This Case Study Brief provides results from Roanoke-Chowan Community College’s participation in the Carolina Works initiative, which aimed to improve retention and completion outcomes for students through proactive, technology-mediated student success coaching. Carolina Works was supported by a U.S. Department of Education First in the World Grant and involved an experimental evaluation study, which is considered the most rigorous design for estimating impacts of innovative strategies such as success coaching. Findings from Roanoke-Chowan Community College include:

- Students with a coach are more likely to be retained and to complete a credential
- Black students, who represent two-thirds of enrollment at Roanoke-Chowan Community College, experience notably large benefits from coaching
- A highly proactive and persistent approach to student outreach and a campus culture of personalized supports are key implementation factors supporting effective coaching

Founded in 1967, Roanoke-Chowan Community College (R-CCC) is nestled in the heart of Hertford County near the rural community of Ahoskie, North Carolina. Known for its nurturing learning environment, R-CCC offers a wide selection of programs of study to prepare students for transfer or entry into the workforce. R-CCC is accredited by the U.S. Department of Education as a minority-serving postsecondary institution, and in Fall 2019 enrolled 650 undergraduates. Between 2015-2020, R-CCC was one of 10 North Carolina community colleges that participated in Carolina Works, a U.S. Department of Education funded study to assess the impacts of success coaching on students’ postsecondary outcomes.
Introduction

In 2015, Roanoke-Chowan Community College (R-CCC) was one of 10 community colleges embarking on the Carolina Works initiative, a five-year effort to improve students’ retention and credential completion through the provision of proactive, technology-mediated success coaching. Success coaching is part of a larger movement by colleges to take a more holistic and personalized approach to supporting students’ academic and non-academic needs. By providing services that are individualized, proactively delivered, and informed by real-time data on students’ academic and non-academic progress and challenges, success coaching has the potential to greatly improve postsecondary outcomes.

This Case Study Brief presents findings from Roanoke-Chowan Community College connected to a mixed-methods, independent evaluation of Carolina Works led by DVP-PRAXIS LTD (see box, ‘Carolina Works Evaluation’). Results from R-CCC demonstrate the value of success coaching as a strategy for improving students’ retention and completion outcomes, particularly for Black students, and point to promising practices that can serve as a model for other colleges looking to implement coaching.

Carolina Works Evaluation

Roanoke-Chowan Community College was one of 10 participating colleges in the Carolina Works initiative. Led by Central Carolina Community College, Carolina Works was 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. Carolina Works aimed to increase students’ postsecondary outcomes across 10 North Carolina community colleges through provision of proactive success coaching informed by Aviso Retention, a web-based early alert and advising system using predictive analytics.

The evaluation of Carolina Works involved a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) to assess causal impacts of the success coaching treatment on students’ retention and completion outcomes. Roughly one-half of students first enrolling at study colleges between Fall 2016 and Fall 2018 were randomly assigned to a "treatment" group (assignment to a coach), and the other half were assigned to a "control" group (no coach assigned). This brief presents within-institution retention and completion rates at Roanoke-Chowan Community College for each group of students.

A report on results based on the full sample of 10 Carolina Works colleges can be accessed at www.dvp-praxis.org.
Success Coaching at Roanoke-Chowan Community College

Key components of the success coaching model as operationalized across the Carolina Works project are summarized in Figure 1. Success coaches develop personal relationships with students, serving as a main point of contact as well as a connector to other key supports and resources at the college and beyond. Coaches provide direct support to students, refer students to other college personnel and resources, and follow up with students to help 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 when they need it most.3

R-CCC’s success coach leveraged his former experience as a social worker, elementary school teacher, and career advisor to effectively connect with and support students. Based on testimony from students, R-CCC’s coach is widely considered a warm, engaged, committed, and non-judgmental coach who is meticulous about making students feel accepted, listened to, and directed toward their goals. The success coach demonstrated notable persistence in his outreach to students, spending a majority of his time outside of his office engaging with students on campus between their classes and engaging with faculty regarding any concerns about a student. Importantly, the coach at R-CCC was in place for the entire duration of the Carolina Works study – a practice that resulted in large impacts across the entire 10-college study sample – facilitating strong coach-student relationships that can take time to develop.
**Impact of Coaching on Student Retention and Completion**

