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Virtual Academic Coaching (vAC): A Practical Technology for Student Engagement

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Virtual Academic Coaching (vAC): IT Concepts and Best Practices for Educators

Introduction

Background

Academic coaching, distinct from the roles and responsibilities of post-secondary educators or counselors, is a novel method of higher education student development and retention, and is quickly becoming established at both public and private universities throughout the United States and abroad (Robinson, 2015; Saethern et al., 2022; Sepulveda, 2017). Although relatively new to the canon of student success in higher education, coaching is foundationally based in longstanding tenets of adult education (Knowles, 1974; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011) and relies on principles which educators and counselors have recognized since the formalization of the post secondary classroom (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Positive research into efficacy of the academic coaching profession lends credibility to its potential for success with wide implementation (Alzen et al., 2021; Bellman et al., 2015), and its forward-facing and high level of engagement with adult students (Capstick et al., 2019) certainly suggests that the role of academic coach will continue to grow in the post-secondary setting, and therefore will continue to be a fruitful area of research and student success programming at the university level.

While the professional setting of academic coaching is diverse and often explored outside of the classroom setting, more educators, administrators, and counselors have found overlapping principles to their own practice which may benefit from further inquiry into academic coaching objectives and techniques. Indeed, the inherent differences between adult learning and other educational setting are an important distinction when considering the overlapping concepts between academic coaching and other higher education professions - particularly, the role of the adult educator (and its corresponding systems) as not only a formal source of knowledge, but also a collaborative partner to which the student can turn for the informal guidance that helps define self-discovery of adult learning (Knowles, 1980; Ymeyov, 1998). Despite the commonalities between professions, academic coaching has been criticized (both internally and from outside the career field) as lacking specific parameters for training and development (Sepulveda, 2017; White-Jefferson, 2020). A closer look at the overarching goals, skills, and vision of the career field may benefit not only those unfamiliar with its core concepts and practical application, but may aid the endeavor of creating a well-defined profession from which coaches can further develop, adopting both concrete and symbolic parameters of organizational culture which comes to define other unique professions.

Importantly, this profession has grown and flourished during the pandemic (Howlett, et al., 2021), relying heavily on the use of IT systems and required its proponents to use virtual spaces to provide motivational and student-support methodology alongside the traditional uses of technology in the classroom. However, it is interesting to note that virtual academic coaching has been recognized as positively impactful to student development several years prior to the start of the pandemic, particularly in professions which utilized online learning platforms for ease of access and accommodating atypical adult learners, rather than for social distancing (Cipher

et al., 2018; Lehman et al., 2018; White-Jefferson, 2020). This pre-COVID establishment of coaching in the virtual setting is an important distinguishing feature, particularly since available (though limited) literature supported it use prior to the necessity of social distancing; frequently, distance learning has been associated with negative outcomes in terms of classroom participation and interaction with instructors (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006; Arkoful & Abaidoo, 2015), yet these concerns may not weigh as heavily on the academic coach, who by definition has no strict expectation of interaction with their client, and instead intentionally forms a collaborative relationship to facilitate their objectives with students. The characteristics of virtual academic coaching (vAC) should therefore be examined in depth, with an effort to understand the profession generally, and the use of virtual technology in its practice more specifically, to provide evidence for its implementation more broadly in the post-secondary setting.

Establishing the framework

Given the increasing role of academic coaches in higher education, and the natal use of technology systems in implementing the profession's goals with students, the purpose of this analysis is to provide a general overview of the academic coaching profession, to further identify its objectives and mechanism of interaction with students, and to extrapolate its established use of technological systems to an analysis of best practices of virtual coaching, thereby providing professionals from varied disciplines a better understanding of both the profession of academic coaching and its successful use of technology in student-facing roles.

This analysis intends to provide a comprehensive framework of the academic coaching profession, as well as a more focused evaluation of the use of technology to achieve coaching objectives, and the potential for ancillary professions to utilize similar techniques in developing positive interactions with students in the online setting. These organizational methods may also assist in student success efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, during which virtual interactions have predominated despite limited training and preparation for many professional educators and counselors. Groups which may benefit from this project include post-secondary institutions and educators, academic counselors and mentors, as well as ancillary university staff and student organizations.

In light of the topic of interest and using both an extensive literature review and relevant research, this paper will address the following three research questions:

1. What is the historical background and educational context of academic coaching in higher education?

2. From a theoretical perspective, what distinct attributes or objectives of academic coaching are most impactful towards efforts of student success?

3. In a practical sense, how does the act of coaching remotely, or virtual academic coaching (vAC), impact the ability of practitioners to deliver these stated objectives to students?

