming for students who might not know what to ask or who to ask for help. This may be especially true at two-year colleges where students are more likely to be first-generation college students who can't necessarily rely on family networks to learn how to navigate college.

Many students described their Coach as a hub that connects them to these various services, taking the time to learn about their needs and often walking students to the necessary office in order to make a personal introduction and warm hand-off. Many students described their Coach helping resolve miscommunications or issues with their professors, serving as a trusted mediator between both parties. In other examples, students described their Coach personally introducing them to academic tutors or financial aid staff, summarizing to their colleague how they can help the student. By enabling a student to tell their story once to a trusted and knowledgeable confidant, the Coaches are able to efficiently and proactively connect the student to services and other caring faculty and staff who can assist the student with their particular need.

Student Voices

"I'm insecure about everything on campus... To me, [my Coach] is the glue that ties all the resources together. You know [other services] exist, but you don't want to just go in with questions and sound dumb. It's easy to go into [my Coach's] office and ask how to do it. Sometimes she'll say 'let's call [the other support office] right here, right now.'"

"I wouldn't necessarily know where to go for help, so I would ask her, and she'd tell me... [My Coach] is a gateway that leads to other support options. She would often call other staff when I was there in her office and tell them I was going to come by for help. It was extremely useful to have that help to navigate to these places easily."

"In terms of learning the campus and getting comfortable with the whole scene, [having a Coach] cut that process down to one semester and accelerated it. Otherwise it would have taken me three semesters to learn all of those things."

"[My Coach] connects better with us. A tutor is just there to do one job and get us out. [The Coach] is there to help us learn on our terms and not anyone else's."



Guide to Academic & Career Goals

In addition to helping students meet their immediate needs, students also described their Coach aiding them as they explore and map academic and career pathways. We heard from students that their Success Coaches assisted them with that long-term perspective, helping them set academic and career goals, illuminating the pathways to reach them, and developing conditional alternatives or “parallel plans” in case longer-term goals need to shift given immediate needs.

Success Coaches serve as a support to help students identify their goals and the steps to reach them efficiently, minimizing excess credits and therefore excess time and money. Without a partner to help students strike a balance between their immediate needs and their longer-term education and career pathways, it is all too easy for students to lose track of these longer-term goals or to give up on them entirely to meet short-term needs.



Student Voices

“I have had great interactions [with my Coach]. I didn’t know what [courses] I wanted to take or what [program] I wanted to do, so she printed out all the colleges and programs I was interested in. She even found information on jobs and salaries in my field.”

“I think the biggest thing [about having a Success Coach] is that if you are juggling jobs and school, they help remind you what you need to do to be successful. Not just for the rest of the semester but for the next year.”

“[My Coach] would reach out about classes – what do I need to take, in what order, and she would research for me, and I would return and she had everything laid out for me. She knew about my [health issue] and that I wanted to do business administration – I asked her to help me, to point me in the right direction.”

“I had no idea what to do with my life. I was recently back from mission trip and [my Success Coach] encouraged me to figure out what I want to do and told me that she would help me.”

Conclusion

This firsthand feedback from students in the Carolina Works initiative offers a critical contribution to emerging perspectives about the value of Success Coaching and similar support models. When researchers and practitioners describe the role of the Success Coach, they often lead with how Coaching can help students overcome academic or personal barriers through a proactive connection to needed resources. In our conversations with students, those benefits came through as present and essential. However, students most often led with their appreciation for the sincerity, dedication, and genuine care they felt from their Coaches. While it's important to note that the sample of students who volunteered to participate in one of the focus groups may be more likely to express favorable attitudes toward their Coaches, their collective feedback sheds light on the value of the very real benefits of having a dependable, encouraging advocate.

When students have a trusted personal connection, they're more comfortable engaging in difficult conversations about their academics, personal lives, uncertainties, goals, and futures. When students are able to have these difficult conversations, it could very well make the difference between continuing in college or becoming overwhelmed by the weight of navigating a complex educational pathway on their own. Through the mixed-methods evaluation approach to the Carolina Works study, understanding firsthand stakeholder experiences alongside data on coaching interactions and student outcomes will tell a more holistic story about this emerging innovation.



Carolina Works Success Coaches, 2018

Endnotes

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