The Effect of Academic Coaches on Non-Traditional Student Performance in an Intensive Online Learning Program

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine how academic coaches impact non-traditional student performance in a time-intensive online learning program for pursuing a master's degree in a public university. By adopting the analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique, we compared the academic performance of students in three courses with different numbers or styles of academic coaches. The findings indicated that the average score of students was higher when students received more feedback from an academic coach, and they had an academic coach in class.

Keywords: academic coach, intensive online program, non-traditional student performance

As higher education institutions react to market and other impactful forces to increase their online offerings, they will need to pursue and develop systems that will support their students. One such way to support online students and to enhance their performance is to adopt academic coaches to provide additional academic and instructional support. Academic coaches play an important role in student success and retention by paying attention to students' personal and professional goals, supporting their academic planning, as well as establishing and helping completion of the degree (Capstick, Harrell-Williams, Cockrum, & West, 2019). Academic coaches can also help students acquire the skills necessary to succeed in a competitive postsecondary environment (Field, Parker, Sawilosky, & Rolands, 2013). Moreover, while supporting online students, academic coaches also serve as a resource for faculty and other instructors of record. This indirect support structure allows faculty the opportunity to direct their efforts on the ultimate goal of providing high-quality instruction and support for student success.

Previous studies have provided useful information about the characteristics and effectiveness of academic coaches in specific contexts such as nursing and special education programs (Capstick et al., 2019; Cipher et al., 2018). However, to date there is little research on academic coaches in time-intensive online degree programs. Specifically, few scholars have examined the effect of academic coaches on non-traditional student performance by comparing multiple academic coach interventions (e.g., comparing student performance when the class has no academic coach compared to having one coach and one coach compared to having three academic coaches) particularly at the graduate level.

The purpose of this study is to examine how academic coaches impact non-traditional student (hereafter student) performance in a time-intensive online learning program for pursuing a master's degree in a research-intensive public university in the Southern United States. By comparing three courses with different numbers of academic coaches, this research assesses the performance of students enrolled in online degree programs and examines the effect of academic coaches on student performance. The three research questions guiding this study are: 1) Does an

academic coach have an impact on non-traditional student performance? 2) Does the number of academic coaches have an impact on non-traditional student performance? And 3) Does the feedback style of academic coaches have an impact on non-traditional student performance?

Literature Review

Literature related to student access and support documents the role of academic coaches in traditional learning environments. The primary expected benefit of this kind of academic coaching is through the development of rapport (Strange, 2015) and relationships with students (Barkley, 2011) to increase learning, which Tinto (1999) posits is the key to student retention. The main purpose of academic coaches in online learning contexts is to meet the needs of students, and as such, they play a variety of roles. These roles include grading assignments and discussion forums, proctoring examinations, providing feedback to students, and facilitating instruction, and clarifying course content (Broussard & White-Jefferson, 2018). In this study, an academic coach is regarded as a highly qualified and experienced practitioner in the field with a doctoral degree who supports both faculty and students in online learning courses (Instructional Connections, 2012).

Methods

Three courses were selected in the master's program. In course A (Principles of Adult Education, we compared student performance across years to see if students perform better when they have an academic coach. In course B (Research Methods), we compared any differences in student performance when the course had a different number of academic coaches. In course C (Performance Analysis), we examined if the feedback style of academic coaches would affect student performance. One instructor taught both course B and C and another instructor taught course A. The total number of participants for this study consisted of 435 graduate students who enrolled in the program and each completed the three courses.

Results

Descriptive analysis was performed, including mean and standard deviation of student performance for each course (Table 1).

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Student Performance by Course*

Course	Settings	Mean	Standard deviation	Variance
Course A:	One coach	99.083	1.222	9.236
Adult education	No coaches	93.705	3.039	1.494
Course B:	Three coaches	92.250	6.358	40.427
Research methods	One coach	91.051	4.864	23.654
Course C:	More comments	96.133	2.842	8.076
Performance analysis	Fewer comments	93.950	5.624	31.633

As seen in Table 2, the ANOVA results showed that academic coaches play a significant role in non-traditional students' academic performance ($p < .05$). When students had an academic coach in the Principles of Adult Education course, their performance was higher (average score 99.083) than when they did not have a coach (93.705). The average student score was higher in the Performance Analysis course when students received more feedback and comments from an academic coach than when they received fewer feedback and comments (96.133 and 93.950, respectively). However, there was no significant difference in academic performance when students had one academic coach (91.051) compared to having three coaches (92.250).

