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# Academic Coaching and Self-Regulation: Promoting the Success of Students with Disabilities

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## **Abstract**

The increasing number of students with disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education, and the variety of these disabilities, challenges higher education institutions to meet the unique needs of these students. Academic coaching has been found to be effective in enhancing student success and is one approach that can help meet the needs of students with disabilities. This paper describes an academic coaching model for students with disabilities, discusses the theoretical foundations on which the model was developed, and summarizes the results of an assessment of the program.

## **Keywords**

Students with disabilities, academic coaching, self-regulated learning

## **Disciplines**

Accessibility | Disability and Equity in Education | Higher Education | Higher Education and Teaching | Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

## **Comments**

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# Academic Coaching and Self-Regulation: Promoting the Success of Students with Disabilities

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## Abstract

The increasing number of students with disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education, and the variety of these disabilities, challenges higher education institutions to meet the unique needs of these students. Academic coaching has been found to be effective in enhancing student success and is one approach that can help meet the needs of students with disabilities. This paper describes an academic coaching model for students with disabilities, discusses the theoretical foundations on which the model was developed, and summarizes the results of an assessment of the program.

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With an increasing number of students with disabilities (SWD) enrolling in postsecondary education (DeAngelo, 2011; Henderson, 2001), higher education professionals are implementing programs to support this diverse and growing population (Bellman, Burgstahler, & Hinke, 2015; Parker & Boutelle, 2009; Wessel, Jones, Markle, & Westfall, 2009). Students with non-apparent disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, ADHD, psychiatric disorders) account for a growing majority of those served by Disability Services (DS) offices (DeAngelo, 2011; Henderson, 2001). Like many SWD, students with non-apparent disabilities are more likely to be underprepared for college and lack the academic skills (e.g., organization, study strategies) necessary for success in higher education (Parker & Boutelle, 2009; Wolf, 2001).

Students with non-apparent disabilities often encounter a variety of difficulties associated with executive functioning, cognitive processing, and interpersonal communication (Bellman et al., 2015; Parker & Boutelle, 2009; Wolf, 2001). These difficulties increase the need for additional supports, which aid in student development, retention, and graduation (Harris, Ho, Markle, & Wessel, 2011; Parker & Boutelle,

2009; Wessel et al., 2009). Academic coaching is one approach used to aid in students' transition to postsecondary education and to develop students' academic skills (Bellman et al., 2015; Parker & Boutelle, 2009).

In this paper, we describe an academic coaching model for SWD. We begin with a brief review of how academic coaching is used to support SWD. Then, we outline the theoretical foundations that guided the development of a program, and we highlight results of an assessment conducted on the program. We conclude with a discussion of implications for future programs and assessments.

## Summary of Relevant Literature

Academic coaching is a contemporary approach to supporting and retaining students in postsecondary education (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). Given its focus on supporting students' academic skill development, scholars and practitioners have explored its use with SWD (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Parker & Boutelle, 2009). In the following sections, we briefly review the effect of academic coaching on student success and discuss how humanistic psychology and self-regulation

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provide a theoretical foundation for academic coaching practice.

### **Academic Coaching**

Academic coaching consists of a series of individualized meetings between a student and an academic coach. During these meetings, the academic coach and student work collaboratively to identify a student's strengths and develop the skills the student needs to be academically successful (Bellman et al., 2015; Field, Parker, Sawilowsky, & Rolands, 2013). Many approaches to academic coaching use an inquiry model—a semi-structured format focused on reflection, planning, and self-awareness using open-ended questions (Bellman et al., 2015; Field et al., 2013; Parker & Boutelle, 2009). The flexibility of the inquiry model allows sessions to be tailored to meet the students' needs while also modeling reflective thinking, goal setting, and planning (Bellman et al., 2015).

