

HOW THE ROLE OF COACHING IS IMPACTING HIGHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

The concept of coaching has become an important practice within higher education institutions; as a result, it has great impact on both the academy and its students. Coaching techniques are being used at all levels from student development and advising to employee and leadership professional development. Because of the number and variety of higher education institutions in its region, members of the local Raleigh, North Carolina International Coaching Federation (ICF) Chapter recognized that there was a need to understand how coaching is used in these settings. Additionally, the significant number of professional coaches (some of whom also hold teaching or research positions in colleges and universities) working in this distinct industry justified the creation of a Special Interest Group (SIG) to focus on its specialized needs. Several of these academicians, researchers, counselors, and certified coaches identified a need to better define coaching in this industry, to understand what was being researched already within the academy, and to develop a body of knowledge and reference materials about the use of coaching and its various applications within the higher education context. As a result, this white paper is the first of many forthcoming articles and evidence-based studies to delve more deeply into how the role of coaching is impacting higher education.

This overview or “white paper” was designed, written, and edited under the co-leadership of Kelli Hendrickson, ScD, ACC and Chris Cavanaugh, EdD, ACC to begin to address the various roles that coaching plays within higher education institutions. This work was co-developed in collaboration with the Raleigh ICF Higher Education Special Interest Group (HEC SIG), which was created in 2019 and is led by Rebekah Layton, PhD, CMC, PCC from UNC-Chapel Hill, and Maryam Mohaghegh, M.SC, CPC from NC State University. The creation of a publication team of academic experts and coaches was formed in 2020 and focused their efforts on researching three different populations within higher education: (1) undergraduates, (2) graduate and postdoctoral students, and (3) the executive leadership, administrative staff, and faculty.

This paper summarizes how coaching has been implemented in these three main areas. First, how coaching shows up in the academy is described. Second, the unique qualities about each of these three groups are discussed. Finally, some of the benefits, challenges, and impacts on each of these populations are considered. Contributing co-authors and researchers are identified within each section. The intent of this overview or “white paper” was to establish a baseline from which to continue this work collaboratively to develop our collective coaching skills, identify key themes, and address the various needs that the future of coaching offers in the higher education world.

Defining Coaching

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching “as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (International Coaching Federation, 2021). Further, the CoActive Coaching framework defines “a coaching relationship [as] built on the premise that clients are naturally creative, resourceful, and whole and are capable of making the best choices in a relationship founded on trust in the client’s capacity and integrity” (Kimsey-House et al., 2011, p 18).

However, within the university sector, there are different types of relationships between what would be considered a coach and the “coachee,” such as coach-student or coach-staff member. Different terminology and different relationships occur depending on each of these different populations. Terms describing the coaching process can be sometimes confusing and used interchangeably, creating misunderstandings as to the role that the coach and coaching techniques play in the academy. As such, below are some of the more frequently used terms and some of the specialized relationships that use coaching techniques.

From a student’s perspective, the role of coaching can take place within the realms of: academic advising; career development and identity; support for students with accommodations for disabilities; living and learning communities; first-year colleges; writing centers skills development; tutoring; counseling; and working with faculty advisors. There are also many ways to describe the interactions between teachers and learners that may get confused with coaching, such as those that have been termed collaborative, person-centered, or curiosity-based exploration to support the student’s self-identified goals. Sometimes the context of a faculty coaching relationship is with a student researcher. Additionally, a career professional might be coaching students to prepare for job interviews. These examples are very different situations than exist between a professional coach working with administrators or faculty.

With this in mind, reviewing what the definition of coaching is (and is not) for students creates a need for even further clarification. The terms **coach**, **advisor**, and **mentor** are often used interchangeably. Even a quick search on any university website will bring up sports-related content as athletics have positions of *coach* for most of their sports. One study defined the distinction between mentoring and coaching to include constructs underlying advising and mentoring that are quite distinct from coaching, which is learner-driven (Deiorio et al., 2016).

Some sample institutional distinctions between these concepts are helpful to consider as a starting point. The University of Maine (<https://machias.edu/academics/faculty-handbook/section-iv-academic-pol/academic-adv-def/>) defines **academic advising** as “the process between the student and an academic advisor of exploring the value of a general education, reviewing the services and policies of the institution, discussing educational and career plans, and making appropriate course selections.” They further outline the goals for effective advising to assist advisees in effective decision making, to be accomplished by the following:

- Providing accurate information about institutional policies, procedures, resources, and programs.
- Assisting students in understanding the nature and purpose of higher education and the value of general education.
- Assisting students in their consideration of life goals by relating interests, skills, abilities, and values to careers and the world of work.
- Assisting students in developing an educational plan consistent with life goals and objectives (alternative courses of action, alternative career considerations, and selection of course).
- Assisting students in evaluation or reevaluation of progress toward established goals and educational plans.
- Assisting students in self-understanding and self-acceptance.
- Making referrals to other institutional or community support services.