Table 2. *ANOVA Results*

Course	Groups	Sum of squares	df	Mean squares	F-value	*P*
Course A: Adult education	Between groups	598.147	1	598.147	106.737*	.000
	Within groups	453.92	81	5.604		
	Total	1052.067	82			
Course B: Research methods	Between groups	62.428	1	62.428	1.931	.166
	Within groups	5561.321	172	32.333		
	Total	5623.749	173			
Course C: Performance analysis	Between groups	210.788	1	210.788	10.510*	.001
	Within groups	3509.937	175	20.057		
	Total	3720.725	176			

Note. * $p < .05$

Discussion and Implications

We found that student performance was higher when students had an academic coach than when they did not have a coach. This result is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Capstick et al., 2019; Lehan et al., 2018). It implied that academic coaches can play an important role in student performance by supporting students. Specifically, in a time-intensive online degree program, it is critical for students to receive appropriate guidelines and correct instructions, obtain support for different activities in class, and secure a positive learning experience in efficient and effective ways and in a timely manner. By identifying improvement areas and providing timely responses and feedback, academic coaches could help students perform better in their discussions, assignments, , and the overall course. To maximize these supportive functions of academic coaches in online learning, training and developmental opportunities should be provided to coaches to learn new coaching skills and techniques related digital technology to effectively motivate and guide students in their learning process. However, the results indicated that student performance was not significantly different when students have either one or three academic coaches. Thus, out X hypothesis was not supported as the finding showed that the number of academic coaches did not affect student performance.

Overall, the results of this study implied the need that the presence and role of academic coaches be examined differently based on the content features, class context and students' needs, even though academic coaches can support students for their academic performance in an intensive online program. For instance, academic coaches in research methods courses need to provide

more examples and practical guidelines to correct students' misunderstanding and advance their knowledge as research methods courses emphasize the combination of theory, procedures, and practical skills and have been regarded as a demanding and challenging for students (Kilburn, Nind, & Wiles, 2014; Lewthwaite & Nind, 2016). In particular, when teaching research methods in online environments, it is important to understand students' learning process of translating scientific evidence into practice through better instructional approaches (Chilton, He, Fountain, & Alfred, 2019). Accordingly, how academic coaches can provide research process-oriented, elaborated and detailed guidance and support to students could be more important than how many academic coaches support students in research methods courses.

Finally, out results showed that student performance was higher when students received more feedback and comments from an academic coach than when they received fewer feedback and comments, which supported by previous studies (Barkley, 2011; Broussard & White-Jefferson, 2018; Cox-Davenport, 2017). To provide stronger support for students' academic success, academic coaches need to be proactive in providing appropriate feedback and comments to students for improving their performance, rather than passively grade and review submitted assignments. Appropriate and continuous feedback from academic coaches can play a crucial role in students' academic progress and achievement as coaches help students engage more in learning process and activities, and foster their goal setting, responsibility, and reflection in class and academic exercises (Pechac, & Slantcheva-Durst, 2019; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). In time-intensive online learning environments with relatively large size classes (e.g. 90 or more students), academic coaches and instructors should consider instructional strategies such as providing weekly feedback with high quality and details in a consistent way.

From a theoretical perspective, this study highlighted the role of academic coaches for non-traditional student performance in a time-intensive online degree program. By comparing the three courses, we examined if different settings related to academic coaches can affect student academic performance. Specifically, we enriched the discussion related to the role of academic coaches in terms of their presence, number, and feedback styles as they impact student performance. In particular, this study expanded the scope and category of students and learning contexts related to academic coaches by emphasizing non-traditional students and time-intensive online environments. Scholars could further examine how academic coaches can enhance their role and develop their feedback skills and techniques to improve student performance in different courses and contexts.

From a practical perspective, our findings will help instructors and professionals in the field better understand the important role of academic coaches in online learning environments. By maximizing the advantages of online learning including the flexibility, accessibility, and convenience, practitioners can provide well-designed online learning programs that enhance student and faculty support through the use of academic coaches. To clarify expectation and efficient communication, instructors can work with academic coaches to establish the guidelines for providing feedback and comments to students according to assignments, available resources, and evaluation criteria. Practitioners can also identify the different roles of academic coaches, based on the features of contents and students, class size, and course schedule, to build supportive learning environments and provide effective support to students.

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