This Case Study Brief provides results from Randolph 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 US 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 Randolph include:

- Students with a coach are notably more likely to be retained and to have completed a credential.
- Black and Hispanic students, male students, and part-time students experience more pronounced benefits from coaching on several outcomes.
- Strong support from academic leadership and a highly proactive and personalized approach to student engagement are key implementation factors supporting effective coaching.

Randolph Community College, a member institution of the North Carolina Community College System, is a public, two-year, comprehensive community college located in the geographic center of North Carolina. In the 2019-2020 academic year, the college enrolled more than 3,000 credit students as well as approximately 8,500 non-credit students in a wide variety of subjects designed to meet the changing technology and complex social development of its community. Between 2015 and 2020, Randolph Community College 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, Randolph Community College 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 Randolph Community College connected to a mixed-methods, independent evaluation of Carolina Works led by DVP-PRAXIS LTD (see box, ‘Carolina Works Evaluation’). Results from Randolph Community College demonstrate the value of success coaching as a strategy for improving students’ retention and completion outcomes, and point to promising practices in implementation that can serve as a model for other colleges.

Carolina Works Evaluation

Randolph 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 Randolph 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 Randolph 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.\(^4\)

Randolph Community College’s two success coaches worked in behavioral health and in secondary education, respectively, prior to joining the college at the start of the Carolina Works initiative. Both coaches at Randolph are highly proactive in their initial outreach as well as their continual follow-up with students, using data from Aviso and other sources to target their outreach and build a holistic understanding of their students. In interviews conducted with coaches throughout the study period by DVP-PRAXIS LTD, Randolph’s coaches emphasized the importance of building strong rapport with students as a foundation for other services they can offer, as well as the importance of taking intentional steps to empower students to work autonomously towards meeting their goals. Importantly, both coaches at Randolph were in place for the full 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. Coaches at Randolph commented that the strong bonds developed with students are especially critical at times when students are facing a personal crisis or unforeseen emergency, including those precipitated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Impact of Coaching on Student Retention and Completion

The Carolina Works study included more than 1,600 first-time students at Randolph Community College starting 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 Randolph 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.

Study results from Randolph Community College point to the promise of success coaching as a strategy to help community college students reach their academic goals. As shown in Figure 2, students assigned a success coach had notably 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:

- Four percentage points more likely to be enrolled in the subsequent spring term (from 71.8% to 75.4%), representing a 5% increase in Fall-Spring retention over the control group average.
- Five percentage points more likely to be enrolled in the subsequent fall term (from 50.0% to 54.9%), representing a 10% increase in Fall-Fall retention over the control group average.
- Six percentage points more likely to be enrolled in the second spring term (from 43.2% to 48.8%), representing a 13% increase in Fall-to-2nd-Spring retention over the control group average.
- Five percentage points more likely to complete a credential (from 24.4% to 29.7%), representing a 22% increase in completion over the control group average.

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

Source: Carolina Works Evaluation Data, First-Time Fall Students N=1,628. All differences are significant at $p<.10$. Success coaching has proven to be such a valuable asset to our students. Not only does the self-confidence of a student increase, but coaches help students think through options, connect them to resources, and motivate them to persist and complete their educational goal. The college’s experience with success coaching has validated for us the necessity of providing a success coach for every student.

– Vice President, Randolph Community College

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Disaggregated analyses of Randolph Community College data suggest that student groups that are undeserved within higher education – namely, Black and Hispanic students and part-time students – benefited more from coaching on several outcomes, suggesting that the intentional targeting of coaching services can help close equity gaps:

• Among Black students at Randolph Community College (n=137), those assigned to a coach were 8 percentage points more likely to be retained from Fall-to-Spring (from 53% to 61%), and 6 percentage points more likely to be retained after two academic years (from 22% to 28%); this latter result represents a nearly 30 percent increase in retention rate over the control group average.

• Among Hispanic students (n=205), impacts on credential completion were large—Hispanic students with a coach were 8 percentage points more likely to complete a credential (from 16% to 24%), representing a 50% increase in completion over the control group average.

• Part-time students (n=581) experienced notable benefits from coaching in terms of credential completion. Part-time students (defined as enrolled in fewer than 12 credits) assigned to a coach experienced a 7 percentage point boost in completion (from 20% to 27%), which represents a 36% increase in completion over the control group average.