Advisors (academic and research) can embrace a coaching philosophy and seek coach training to better serve in their role. A coach-approach style can be beneficial for engaging and empowering students but can provide an invested coaching relationship. The ICF Code of Ethics establishes a need for a clear definition of roles and responsibilities within the coaching relationship (<https://coachingfederation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics>). The very nature of the advisor-student relationship can present an inherent conflict of interest and thus coaching should not be confused with advisors-as-coaches.

Career coaching focuses on helping students plan for career life after college, be that in the work world, in graduate school, or in postdoc settings. One of many examples is Indiana University Bloomington (<https://cdc.indiana.edu/career-coaching/what-is-coaching.html>), which integrates coaching across its campus. Possible conversation topics might include major and career exploration, job and internship search strategies, interview preparation, resume and cover letter preparation, and more -- all offered with a coaching mindset. Another is UNC Charlotte, which also offers career coaching (<https://career.uncc.edu/career-coaching>) to both students and alumni. They describe such activities as discerning what major to choose, identifying what kinds of experiences to engage in, such as internships, co-ops, or volunteering, that augment classroom credits, conducting career assessments, finding a job after college, conducting career assessments, and developing career materials such as portfolios, resumes, curriculum vitae, and interviewing skills.

In a higher education setting, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) points out that career coaching “focuses on solutions, insight, and action. It is a positive approach that focuses on a client’s capabilities, helping him or her to practice and hone skills needed in the job search. Coaching is active, focused, positive, and outcome-oriented” (NACE Staff, 2017). In contrast, **career counseling** “focuses on establishing a therapeutic and confidential alliance with clients using core counseling techniques requiring adherence to all state and federal regulations related to counseling” (NACE Staff, 2017).

There has been a transition in career offices to move from career counseling to career coaching. In some cases, both career counseling and coaching are offered. As Steve Koppi explains, “In this context, it is important to distinguish coaching from counseling, not as an either-or proposition, but rather as a difference in stance or position with regard to the staff-student relationship” (Koppi, 2018).

From the administrator, staff, and faculty perspectives, coaching can take on multiple roles such as an informal or more formal **mentor** relationship that uses coaching techniques. Generally speaking, a mentor is someone who shares their knowledge, skills, and/or experience. A **coach** is generally someone who provides guidance and support to a client to pursue their goals. Both approaches can help employees reach their full potential. Such coaching relationships can be established by either an **internal or externally hired coach** to work with an employee of the institution to focus on areas such as performance improvement, team development, and even looking at more professional career development with aspirations towards positions in administration and executive leadership roles within higher education institutions.

As described, the terms and usage of coaching and coaching techniques present an opportunity to clarify the various roles, responsibilities, and impact of creating a culture of coaching in higher education. The following sections describe in more detail these attributes as they relate to the different populations within the university sector.

Undergraduate Student Coaching

By Maryam Mohaghegh, M.SC, CPC, Chloe Ember Benjamin, M.Ed., and Anil Kale

According to Devine et al. (2013), “Educational establishments need to provide young people with the skills and competencies needed to succeed and flourish in this rapidly changing world. The conventional transmission model of education is being called into question, as indeed are the focus and outcomes of education.”

College students experience a large number of stressors, including financial difficulties, academic struggles, career indecision, personal issues, and relationship conflicts (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018). These stressors impact their grades, livelihood, and academic performance and can even result in their dropping out. Nationwide, approximately 25% of fulltime students do not persist beyond their freshman year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). This figure is alarmingly high given that early withdrawal from college affects students, their families, and university administration (Kahn & Nauta, 2001). Colleges and universities have long recognized that helping students to become personally connected and committed early in college is critical to their successful retention and graduation. Getting connected to the institution and committed to the academic process are especially challenging for new students who must quickly master a wide range of academic, personal, and social adjustments. Therefore, institutions typically frontload a wide variety of services and personnel designed to help new students survive in colleges such as first-year courses, first-year interest groups, living-learning communities, help centers, advisers, counselors, tutors, and mentors. Since the early 2000s, a new kind of new

student support service, personal coaching, has emerged and is proving to be more effective than traditional student services (Brooks, 2005).

Findings show that coaching is an effective intervention for undergraduate students across several domains. It is an effective way to increase: (a) building awareness of values and alignment with decision making, (b) confidence in goal setting and attainment, (c) confidence in the choice of major, (d) satisfaction with major, (e) compatibility of choices with faith, values, and strengths, (f) confidence in life purpose, and (g) confidence in self (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018).

