

GRADUATE STUDENT'S PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC COACHES IN ACCELERATED ONLINE COURSES

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This study aimed to investigate the graduate student's perceptions of the effectiveness of academic coaches in asynchronous accelerated online instruction in a master's educational leadership program. A mixed-method research design was used to examine student satisfaction using surveys and focus student group interviews on an accelerated online masters in the educational leadership program. The sample population for this study included participants from former and current graduate students in an educational leadership master of education program. The study is a step forward in understanding the role of instructional coaches and the support provided to students and professors in accelerated online programs. Results indicated that a sample of students believed that instructional coaches needed proper credentials, experience, and training to serve the students with whom they worked. In addition, both positive and negative experiences were both reported by the sample of graduate students. Over 53% of the students reported being extremely or somewhat satisfied with their academic coach. Many expressed those academic coaches were a supportive element in the courses they were assigned.

INTRODUCTION

Fully online courses became possible in 1997, with Blackboard serving as the first eLearning platform in higher education. Although online education in higher education is not a new phenomenon, there is a need to measure the effectiveness of accelerated online instruction and the use of academic coaches (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). The term academic coach gen-

erally refers to someone who has been assigned the role of "using a coaching style relationship to enhance student learning" (Barkley, 2011, p. 79). Some companies and private consultants offer academic coaching services to universities for profit. The use of academic coaches has been primarily a response to an increase in class sizes and a lack of faculty engagement with students, grading demands on professors, and the quality of pro-

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viding feedback to students (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). Traditionally academic coaches have been employed by universities to assist professors teaching online courses with an enrollment of more than 30 students. The professor's main role is to be the professor of record, including responsibility for all curriculum-related activities. The academic coaches' primary duties may include grading exams, overseeing and grading discussion boards, and grading and providing feedback on written assignments (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). A study by Gazza and Matthias (2016) concluded that using academic coaches increased student enrollment, reduced faculty stress, and increased student success and satisfaction (Cipher et al., 2018).

Accelerated online graduate courses are typically graduate-level education courses that are 100% online, 7 weeks in length, and where academic coaches support faculty responsible for teaching online courses. Many university programs have adopted accelerated online program models to respond to the need for a compressed course of study that helps adult learners achieve the necessary skills and credentials faster (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010).

The literature is somewhat limited on the use of academic instructional coaches, notably since online instruction was first launched at The University of Phoenix in 1989 for both the bachelor's and master's programs. Since then, the growth of distance learning programs has increased across national universities and has provided many significant positive effects on higher education. Evaluating how academic instructional coaches support professors while facilitating learning in online courses is essential. Most recently, due to the coronavirus pandemic worldwide, there has been a greater need to deliver instruction online to limit exposure to the disease for courses designated as traditional face to face. The significance of this study will inform stakeholders in higher education about the role of the instructional academic coaches in a model of an accelerated online instruction program as a viable model

for continued enhancement of online instruction.

This study aimed to investigate the graduate student's perceptions of the effectiveness of academic coaches in asynchronous accelerated online instruction in a master's educational leadership program.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online education has been a significant component of higher education, with colleges and universities offering more degrees and courses. According to Flanagan (2012), "As technology continues to evolve, students' demands change, and higher education attempts to adapt. For an "institution to stay competitive and cutting-edge, change is inevitable, and they must adapt" (p. 1). As a result of the demand for online degrees, enrollment for such programs has skyrocketed. Times have changed, and online instruction is becoming more popular with degree-seeking adults (Flanagan (2012). The increasing use of the internet and the growing number of students enrolling in online classes brings new opportunities and challenges to online learning. Universities cannot discount the accessibility of online courses, which offer many perceived advantages. For example, according to Daymont et al. (2011), online learning does not require students to sit in a classroom, saves travel time and money, and provides flexibility to log into courses and complete assignments based on personal schedules. Additionally, online classes provide student voices to be heard as opposed to face-to-face classes, where individuals might be too introverted or shy to engage in class conversations.

As a result, of the changing demands for more online degrees, colleges and universities have adapted their online degree and course offerings to other formats, such as Accelerated online programs, otherwise known as AOP. Graduate programs have begun to move to accelerated formats, where instructional time

is compressed more quicker (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010).

Consequently, the need for student support has increased enrollment in accelerated online programs. Traditionally, students have received formal and informal academic and social support from their brick-and-mortar institutions (Taylor & Holley, 2009). These types of support are available in different ways for online programs and have promoted universities to pursue the development of specialized services for students (Felder-Strauss et al., 2015). One type of approach to providing support to the student is the use of academic coaches. This model provides a basis for ongoing support and assists online students by being a link between students and faculty (Robinson, 2015). The use of academic coaches has not only served to help students' need for support and success, but they have also aided in increasing enrollment and reducing faculty stress (Gazza & Matthias, 2016).

Online Learning

With the advent of technology such as the World Wide Web, distance education has transformed into online learning. According to Allen and Seaman (2017), the internet provides a one- or two-way transmission, which allows video conferencing and other media to facilitate instruction.