Results also show that male students (n=617) experienced an especially large boost from coaching in terms of longer-term retention as well as credential completion. For men, having a coach increased Fall-Fall retention rates by 10 percentage points (from 48% to 58%) which represents a 22% increase in retention over the control group average, and coaching increased credential completion rates by 10 percentage points (from 20% to 30%) which represents a 50% increase in completion over the control group average.
Promising Practices in Success Coaching
Implementation at Randolph 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. In addition, because Randolph Community College was identified early on as a high-performing campus, the evaluation team conducted an extra site visit to this campus involving in-depth interviews with success coaches and college leadership, as well as time spent shadowing the coaches as they went about their daily tasks. Through these visits, the evaluation team documented several best practices at Randolph Community College related to effective coaching strategies and observed a “culture of radical hospitality” and strong administrative leadership that supported widespread campus-level buy-in:

**Meeting students where they are.** One notable best practice is coaches’ tendency to spend large portions of their day engaging with students outside of their offices, tracking down students near classrooms or at other campus locations like the library or cafeteria. In doing so, their goal is to make a personal, preferably in-person connection with all students before issues arise, acknowledging that many students will not initially seek them out in response to emails, phone calls, or texts. Once the initial face-to-face connection occurs, the student is more likely to be responsive to less intrusive coach outreach.

**Synthesizing data to build a holistic understanding of each student.** Using data available in the Aviso system, coaches build a holistic picture of each student that helps them organize and plan their strategy for engagement. Coaches demonstrate strong analytic ability to take in information on prior and current student performance, course difficulty level, personal circumstances, and early alerts sent by faculty, using these data points to build a comprehensive understanding of students and their context before reaching out.

**Advocating to empower.** Success coaches work to simplify the college for students, while also modeling and teaching processes and behaviors that students should eventually be able to carry out themselves. One coach referred to this as the “I do, we do, you do” approach (see box). While coaches aggressively reach out to their students initially, helping them address issues that affect performance (which may include advocating for them with faculty and staff), the ultimate goal is to teach them how to be successful students, which includes learning the necessary processes to resolve issues like dropping courses, registering, getting off probation, and dealing with financial aid.

**Fostering faculty buy-in through academic leadership.** Coaches at Randolph Community College report to a leader within Academic Affairs – and the strong leadership, communication, and advocacy on coaches’ behalf within the academic division has helped to facilitate strong faculty buy-in and support. Each semester, the academic division hosts “Aviso award ceremonies” to acknowledge faculty who are consistently entering information on students into the data system that informs coaches’ outreach, and these ceremonies are used as an opportunity to further promote and build awareness by faculty of the coaches’ role. Faculty offering their perspective on the coaches during evaluation site visits described them as a critical asset for the college, and especially for students.
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 Randolph 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 “meet students where they are” and to prioritize face-to-face engagement.** Coaches at Randolph reported spending more than two-thirds of their time, on average, outside of their offices visiting classes or meeting with students on campus. This approach to meeting students in-person was, by far, the most frequent method of communication with students, and coaches believe it was a big reason for their success. Making time for relationship-building is a key marker of success for coaching.

- **Ensure academic leadership is supportive of success coaches as partners with faculty to support student success.** At Randolph, faculty support and buy-in for success coaches was facilitated by embedding coaches within the academic division. This organizational and reporting structure positioned success coaching as an institutional priority to improve academic outcomes rather than a programmatic initiative of the student services division. The more buy-in from academic leadership and enthusiasm from faculty, the more engaged success coaches can be with students who will reap the benefits.

- **Engage in hiring and employee management practices that foster long-term tenure of coaches at the institution.** Coaches at Randolph were 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. Results from this study overall – and especially at Randolph Community College – suggest prioritizing scarce resources for support services can yield significant retention and completion outcomes that benefit students, the institution, and the community.
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


JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. www.jff.org

5 Estimates of treatment effects are based on OLS regressions that control for student-level covariates as well as term-start fixed effects.

6 Due partly to small sample sizes, differences between treatment and control group outcomes among Black students and among Hispanic students presented in this brief are not statistically significant at p<.10, despite being substantively meaningful. Black students are inclusive of Hispanic and non-Hispanic ethnicity, and Hispanic students include students of all races except Black students.