The Carolina Works study included 519 first-time students at Roanoke-Chowan Community College who started in the Fall 2016, Fall 2017, or Fall 2018 terms, and whose outcomes were tracked through the Spring 2020 term. One-half of these students were randomly assigned to a success coach (i.e. treatment group), and one-half of students received Roanoke-Chowan Community College’s standard set of services (i.e. control group). Because coach assignment was random, any difference in outcomes between treatment and control group students can be attributed to the coaching treatment.³

Study results from R-CCC underscore the effectiveness of success coaching as a strategy to help community college students reach their academic goals. **Students assigned a success coach at R-CCC had substantively higher retention and completion rates compared to students not assigned a coach.** Specifically, compared to students in the control group, students with a coach were roughly 4 percentage points more likely to be retained to the next fall (from 32.5% to 36.8%), representing a 13% increase in Fall-Fall retention over the control group average, and were 2.5 percentage points more likely to be enrolled two years later (from 26.7% to 29.2%), representing a 10% increase in Fall-to-2nd-Spring retention over the control group average. Students with a coach at R-CCC were also 2.0 percentage points more likely to have completed a credential (from 11.9% to 13.9%), representing a 16% increase in completion over the control group average.⁵

Disaggregated analyses of R-CCC data show that **Black students and low-income students who received Pell grants experienced especially large benefits from coaching,** suggesting that the intentional targeting of coaching services to students who are typically underserved within higher education can help close equity gaps:
Among Black students, who comprise the majority of all undergraduates at R-CCC, those assigned to a coach were 12 percentage points more likely to be retained from Fall-to-Fall (from 25% to 37%), representing a roughly 50% increase over the control group average; and were 8 percentage points more likely to be retained after two academic years (from 20% to 28%); representing a nearly 40% increase over the control group average. Both of these differences are statistically as well as substantively significant. In addition, among Black students, those assigned a coach were more than 50% more likely to complete a credential (13% of students with a coach completed, compared to 8% of students not assigned a coach).7

Figure 2: Retention and Completion Outcomes for Black Students Assigned a Success Coach versus Black Students Receiving Business-as-Usual Services

Among students receiving Pell grants (n=343), those who were assigned a coach experienced a 9 percentage point increase in retention to the next fall term (from 37% to 46%), representing a 23% increase in Fall-Fall retention over the control group average; and experienced a 7 percentage point increase in Fall-to-2nd-Spring retention (from 30% to 37%), representing a 24% increase over the control group average. Pell recipients with a coach were also more likely to complete a credential (from 14% to 17%). A full two-thirds of the sample of fall-start students at R-CCC received a Pell grant in their first term.

Results from R-CCC also show that male students (n=166) experienced an especially large boost from coaching in terms of retention. For men, having a coach increased Fall-Spring retention rates by 5 percentage points (from 52% to 57%), Fall-Fall retention rates by 9 percentage points (from 32% to 41%), and Fall-to-2nd-Spring retention rates by 5 percentage points (from 27% to 32%). The coach at R-CCC assisted with the Male Mentoring program on campus, which may be connected to these notable benefits of coaching for men.

"Sometimes [students] just need that extra encouragement. I try to keep them encouraged. Especially with young men, I try to help them find that balance—it’s time for us to matriculate and be more mature. At end of the day we need to do our work. I’m not your parent, but I’m here to help keep you encouraged."