Online learning as an instructional tool has several advantages. For example, one advantage to online instruction as its predecessor, distance education, is that it allows teaching and learning over vast geographic distances, permits learners to access materials, and allows interaction with instructors virtually (Anderson, 2008). Secondly, online learning allows for greater time flexibility. For example, students can work full-time and work on their degrees from their homes during their time away from their work environments (Lee & Choi, 2011).

Online learning can occur in three primary modes: synchronous, asynchronous, and blended learning. Synchronous delivery occurs

“when the transmission of the material to students is simultaneously received” (Rudestam & Schoenholtz, 2010, p. 165). This mode allows the instructor to connect with students virtually and simultaneously through video conferencing or by sharing computer screens. This mode of instruction is advantageous since it allows for live interaction between students and instructors. Asynchronous education, on the other hand, occurs “when the transmission of the educational material precedes the students' receipt of the material” (Rudestam & Schoenholtz, 2010, p. 165). This online modality is prevalent since it allows students to log in and work at their own pace while away from work commitments. Blended learning involves “combining online and face-to-face instruction” (Graham, 2006, p. 3). Thus, the Blended Learning approach brings the best aspects of the synchronous and asynchronous modes.

Accelerated Online Programs

As online university programs gain popularity, so do online courses with an accelerated format. Accelerated online university programs are often graduate programs that offer the same degree and course content but at a quicker pace. Thus, completion of a graduate university degree or course credits is obtained in a briefer period (Wlodkowski, 2003). With the same course objectives, accelerated online programs are typically offered within a compressed time that is compacted compared to the traditional university semesters (Pastore, 2010). The typical 16-week semester is accomplished in usually in 6 to 8 weeks. Students typically can finish their programs in half the time traditional degree programs require.

One of the attractions of these types of programs is the time-compressed format with the online mode of instruction. Graduate students, typically working full time and have other commitments with their families, are attracted to accelerate coursework since this type of learning is not impeded by time or space (Kasworm, 2008; Wlodkowski, 2003). Graduate

students have often expressed content with having the latitude to work quickly in reaching their professional goals with accelerated online programs (Pastore, 2010; Seamon, 2004; Wlodkowski, 2003).

Demand for these programs has increased over the past decades because they meet the needs of working professionals seeking graduate degrees or certifications (Penprase & Koczara, 2009). This quickly paced format allows adult students to change careers or update their job skills, often demanded by a changing economic demand.

Studies that have examined accelerated online programs' effectiveness have produced varied findings indicating that there is still more to be understood concerning this effectiveness (Bekele & Menchaca, 2008). Some researchers have indicated that the effectiveness and quality of accelerated online courses may also vary due to the students' learning traits and habits. For example, learning might vary due to how students spend time on the assignments, their motivation to learn, their understanding of new course material, and personal discernment of the importance of the new knowledge (Biggs & Collis, 1982).

History of Academic Coaching

The concept of coaching began in the sports industry to help improve athletic performance by using an ongoing relationship that guided the athlete in realizing their vision and goals (Barkley, 2011). Kappenberg (2008) noted that initially, coaching was associated negatively because of its use because of the athlete's poor performance. As time passed, the perceptions of coaching changed to more positive ones, which began to include academic coaching (Smith, 2009). Coaching also became popular in other industries, such as the business world, and has been used extensively for executive coaching and mentoring (Bettinger & Baker, 2011). Academic coaching entered higher education in 2000 when a firm, InsideTrack, offered its services to universities to increase student retention (Bettinger & Baker, 2011).

Since then, hundreds of higher education institutions have utilized academic coaches.

METHODOLOGY

This mixed methods study was conducted with an online survey and online focus group interviews to determine the perceptions of graduate students at a university that utilized instructional academic coaches and the effectiveness of instructional coaches. A mixed methods research design is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and mixing quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study or a series of studies to understand a research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). "Mixed methods design is sometimes useful when qualitative data collection and analysis results do not adequately explain the outcomes and additional data is needed to help interpret the findings" (McMillan, 2012, p. 317). According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2006), "because of its logical and intuitive appeal, providing a bridge between the qualitative and quantitative paradigms, an increasing number of researchers are utilizing mixed methods research to undertake their studies" (p. 482). In addition, researchers may elect to utilize a mixed methods approach when they need to "identify variable, key concepts, and themes through qualitative data collection in advance of using quantitative techniques to further investigate a problem" (McMillan, 2012, p. 317).

Research Design

This mixed methods study used the Exploratory Research design. According to McMillan (2012), in this type of design, qualitative data is gathered primarily, and then quantitative data. In this study, graduate students were first asked to participate in online focus group interviews. According to Creswell (2012),

The purpose of an exploratory sequential mixed methods design involves gathering qualitative data to explore a phenomenon and then collecting quantitative data to explain

relationships found in the qualitative data. A popular application of this design is to explore a phenomenon, identify themes, design an instrument, and subsequently test it. (p. 543)

In this research design, the researcher stresses the qualitative data more than the quantitative data. This emphasis may occur through presenting the overarching question as an open-ended question or discussing the qualitative results in more detail than the quantitative results.