Approaches that have successfully been used for undergraduates are behavioral coaching, solution-focused coaching, cognitive-behavioral coaching, instructional coaching, peer coaching, and positive psychology coaching. While they are listed separately, most often a blended approach is adopted (Devine et al., 2013). The structures for these coaching sessions vary and include individual coaching, peer coaching, and group coaching (Cruz & Rosemond, 2017).

While the value of coaching is increasing across universities, not all are supportive. Lefdahl et al. (2018) argue that free life coaching is a unique opportunity that many colleges and universities do not provide. Demonstrating the effectiveness of this service to students may increase retention and student satisfaction by promoting coaching services as a distinctive type of support for students. Expanding the use of coaching to reach other minority and underserved populations could be a useful tool for social justice intervention and create equality for those who have traditionally been at a disadvantage in their current setting or environment (Lefdahl-Davis et al. 2018). Underrepresented groups such as first-generation college attendees, students of color, and/or individuals from low-income households (Bettinger & Baker, 2011; Kahn & Nauta, 2001) can benefit from coaching.

When evaluating the effectiveness of coaching, a challenge lies in that there are very little outcome data using life coaching with undergraduate students from the general population rather than specific groups, such as those with ADHD or disabilities or those in specific professional programs (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018).

Empirical data on the effectiveness of coaching undergraduates might provide a basis for wider investment within academia. We hope that more research will be done to explore what outcomes coaching impacts in a general undergraduate population.

Graduate, Professional, and Postdoctoral Student Coaching

By Kelli Hendrickson, ScD, ACC, and Rebekah Layton, PhD, CMC, PCC

Professional schools have consistently been leading the curve on career transition support, job placement, and career coaching, with clear lines of demarcation between multitudes of career support offered. In these settings, coaching is a formalized, sometimes compulsory, process in for students in law, medical, business, and nursing schools (Stillwell, Vermeesch, & Scott, 2017). In contrast, the literature on graduate and postdoctoral applications of coaching often

combines or confuses mentoring and advising services as is commonly seen in other areas in higher education. Postdoctoral trainees are often not addressed at all because they fall into categories as both trainees (similar to graduate students) and employees (but are not considered permanent employees). Hence, they are often missing from strategic conversations which include opportunities for coaching and literature on interventions for postdoctoral trainees more broadly.

As a population, graduate students and postdoctoral trainees fall into the “donut hole” of support within the academy. They are not all employees (at some institutions graduate students are employees) but they are also not just students and trainees. Their immediate supervisors, typically their only formal connection with the academy, have an inherent conflict of interest as defined by the ICF Code of Ethics (<https://coachingfederation.org/ethics/code-of-ethics>). While a coach-approach style may be used by some research advisors (faculty members also known as principal investigators) and can be beneficial, this does not provide a pure coaching relationship to fully support and help realize the trainees’ career and professional goals.

Graduate students, professional students, and postdoctoral trainees typically encounter unique stressors compared to other students in higher education. Notably, this population experiences stress around securing stable research funding, interacting with supervisors, pressure to publish and finish theses/dissertations in a reasonable time (Arnold, 2014 as cited by Fried et al., 2019; Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, 2018). Additionally, their concerns associated with life planning and family prioritization while in school have a different scope than the typical undergraduate population. Finally, individuals who are not native to their country of study face additional stressors involving visa stability, integration, and social isolation.

Coaching for individuals provides the opportunity for customized conversations on goals and needs in the face of these unique stressors as well as long-term strategic planning around career and life planning. Most individuals in this area have been conditioned to focus on their research or science to the exclusion of all else “until they are done” and to show no vulnerability. One-on-one coaching provides an opportunity to take a holistic view of academic progress, career path, and personal development in the absence of any supervisory relationship (advisors, supervisors, etc.). Coach facilitated group coaching provides normalization of common stressors, removes relative isolation, and permits deeper reflection and exposed vulnerability in a safe space.

Graduate and postdoctoral coaching has emerged as an additional option outside of the traditional career service centers in areas to provide a more tailored coaching focus through postdoctoral affairs centers, academic programs, departments, or graduate offices. However, there is limited documentation on the existence of coaching programs beyond small pilot programs. Patphol (2018) cited limited, but quantitative evidence, on the effectiveness of bringing coaching into the development plan of graduate students. One group program documented those individuals receiving coaching self-reported in “improvements in their mental health and resilience [...] self-awareness, skill acquisition [...] developed an ability to shift perspectives, a sense of community and support.” (Fried & Atkins, 2019). While there have

been budgetary cuts due to the current pandemic which may limit the expansion of these type of roles, initial evidence suggests promising results of providing specialized coaching (Richman et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2021), which could improve graduate and postdoctoral career outcomes, help meet their personal goals, and increase their satisfaction in their respective programs.