– Success Coach, Roanoke-Chowan Community College
Promising Practices in Implementation of Success Coaching at Roanoke-Chowan Community College

As part of the Carolina Works evaluation, DVP-PRAXIS LTD conducted annual site visits to participating colleges in order to explore variation and document promising practices in college-level implementation. Through these visits, the evaluation team documented several best practices at Roanoke-Chowan Community College related to effective coaching strategies and a campus culture of personalized supports that facilitated widespread buy-in for coaching:

Consistency of coach-student relationships. At R-CCC, the coach was in place for the duration of the study, which created strong continuity of support for students and facilitated trusting relationships that are the foundation of effective student supports. Across all 10 colleges participating in Carolina Works, results of coaching were stronger among institutions with coaches in place for the entire five-year study.

Meeting students where they are. The success coach at R-CCC is intentional about getting out of his office, seeking out students on campus as opposed to waiting for students to come to him. In addition to frequenting common areas such as the cafeteria and library, the coach uses course schedule data target students’ location on campus and meet them outside of their classrooms. In engaging with students on campus, the coach strives to make a personal, preferably in-person connection with students before issues arise.

Persistence in connecting with students. The success coach at R-CCC demonstrates notable persistence in connecting with his students, proactively reaching out to students by phone, email, and text, and when this isn’t effective, checking up on students by dropping by their classes, reaching out to faculty, and even calling family members to track down students’ phone numbers that might have changed. Students interviewed at R-CCC expressed appreciation for their coach’s persistence, which they perceived as reflecting the coach’s concern for their well-being; some students also acknowledged that they likely would not have met with their coach initially had he not been persistent in his attempts to connect.

Leveraging a campus culture of personalized supports. As noted on its website, R-CCC focuses on a “nurturing learning environment and personal attention” for students, which is facilitated in part by the college’s relatively small size. Student support programs at R-CCC which preceded the Carolina Works study, including Male Mentoring and TRIO (Student Support Services), are characterized by highly personalized and proactive engagement, and staff and faculty interviewed at R-CCC emphasized an overall campus culture that values individualized student supports. This pre-existing campus culture of personalized, proactive supports allowed faculty and staff at R-CCC to immediately understand and support the role and value of the success coach.
Conclusion

Findings from the evaluation of Carolina Works suggest that success coaching is an effective strategy to help more students stay on their pathways and earn college credentials. Insights from Roanoke-Chowan Community College point to the following key practices that can be modeled by other institutions looking to adopt or scale success coaching on their campuses:

• **Train coaches to be persistent in their outreach and to “meet students where they are.”** The coach at R-CCC reached out to students persistently and did not give up when students were initially unresponsive. Importantly, the coach was highly visible on campus and reported spending more than two-thirds of his time outside of the office visiting classes or meeting with students, faculty, or staff on campus. Making time for relationship-building is a key marker of success for coaching.

• **Engage in hiring and employee management practices that foster long-term tenure of coaches at the institution.** The coach at R-CCC was in place for the duration of the five-year Carolina Works study, providing students with strong continuity of support and facilitating trusting student-coach relationships. Results at R-CCC and from the broader Carolina Works study suggest that students do better when they can rely on a consistent ‘go-to’ person across time.

• **Promote a campus culture of personalized supports.** At R-CCC, faculty support and buy-in for success coaching was facilitated by a pre-existing campus culture that places high value on providing personalized supports for students. The more campus-wide buy-in for coaching and enthusiasm from faculty, the more engaged success coaches can be with students who will reap the benefits.
Endnotes

Community College Research Center. Evaluation of Integrated Planning and Advising for Student Success (iPASS). ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/research-project/integrated-planning-and-advising-services.html


3 www.avisoretention.com


5 Estimates of treatment effects presented in this brief are based on OLS regressions that control for student-level characteristics and term-specific differences.

6 Unless otherwise noted in the narrative, the differences between treatment and control group outcomes presented in this brief are not statistically significant at p<.10—despite being substantively meaningful—due to modest sample sizes of the study groups at this small, rural college.

7 Black students are inclusive of Hispanic and non-Hispanic ethnicity.