In exploratory research, questions are designed to help understand a particular topic of interest. They can help connect ideas to understand the groundwork of analysis without adding preconceived notions or assumptions. Exploratory questions are typically used when asking how a product or service is used or perceptions around a specific topic (McMillan, 2012). This study's research questions proposed to investigate the graduate student's perceptions of the effectiveness of academic coaches in an asynchronous accelerated online master's in educational leadership program are as follows:

- Research Question 1: What credentials and experiences should an academic coach have to be qualified to help you as a student?
- Research Question 2: What experiences did the online graduate students report in having an academic coach assist them?
- Research Question 3: What level of satisfaction did the online graduate students report in working with an academic coach?

This study also used the principles of qualitative research. Qualitative research is a methodology used to aid researchers in further understanding or explaining the meaning of a social phenomenon "with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). The participants construct reality, and it is the aim of qualitative research to understand their experiences. What is of utmost importance is to document and con-

struct meanings from the participant's views and not of the researchers (Merriam, 2009). Since it is the researcher's goal to understand a participant's views, the selection of the participants is typically nonrandom and purposeful in the case of this study.

Population Sample

This study used purposeful sampling, a sample method in which researchers deliberately select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). This study had 63 graduate students respond to the online questionnaire. Of 63 students, 81% (51) were currently enrolled, while the other 14% (12) graduated from an accelerated online master's in the educational leadership program. Of most students who participated in the online questionnaire, 87% (54) were female, while the remaining 13% were male students.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Online Questionnaire and Interview

According to Merriam (2009), "the case study does not claim any methods of data collection or data analysis. All methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study" (p. 28).

As part of the instrumentation for this case study, graduate students enrolled in the course were administered a 20-item questionnaire based upon a 5-point Likert scale, which had the following response choices: Extremely satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Somewhat dissatisfied, and Extremely dissatisfied. The questionnaire in this study employed purposely similar questions to elicit similar responses and establish reliability. A total of 200 students were asked to take the online questionnaire, and out of those 200 students, 63 responded completely. Therefore, the response rate for the online questionnaire was approximately 30%.

The other data source for this study consisted of a focus group interview session, which according to Yin (2003), assists the researcher in focusing on the case study topic. The focus group interviews in this study consisted of thirteen questions designed to elicit open-ended responses. Interview questions are guided conversations rather than ridged questions that allow the participants to openly remark on their experiences and express their thoughts about events (Yin, 2003). Guided conversations allow the process to become free-flowing rather than inflexible (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Creswell (2003) suggested that in qualitative studies, the researcher can conduct face-to-face interviews with participants, interview participants by telephone, or engage in focus group interviews with six to eight participants in each group. These interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few and intended to elicit views and opinions from participants. Johnson (2002) stressed that a researcher who uses in-depth interviewing commonly seeks “deep” information and knowledge. The information and knowledge are usually deeper information and knowledge than what is typically gleaned from surveys, informal interviews, or focus groups. The information generally addresses personal matters, such as lived experiences, values and decisions, occupational ideology, or perspectives. Due to the condition caused by the current coronavirus pandemic, the researchers of the study interviewed the informants via Zoom video conferencing utilizing in-depth, open-ended questions. Using this data-collecting strategy, the researcher could solicit direct quotations from the participants about their experiences, opinions, feelings, perceptions, and knowledge relative to their association with a particular charter school organization. Direct quotations are a primary source of raw data in qualitative inquiry, revealing respondents’ depth of emotion, how they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions (Patton, 1990). The goal of the researcher utilizing

this strategy was to provide a framework within which to gather high-quality information from people and data that would reveal experiences with program activities and perspectives that represented accurately and thoroughly the respondent’s point of view about the leadership traits and characteristics of the charter school organization under study. According to Creswell (2012), “focus groups are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information and when interviewees are like and cooperative with each other” (p. 218). The primary purpose of the interview is to acquire specific information. The researcher strives to determine the participants’ feelings or thoughts about a specific phenomenon. In other words, researchers interview participants to obtain information that cannot be directly observed, such as feelings and perceptions (Patton, 1990).

Data Collection Procedures

The first source of data from the online questionnaire. The 20-item questionnaire was designed to solicit demographic data and satisfaction levels with the online course, the professor of record, and the academic coach. The questionnaire was launched on Qualtrics and was made available to the 200 solicited students for 2 weeks. Once the deadline for the online questionnaire was reached, the researchers downloaded the raw data and stored it in a secure location on their office computers.

The researcher used the Zoom video conference and open-ended, in-depth interviews as the primary source of data collection. Five individual, open-ended interviews were conducted. Patton (1990) contended that qualitative interviewing aims to understand how participants view the program, learn their terminology and judgments, and capture the complexities of their perceptions and experiences. Therefore, to avoid work-related distractions and time constraints, all the focus group inter-

views were conducted after work hours and off campus (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is making sense of one's data (Merriam, 1988). It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and interpreting the more significant meaning of data (Creswell, 2003).

The first data collected for analysis was the online questionnaire data, which consisted of 20 questions based on a 5-point Likert scale, with the following response choices: Extremely satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Somewhat dissatisfied, and Extremely dissatisfied. After the online questionnaire data was collected and downloaded, a Microsoft Excel formatted file was saved and imported into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Afterward, they began descriptive analysis with SPSS. Reports were run, which gathered frequencies and were saved in table format for analysis.