Additionally, at this phase in their academic journey, they typically struggle with the dissonance of wanting coaching services while thinking they shouldn't need them while enrolled in an advanced degree program. Thus, services that are currently available to these individuals may not be openly utilized. Presenting coaching within the context of an important/critical opportunity for personal and professional growth is key to becoming accessible to this community. Viewed in this way, individuals choosing not to utilize coaching would be "missing out" on a professional development opportunity rather than the current (mistaken) view that coachees need assistance and are hence "missing something", which aligns with the ICF definition of the coaching process as unlocking "previously untapped sources of imagination, productivity and leadership" (ICF, 2021). As this population is the hiring ground for future administrators, staff, and faculty, a robust and open offering of coaching in this area is an opportunity to help them bring out their best performance while building the foundation of a coaching culture within the academy.

Administrator, Staff, and Faculty Coaching

By Pamela Maxson, PhD, ACC, and Chris Cavanaugh, EdD, ACC

Coaching provides opportunities for administrators, staff, and faculty to explore and develop areas of growth, improve performance, and increase career satisfaction and success (Cavanaugh & Cavanaugh, 2018). Professional development coaching in these areas has far-reaching benefits for both the individuals as well as the institution (Rodriguez et al., 2016). The individual being coached can attain greater competence, achieve goals, and further develop their career (International Coaching Federation, 2021). The institution benefits from more engaged leaders and effective team members, greater efficiencies, and improved mission-driven work, among other benefits (Iordanou & Barnes, 2016). The return on investment is profound, including but not limited to, efficiencies and conservation of personal energy and time as well as institutional and financial resources (Davis, 2015). Coaching, then, can lead to success rippling from the individual to the whole institution. Furthermore, coaching administrators, staff, and faculty can lead to these individuals using a coaching approach in their own work, thereby multiplying the return on investment.

Coaching provides opportunities for individuals to focus on areas for growth, which ideally result in higher performance and overall personal satisfaction (Association of Governing Boards, 2015; Gander et al., 2014). It helps an individual identify their best self in their roles and how to bring that best self to the workplace. Many coaching areas are relevant for both administrators, staff, and faculty, including: conflict resolution; change management; problem-solving; leading innovation; project planning and delegating; building trust, trustworthiness, and respect; motivating and encouraging others; stress management; and much more leadership and managerial skills (Gmelch & Buller, 2015).

Utilizing various professional development opportunities, especially the benefits provided by coaches, can offer administrators, staff, and faculty new opportunities to explore possibilities, overcome fears and misconceptions, and reaffirm the value they offer to the academy and the university (Garvey & Megginson, 2018). Coaching is not about “fixing” a person; rather, coaching focuses on becoming the best one can be.

Coaching administrators, staff, and faculty will be particularly relevant in a post-COVID world, when higher education is rethinking what it is and what it will become (ICF, 2020). Coaching can facilitate navigation of this process and help create a vision for the institution’s betterment, delivering excellence and joy to all stakeholders.

Summary/Conclusion

The purpose of this white paper has been to provide a baseline and general overview of the various ways that coaching currently exists in the academy in 2021. As institutions of higher education are creating more of a culture of coaching, there are many new opportunities for coaching and coaching techniques to be introduced, utilized, and expanded to serve the different populations of students and employees. Clarity of roles and responsibilities and proper use of good coaching techniques are needed more than ever. As the profession of coaching continues to evolve, the ICF Raleigh Area Chapter HEC SIG and the publications team are continuing to research, study, and communicate the value and strengths that come from the coaching experience and to determine the return on investment and impact on the lives of its constituencies.

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Chloe Ember Benjamin
Chris Cavanaugh (Pub Team Co-Lead)
Kelli Hendrickson (Pub Team Co-Lead)
Anil Kale
Rebekah L. Layton (HEC SIG Co-Lead)
Maryam Mohaghegh (HEC SIG Co-Lead)
Pamela Maxson
Elizabeth Ross

Those interested in the work of the HEC SIG should contact the Co-Leads Rebekah Layton, PhD (rlayton@med.unc.edu) and Maryam Mohaghegh, MSc (mmohagh@ncsu.edu). Those interested in contributing to the HEC SIG Publication Team should contact the Pub Team Co-Lead Kelli Hendrickson, ScD (kelli@drkellihendrickson.com).

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Additional Coach Related Resources and Materials

Books

Stoltzfus, T. (2008). *Coaching questions: A coach's guide to powerful asking skills*. Stoltzfus.

Articles

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Websites

- Coaches Training Institute (CTI): One of the oldest coaching training organizations in the US. The Learning Center model is adapted from the co-active model developed by this organization. <http://www.coactive.com>
- International Coach Federation: National organization and governing body for the coaching field. <http://coachfederation.org>
- The Edge Foundation: Organization dedicated to providing coaching to high school and college students with ADHD. <http://www.edgefoundation.org/>