Literature review
      Establishment of the field

With almost no literature on academic coaching prior to the turn of the century - an extensive dissertation on coaching by Brock (2008) found only three references to the profession of coaching between the years of 1938 to 2003 - it is important to begin with a brief history of the establishment of the field of interest to better understand its initial, and changing, objectives and core concepts. Academic coaching can best be likened to a multidisciplinary synthesis of several related professions which developed independently of one another due to changing social and economic forces: namely, the extraordinary boon of the 'self-help' field beginning in the late 1980's (Natale et al., 2005; Sherman & Freas, 2004), the rise of college attrition rates at the start of the millennium (American Institute of Research, 2010; Taylor, 2008; Perry & Kennedy, 2009), and a changing appreciation of the adult learner, in particular regarding the desire for new generations of students to work collaboratively in the higher education setting (Pinder-Grove, 2009) and the rise of self-regulated learning (Glenn, 2010). Each of these key contributions and societal changes will be discussed in greater detail to help robustly examine how the profession of academic coaching came from virtually nothing at the start of the century to an established field of practice, with more than 160 unique coaching programs in 39 states in slightly over a decade (Robinson, 2015).

The first established use of coaching in a general sense began in the business and finance industries in the early twentieth century, particularly at the executive level, and often initiated to correct some deficiency or limiting factor to a potential executive's success (Brock, 2008). The first peer-reviewed journal to publish an article on this novel type of coaching was *The Harvard Business Reivew*, in 1955 (Brock, 2008). The sector remained relatively stable until the 1980's, when competition within the financial services sector reached a crescendo, particularly within the executive suite. According to an analysis of executive coaching conducted by Sherman & Freas (2004), this time period saw a shift which expanded the role and power which high-level executives might enjoy within their role at an organization; perhaps more importantly, those responsible for the well-being of a company began to assign a high level of importance and "intellectual capital" to those individuals with such extensive roles within the organization. To ensure the highest-quality caliber CEOs (and similar positions) were in place, board members and business owners sought to develop these members of the team, creating the context for our common-day, familiar efforts of professional development, now often extended to much of the organization, albeit with varying context and duration (Sherman & Freas, 2004).

Within a decade of this significant rise in executive coaching, the personal self-help phenomenon in the United States began its meteoric rise in the form of countless books, tapes, CDs, seminars, and one-on-one personal coaching previously limited to the professional and executive levels (Griffiths, 2005). The success of this new field led to the initiation of the International Coaching Federation in 1995, with a stated mission to "give credibility to an emerging profession and give coaches a place to connect with one another" (International Federation of Coaches, 2021); this organizational body was born of necessity, as professional coaching ballooned rapidly from 2,100 certified coaches in 1999 to more than 46,000 by 2015 (Robinson, 2015). Interestingly, the use of professional coaches in educational settings,

particularly higher education, was minimal over this timeframe, despite obvious parallels in learning theory and modern adult education concepts (Griffiths, 2005). Prevailing winds began to shift in the early 2000's, with several authors highlighting key similarities between coaching and the adult learning theories. Of note, Zeus and Skiffington (2002) emphasize the commonalities between the goal of professional coaching and the idea of the lifelong adult learner, describing it as "a vehicle and a platform for learning." Perhaps more pointedly, Griffiths (2005) takes this belief one step further and recognizes the distinct lack of professional coaching in the education sector, describing formal coaching in the field as "minimal" and offering significant scholarly efforts to recognize the overlapping characteristics of intended outcomes of the coaching relationship and student engagement and success, including mentorship, transformational learning, and adult learning theory (Griffiths, 2005). Notably, this author returned to her seminal work in 2015 and expanded the scope of these commonalities from several core concepts to 18 unique learning theories which encompass traits of coaching and adult education (Griffiths, 2015).

A Confluence of Necessity - Higher education

With the established expansion of the coaching industry in the late twentieth century, including personal and executive-level practitioners with an established governing body of practice and internationally recognized certification program, it may seem that establishing coaching in the academic setting was inevitable; however, as noted by Griffiths (2015), there was a significant lag in bridging the gap between coaching and higher education in particular, with her nascent research finding "minimal" presence of coaching in the university setting (Griffiths, 2005). What factors, then, have contributed to the success of academic coaching and its prevalence in higher education in the last two decades? Historically, it is important to remember the climate within which coaching became prevalent. At the turn of the twenty-first century,

Increasing enrollment
Undergraduate underpreparedness
Millennial students and collaboration
Attrition - economic and socio-emotional costs
Inside Track and the rise of academic coaching
Noncognitive development and meta cognition

Theoretical framework
An overview of changing young adult psychology
Theories of adult learning
Theories of mentorship
Theories of counseling
Practical application in higher education
Goal-oriented learning
Diffusion of power differential
Collaboration
Self-authorship and strategic learning
Metacognition and post-institutional application
Use of IT systems

Virtual coaching
Virtual contact (email, text)
Support groups
Webinars
Methodology materials
On-demand training

Reflection/Conclusion

Acknowledgements

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