This study's second data type was qualitative data from the focus group interviews. Merriam (1988) suggested that the final product of a qualitative study is shaped by the collected data and the analysis that accompanies the entire process. The raw audio data was first downloaded and saved into a secure location in the researcher's office. Afterward, it was transcribed into a Microsoft Word file. The process of preliminary exploratory analysis began by reading, memoing ideas, and thinking about the organization of the data, as suggested by Creswell (2012). Reading the transcript data occurred several times and resulted in memos that had short phrases, ideas, concepts, or hunches. These memos resulted in the production of codes, which Creswell (2012) states are segments and text labels that aid in forming descriptions and broad themes in the data. After coding and analyzing the transcriptions of the five audio-recorded individual interviews, the researcher found major themes

related to the research questions. The researcher was able to make sense of the massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and draw conclusions from the data. The main themes are as follows: The need for proper credentials and experiences, positive experiences from the student's perspective, and challenges the student faced.

Results

- Research Question 1: What credentials and experiences should an academic coach have to be qualified to help you as a student?

In response to Research Question 1, the following themes emerged from the data analysis: Credentials, experience, and training as essential for academic coaches to possess to work with accelerated online masters' students.

Credentials

After downloading, analyzing, and coding the focus group interviews and the survey data, the central theme discovered from the student's perspective was the need for the academic coach to have adequate and appropriate credentials and experiences as a prerequisite for being an academic coach.

Most students expressed needing proper credentials, such as a graduate degree. For example, one student stated, "I would say first a graduate degree has been beneficial to the experiences that I have because they have experience and expertise. And I guess that would be the greatest thing you know for them to have some background knowledge that should help us with our needs." Another student said, "I think that a person to be at that level should, at minimum, have the same academic experience or credentials that, uhm, that the students have at a bare minimum. So, like, let us say, for example, okay, if I am taking a course in data management, right, then the

coach for that class should have already, all ready been through that.”

Experience

In terms of experiences, students discussed how an academic coach needs to be at least a teacher and a leader at the bare minimum. For example, one student said, “So, as far as experiences and credentials for an academic coach, my expectation would be that they would obviously have been a teacher. Started from the bottom. They would be in an administrator position.” Another student agreed that academic coaches needed some administrative experience. They stated that “they need to have significant experience in academic leadership, to you know to provide that support to students, and just like Student A said, they need to have the background as a teacher, as an administrator, as a central office administrator. Um, so they really can provide that guidance.” The need for solid experiences such as being superintendents, principals, or supervisors resounded many times throughout the focus group interviews.

Training

In addition to having the appropriate education and work-related experiences, students expressed a subtheme of being trained by a coach that gives feedback. One student was heard saying, “I think that they should also have some sort of experience in coaching another individual.” Students overwhelmingly expressed the need for academic coaches to be well trained and experienced in coaching and providing feedback. One student expressed the importance of proper training and said, “Having feedback training. I think that’s one of the components on my part that I’ve kind of missed in several of the ones that they grade. Because I know that they help grade. Sometimes that feedback piece does affect the outcome for the grades of others. You know, if I don’t get it in time or, um, more accurate to what I need to focus on if it’s too general. I

think that something would really work if they had that training or that knowledge.”

- Research Question 2: What experiences did the online graduate students report in having an academic coach assist them?

The researcher analyzed both the online questionnaire and the focus group interview data and identified positive and negative experiences.

Positive Experiences

Students spoke about several positive experiences in having an academic coach with their professor. First, most students interviewed expressed that one benefit was that the academic coach was of valuable assistance to them and the professor. Several subthemes appeared with the type of assistance students felt was beneficial. These subthemes were: assistance in communicating with students, being an advocate, and providing additional support to the professor.

Communicating With Students

For example, students appreciated having academic coaches available to answer questions or clarify the assignments. One student noted that “sometimes the professors are completely asynchronous. They don’t meet with us during Zoom, so we do have questions, and, you know, we like for the academic coach to help.” Another student was satisfied with individual attention as well. They commented, “So then the academic coach comes in and, you know, one-on-one individually helps students understand the content or, you know, the concepts that are, that are being, taught in that particular subject.” Along those lines, students appreciated having academic coaches because they felt it was easier to reach out to them and ask specific questions. A student commented, “The academic coach, I know that it’s someone who is going to help me excel and, you know, become better at what it is that I, or you

know, or to master the course.” Another student stated, “

We ask the questions that we don't really want to ask the professor because maybe, like, oh, this question is just not, you know, ridiculous because you don't want to feel ridiculous asking that question. So at least having an opportunity to provide that communication with someone more like, okay, you know it is not the instructor, but you know if I do my concerns, they will go ahead and tell the concerns to the professor.

Furthermore, some students felt that there was some synchronization between the professor and the academic coach. For example, one student pointed out that they were satisfied by noting, “I've had good experiences with the academic coach because they are on the same page with the professor, so they understand the professor's expectations.”

Student Advocate

Students also expressed that those academic coaches were of benefit by being student advocates. Some felt that the role of the academic coach was beneficial since they were there for a form of support. Students felt that the academic coach

was always on their team. They were rooting for you. They were like the person that sent you reminders. Hey, don't forget to check your APA. Hey, don't forget to submit this tonight. Or, hey, guess what, you have two more days. Like, they were just always someone that sent those extra like reminders, and always someone to be like you just like, hey you guys are killing it; keep it up; you got 3 more weeks. Like someone like your coach that would like to amp you up and get you excited about what you were doing.

Students expressed comfort in reaching out to the academic coach. One said, “I think it would be a great benefit because if there is something that I am not getting, you know, then I know that they have been there to help.”

Another student commented that the academic coach took the time to reach out to her and provide feedback on assignments and personal guidance. The student expressed satisfaction and said that it was “absolutely phenomenal. Um, she would take the time to call and, just, you know, guide. Coach. Mentor. And it was wonderful.”

Additional Support

A third subtheme appeared with students reflecting that the academic coach provided additional support to the professor. For example, one student expressed how the academic coach was another set of eyes for the professor and “gives us a little more of their expertise and best practices of the topic that we're covering and how we can, you know, better prepare for the assignment.” Another student said that the academic coach was “be another voice that we can reach out to for help and helps to provide feedback and share with the workload.” Students realized that the grading workload was large. One student commented, “so imagine me times forty or times thirty, uh so, it's good, so they can actually provide the feedback when the feedback is actually reliable and usable in a way, you know, like kind of that, I'm trying to look for the word ... the leverage feedback like has value to what they're bringing in.”

Negative Experiences

Some of the challenges or negative experiences that students perceived manifested the following themes: Availability of the academic coach, communication, lack of collaboration between the professor and the academic coach, and feedback and clarification of assignments.

Availability

During the focus group interviews, several students expressed concerns over the availability of the academic coaches. For example, one

student commented, “many of them (academic coaches) don’t put their time availability out for the students. And sometimes we send emails, or we might, I know, for example, myself I like to talk to somebody. So, I feel like if they were available to talk to, or we knew their schedule, we could schedule a zoom with them also.”

Communication

Students felt that communication was another challenge when dealing with the academic coaches. For example, one student stated, “you know, and this is a point of contact. But, I don’t really see the mentoring portion of it or the feedback communication.” Another expressed expectation that “communication part with the mentor coach. I wish it were more opportunity if we wanted; this is a Zoom link I’m going to have because the professors sometimes don’t have that opportunity because they’re always busy.”

Lack of Collaboration Between the Professor and the Academic Coach

Another challenge uncovered in the data analysis concerned the perceived lack of collaboration between the professor and the academic coach. Most students expressed concern over the lack of professors and academic coaches “being on the same page.” One student expressed, “And there’s not. It’s almost as though it’s not in sync. It’s almost as though the professor and the instructional coach are not speaking on the assignments. And so that causes confusion, and it’s like a domino effect. Confusion, emails, or group chats.” Another student stated that part of the problem was that “They (academic coaches) don’t attend the zooms. They (academic coaches), so when changes get made, when assignments are clarified, or modified, the instructional coach is not aware of that. Or going back to the discussion board, like when we were posting as a group, but of course, only one person posted. I mean it took a couple weeks for that instructional

coach to get into the groove of, okay, one person is going to post, and another person is going to do a reply, and, uh, so, it gets you to know there is a lot of drawbacks.” A lack of collaboration seemed to be a typical comment from the students. For example, students also expressed concern over the professor and the academic coach being in better communication with one another by having the academic coach attend the class meetings simultaneously with the students. One student said, “As far as the academic coaches not attending any of the zooms, I don’t know if that would maybe have been a little bit more beneficial for us as students because the professor and the academic coach need to be on the same page.” Students expressed a desire for more cohesive agreements between professors and academic coaches. For example, one student stated that “I feel like the professor would have, and the academic coach, could have, you know, agreed upon whether it’s modifying an assignment, an expectation of the assignment, and also, I have the experience where an instructional coach or an academic coach has given me really great feedback on my discussion boards.”

Students also noted they were due to grading discrepancies, inadequate involvement with students, and miscommunication between the professor and academic coach. For example, one student said, “And the other experience I’ve had was a little more on the negative side because the academic coach didn’t know what the professor was expecting on behalf of the assignments and explanations of the assignments, so the grading.” Students expressed concern over the discrepancies concerning grading.

Feedback and Clarification

Students also expressed concern with the quality of feedback from the academic coach. The students had expected “more specific feedback instead of general” feedback. They attributed this to a lack of agreement between the professor and the academic coach. Similarly, another student also felt dissatisfied with

the type of feedback received from the academic coach. Some students pointed out that there was a “communication barrier.” That student expressed that “she (the academic coach) left comments on papers, but then there wasn’t any communication otherwise. There wasn’t no follow-up. It was like thanks for the comment kind of feeling. Not that it wasn’t negative, but it wasn’t very positive. Or it did not give me much or change much, if that makes sense.” A student stated, “I didn’t receive any feedback, and I don’t know. As far as the grading, I don’t know. I imagine it was good. Another student stated that “there was always kind of like a miscommunication piece with the instructor and that coach. Kind of like the grading for some students. They would deduct some points on something because it was graded by someone, and then not deduct the points for the same issue with, you know, because it was graded from another person”. Students claimed that grading discrepancies were obvious concerning grading styles. For example, one student exclaimed, “...sometimes the instructor is a little bit more lenient because you know you’re grading at the end of the day, so I don’t know if that’s kind of the disconnect that would happen with those gradings. It was just kind of like the person that was grading us as a coach was harder grader.” Another student remarked, “I also noticed that between her and the professor, they were not linked on the grading. One was about how the TA was stricter than the actual professor.” At times, grading discrepancies appeared over grammar and paper format of American Psychological Association (APA) citations. A student noted that “her (academic coach) critiquing or grading was on my grammar it wasn’t on the content, I’m looking for that kind of feedback versus if I missed a comma or not.”

Adding to that, one student said,

Alternatively, sometimes the feedback was more generalized when coming from one person. I think that’s the challenge that I had in one of the classes when depending on who was kind of like grading or providing the

communication. Sometimes they were not communicating with us it was kind of a little bit like, well, we heard this from her (academic coach), and we heard from the professor.

Furthermore, one student added that they were very concerned because

there was zero interaction other than comments on discussion boards. Or comments on the essay, and that was it. Because just like the other student said, there is absolutely no contact information, no way to reach out to these academic coaches to seek clarification. Um, so if you had a major disagreement with what they put on an assignment, you had to reach out to the professor. And that’s, you know, putting more work on them because they had to go back and review what their instructional coach is doing, so that becomes difficult.

- Research Question 3: What level of satisfaction did the online graduate students report in working with an academic coach?

To answer Research Question 3, quantitative data was collected from the survey instrument, and the results were reported in the quantitative data findings. The data were collected from the online survey instrument, and the results were reported in the qualitative data findings.

When asked about their overall satisfaction with the accelerated online course, students responded to a 5-point Likert scale used to measure the responses ranging from 5 (*very satisfied*) to 1 (*extremely dissatisfied*). Out of 62 graduate students taking the online questionnaire, the majority, 34 (55.74%), were extremely satisfied, and 21 (34.43%) were satisfied with the online coursework. Four (6.56%) indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Two students (3.28%) reported being somewhat dissatisfied, while none reported being extremely dissatisfied).

In terms of satisfaction with the professor of record, out of 61 graduate students taking the online questionnaire, the majority, 32

TABLE 1*Overall Satisfaction With the Accelerated Online Course (n = 61)*

<i>Level of Satisfaction</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>n</i>
Extremely satisfied	55.74	34
Somewhat satisfied	34.43	21
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	6.56	4
Somewhat dissatisfied	3.28	2
Extremely dissatisfied	0.00	0

TABLE 2*Level of Satisfaction With the Professor (n = 61)*

<i>Level of Satisfaction</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>n</i>
Extremely satisfied	52.46	32
Somewhat satisfied	39.34	24
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	3.28	2
Somewhat dissatisfied	4.92	3
Extremely dissatisfied	0.00	0

TABLE 3*Level of Satisfaction With the Academic Coach (n = 61)*

<i>Level of Satisfaction</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>n</i>
Extremely satisfied	38.33	23
Somewhat satisfied	15.00	9
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	36.67	22
Somewhat dissatisfied	6.67	4
Extremely dissatisfied	3.33	2

(52.46%), were extremely satisfied, and 24 (39.34%) were satisfied with the online course work. Two (3.28%) indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Three students (4.92%) reported being somewhat dissatisfied, while none reported being extremely dissatisfied).

When asked about their level of satisfaction with the interaction with the academic coach, out of a total of 60 graduate students taking the online questionnaire, 23 (38.33%) were extremely satisfied, and nine (15%) were satis-

fied with the online course work. Twenty-two (36.67%) indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Four students (6.67%) reported being somewhat dissatisfied, while two (3.33%) reported being extremely dissatisfied).

Discussion/Conclusions

- Research Question 1: What credentials and experiences should an academic coach

have to be qualified to help you as a student?

The data revealed that most of the students in this study reported being satisfied when the academic coach had proper educational leadership credentials such as principal certification, K–12 school administrative experiences, and academic coach training. Students were comfortable knowing that their academic coaches had credibility with their credentials and experiences. For example, one student stated, “So that also helped a lot because they’ve been a superintendent, principal, supervisor so all that has greatly helped us and has molded us throughout the modules.” Students reflected that some of the reasons for having these credentials were that academic coaches could provide the type of guidance students felt they needed. Students wanted to feel secure and felt that by having the proper experiences “as a teacher, as an administrator, as a central office administrator academic coaches could really provide that direction” needed for the assignments. For students to be successful in online courses, there needs to be a professional relationship or connection between the instructors and the students. Students need to trust and have confidence in the instructors leading the course. Barkley (2012) reinforced this when he stated, “The concept of “academic coaching” refers to a relationship between teachers and students that is proactive, responsive to student learning outcomes, and committed to student success. The teacher’s role becomes less like a formal instructor and more like a coach” (p. 76).

In terms of training, students felt that academic coaches needed some form of standardized training to be fair and consistent with all students throughout the program. For example, one student echoed this when they stated that

having feedback training is one of the components in my part that I’ve kind of missed in several of the ones that they grade (sic). Because I know that they help grade. Sometimes that feedback piece does affect the outcome for the grades of others. You know, if I

don’t get it in time or, um, more accurate to what I need to focus on if it’s too general. I think that something that would really work if they had that training.

Most of the students in the focus groups echoed this sentiment and stated that this was lacking in the coursework they wished had been in place.

- Research Question 2: What experiences did the online graduate students report in having an academic coach assist them?

Students reported having both positive and negative experiences in their accelerated online courses. In terms of positive experiences, students expressed satisfaction when academic coaches were effective communicators, student advocates, and supportive.

According to Muljana and Luo (2019), “maintaining continuous engagement with students, at all times or ongoing support is brought up as one of the top recommendations” (p.34). That said, the sample of students in this study reflected that, in some cases, their academic coaches acted more as a mentor than “grader” and enforcers of (APA) styling and grammar in their assignments. Students sometimes felt more comfortable communicating with their academic coaches before reaching out to the professor of record. This may be the case as Barker (2012) explains that “most important characteristic of academic coaching is to seek and develop a relationship with students. A coach or mentor, type of relationship might be more typical at small schools or colleges that take pride in student success” (p. 79). One student phrased it as academic coaches were someone “to reach out to when you need that support. Especially when those papers are due or something. That we are able to have someone on hand and uh (sic), they’re very knowledgeable” Another student explained that they viewed the academic coach like

they were always on your team. They were rooting for you. They were like the person

that sent you reminders. Hey, don't forget to check your APA. Hey, don't forget to submit this tonight. Or, hey, guess what? You have two more days. Like, they were just always someone that sent those extra like reminders, and always someone to be like you just like, hey, you guys are killing it. Keep it up. You got 3 more weeks. Like someone like your coach that would like amp you up and get you excited about what you were doing. Um, so when someone is there as an academic coach, and then they're just telling you that you missed a comma, you're like, okay, get out of the way.

This aligns with what Barkley (2012) explains when he states that "changing from a traditional instructor with rigid expectations to an "academic coach" provided for large enhancements in the learning environment and higher levels of learning" (p. 76). Academic coaching provides a means of addressing matters. Gazza and Matthias (2016) found that using academic coaches helps boost enrollment, reduce faculty stress, and encourage student success. In addition, academic coaches positively impact student experiences, resulting in greater student satisfaction (Cipher et al., 2018).

Students in this study reflected that this level of collegiality with their academic coach was refreshing. It relieved some of the stress associated with a traditional teacher and teacher role. As Alman et al. (2012) expressed, if properly conducted, academic coaching can serve as a bridge between deep learning and student engagement when students feel a presence of an instructor or academic coach. Furthermore, when these conditions exist in an online environment, knowledge acquisition is strengthened by meaningful dialogues (Alman et al., 2012). As one student explained,

It's what they are doing right now, like instructing us, leading us, and being there when we need them, and guiding us through those modules. And, um, I know that there's a professor that does not meet at all. No zoom, no nothing. But she's there all the time if you have a question. She, I'll email her,

and not even like 15 minutes later, she is answering me back.

The clear and consistent communication between the academic coaches and students made the student feel confident in completing most of their assignments. Students in this study appreciated guidance and communication with their academic coaches.

Conversely, students reported dissatisfaction when there was a perception of a lack of collaboration between the professor of record and the academic coach. Additionally, students reported dissatisfaction with feedback received from the academic coach.

Collaboration

The data revealed that many students were unhappy with the professor of record and the academic coach not agreeing with several aspects of the course, such as the assignment's expectations and the rigor of grading. For example, students stated that they believed the professor of record should set the tone and deliver clear expectations for each assignment. Students cited a barrier between the professor of record and the academic coach in terms of collaborating on the assignment expectation and level of rigor. One student was quoted as saying

that it gets challenging because you want to, you kind of tailor your papers toward the professor's expectations, and sometimes the academic coach is not on the same page at all. So, again, that gets difficult, but then also I've had some great guidance. So, it just, you know, they vary. They're very different personalities that you kind of must mold to. And it's difficult when you don't know who's going to be grading either your discussion boards or your assignments.

Furthermore, according to the students, a lack of collaboration did not occur since many academic coaches were absent during the professor of record's weekly Zoom meetings. One student stated, "if the academic coach wasn't

on that Zoom to understand how the professor wants it kind of spun, then they're going to grade it, you know, based on what the syllabus says". Students felt that this disconnect led to problems in students not being as successful as they could have been. One student felt it was disheartening for the academic coaches not to attend the weekly Zoom meetings and that "if the professor maybe changed an assignment or altered things because of the hurricane or the polar freeze or whatnot, they didn't clue in the academic coach. That, you know, became a problem." Attending the Zoom meeting concurrently was of paramount importance for the students. Not agreeing caused discord among the students since it was expressed that misunderstanding and disparities in grading could occur. Students cited that, "It could be a very different result; the academic coaches are not really beneficial to us because it seems like you don't know their expectations." Students were recorded as saying that there was confusion "because you're trying to mold yourself to what the professor wants." Students expected a uniform consistency in the course and perceived the professor of record and academic coach as "not being on the same page" and stated that, "because if they're not on the same page, and you're turning in something that is not what's supposed to be turned in. It's going to hurt your grade. I think they must be on the same page and again, just that extras support for us." It was this lack of collaboration or synchronization that troubled many of the students that, as one student phrased it, "causes confusion, and it's like a domino effect. Confusion, emails, group chats, and any of that."

Student concerns also centered around the lack of agreement in grading assignments. For example, one student felt that there needed to be more communication between the professor of record and the academic coach in their grading policies. Inconsistencies resulted, and as one student explained that "kind of like the grading for some students they (academic coaches) would deduct some points on something because it was graded by someone, and then not deduct the points for the same issue

with, you know, because it was graded from another person (professor)." Students were very concerned about the lack of agreement and felt that the professor of record and the academic coach "were not communicating and when they were not communicating with us it was kind of a little bit like, well we heard this from her, and we heard this from you, and you know kind of like that piece. Some students expressed that sometimes some academic coaches were stricter graders than their professors of record. As a result of these actions, the student felt that it was unfair to be subjected to the disconnect in grading rigor and assignment of points.

Feedback

Another concern revealed by the data was feedback from the academic coach. Students in this study expressed dissatisfaction because they felt that the communication between the professor of record and the academic coach was discord. Students noted that, at times, that academic coach was a stricter grader, especially regarding grammar and APA citations. For example, one student stated, "I feel that he (academic coach) is stricter than the actual professor. And, uh, that to me was like they need to get on the same page because I couldn't, I couldn't satisfy one or the other because they had different, different ways of grading." Another student explained that they felt that the academic coach focused on minor details and said that "her critiquing or grading was on my grammar, it wasn't on the content. So, like, give me, like if we're engaging in a discussion and were trying to push each other to think in different ways and perspectives, I'm looking for that kind of feedback versus if I missed a comma or not. So, it wasn't, most of, it wasn't all like that, but 75% of it was grammatic." Most students agreed and felt there were gaps in standard thinking about the course and assignments. One student was heard saying, "I feel like the professor would have, and the academic coach, could have, you know, agreed upon how they grade. Zimmer-

man's (1990) research closely ties into how the students in this study expressed themselves about the type of feedback. For example, one concept that Zimmerman (1990) outlined of self-regulated learning, giving fast and accurate feedback about how they are doing, was what students expected. According to Glenn (2010), universities that have used self-regulated learning have found that these methods have a much greater impact if embedded within the course context and that tutoring and counseling are not enough. Instead, a more aggressive plan is needed to build specific skills.

In terms of satisfaction with feedback from the academic coach, student overall could have been more satisfied with the quality and quantity of the feedback. Students explained that a lack of coordination of expectations and communication between the professor of record and the academic coach was partially to blame.

- Research Question 3: What level of satisfaction did the online graduate students report in working with an academic coach?

Fifty-three percent of the students in this study reported being either Extremely or Somewhat satisfied with their experiences in dealing with academic coaches. In other words, students reported having a balance of positive and negative experiences with their academic coaches throughout their coursework. One student expressed that,

I want to say that it's been 50/50. I've had good experiences with the academic coach because they are on the same page with the professor, so they understand the professor's expectations. And the other experience I've had was a little more on the negative side because they didn't know what the professor was expecting on behalf of the assignments and explanations of the assignments, so the grading was a little, you know, different.

These sentiments were due to the various academic coaches being hired to assist in the 30-hour graduate program. According to the data,

the assignment of the academic coach to coaches was random and inconsistent. There was no guarantee that the same academic coach would assist the same professor. The only guarantee that was a certainty was only when the professor of record requested an academic coach.

Limitations

The limitations of this study result from the small sample of 63 respondents. In addition, the study's findings could be affected by the number of experiences the participants had with having an academic coach through their coursework in their accelerated online program. In some cases, the assignment of academic coaches was limited to only one or a few classes in which the students were enrolled. Therefore student interactions would have been limited to only a few times. The findings differed if the students had consistent assistance from academic coaches throughout their course.

Recommendations

If a university is considering instructional coaches for online instruction, one recommendation would be consistent induction and professional development for academic coaches and professors of record. Professional development would be essential to help cultivate relationships among the professional team of instructional coaches and professors and, secondly, for instructional coaches to cultivate relationships with students. One method to accomplish both is a video that professors and students can view about the role of the instructional coach. Overall, the importance of professional development would benefit the relationship between the instructional coach and the students (Bearman & Lewis, 2017; Jones & Andrews, 2019).

A second and important recommendation for academic coaches is to understand the culture of the institution they will be serving. For example, the institution where the study was

conducted has a large population of Hispanic students. This study suggests some implications for practice and policy to advocate for academically at-risk students and the importance of ensuring they are retained. The partnership of Instructional Connection, Inc., which provides this university's instructional coaches, could consider establishing more connections with other departments to help support the students, such as the Writing Center and familiarity with Student Support Services available to students.

Lastly, academic coaches and professors of records should meet regularly and the week before any module commencing to discuss the assignments and rubrics. Advanced preparation would greatly assist all the stakeholders since many of the concerns from this study could be addressed. For example, the method and frequency of feedback could be discussed and agreed upon, and another topic could be the details of the grading rubric.

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