In addition to modeling, academic coaching promotes success by providing a supportive environment for students to gain knowledge, develop confidence, and try new strategies (Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Stober, 2006). Disability scholarship has predominantly focused on the positive effects of academic coaching for students with ADHD and learning disabilities (Parker & Boutelle, 2009; Swartz, Prevatt, & Proctor, 2005). Scholars (Bellman et al., 2015; Parker & Boutelle, 2009) have found that academic coaching benefits SWD by developing their self-regulation, developing their academic skills, and improving their communications and self-advocacy skills. In previous work, Parker and colleagues (Field et al., 2013; Parker & Boutelle, 2009) focused on the value of coaching on students' self-determination and self-regulation. Although much of the coaching literature provides empirical support for the practice, literature less frequently provides a theoretical foundation to help link theory to practice.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Assumptions grounded in a humanistic approach and self-regulated learning provided the theoretical foundation for the development of the academic coaching program described later in this brief. Many academic coaching approaches are rooted in humanistic psychology (Rogers, 2002; Stober, 2006). An assumption undergirding humanistic psychology is the belief that every person has the potential for growth and the capacity to achieve his or her goals (Stober, 2006). Using humanistic psychology as a lens to view education, Rogers (2002) advocated for an approach that emphasized the individual, the development of

relationships, and the facilitation of learning—a process by which a person makes sense of and creates meaning from the information and people with whom he or she engages.

Self-regulated learning is similar to the humanistic, person-centered approach, which emphasizes self-directed learning. In self-directed learning, the student assumes the responsibility for choosing personally meaningful and worthwhile learning outcomes while collaborating with others who provide guidance and/or assistance (Garrison, 1997). Self-regulation relates more to the internal processes of mobilizing those strategies and resources. Developing self-regulation skills in SWD emphasizes their active role in the learning process, promotes proactive efforts needed for success (Zimmerman, 1990), and helps counter executive function deficits associated with non-apparent disabilities, such as planning and organizing tasks and maintaining focus while working (Parker & Boutelle, 2009).

### **Depiction of the Problem**

Individual colleges and universities across the United States are working to address the needs of a growing number of SWD in postsecondary education and the potential limitations in their self-regulation and academic skills (Bellman et al., 2015; Parker & Boutelle, 2009). At the public, four-year, doctoral-granting university in the Midwest that served as the site for this program, the number of students receiving accommodations increased 11% in three years. Despite the increasing number of students requesting and receiving accommodations at the university, professional and graduate student staffing within the DS office remained unchanged.

With an increasing number of students seeking assistance and accommodations, DS staff had less time to meet one-on-one with students to address academic and personal concerns related to the student's disability, to connect the student with appropriate resources, and to aid the student in developing the appropriate academic skills necessary for success in postsecondary education. Furthermore, the DS office did not provide a formal academic coaching experience, and the Learning Center's (LC) academic coaching staff had limited disability-specific knowledge. Therefore, a program was developed to alleviate the workload of DS staff while still providing valuable resources for SWDs. The program represented a unique opportunity to strengthen collaborations within the Division of Student Affairs, alleviate some of the time constraints of the DS staff, and support the increasing number of SWD on campus.

## **Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources**

To better serve the increasing number of SWD and provide more individualized support to aid in transition and academic skill development, the DS office and the LC at the university collaborated to implement a pilot program for coaching students with disabilities. The directors initially envisioned the program as an academic support service for first-year students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). However, within the first few weeks of the program, it became apparent that all students could benefit from working with an academic coach who had both academic skill development and disability-specific knowledge. Thus, the scope of the program expanded to include any student who was referred by the DS staff. A graduate student with previous coursework and experience in postsecondary academic support and disability services served as the academic coach.

Approximately 60 students participated in the program, and 300 individual academic coaching sessions occurred during the academic year. Students who participated in the coaching program were referred by a member of the DS staff based on the student's needs. Of those who participated, approximately 30% were first-year, 18% were sophomore, 30% were juniors, 19% were senior, and 4% were graduate students. Many of the students who participated in the program were in their first year at the university and primarily reported non-apparent disabilities—such as ADHD, ASD, psychiatric disorders, and learning disabilities.

## **Description of Practice**

Members of the DS staff referred students to the coach and helped the academic coach establish relationships and make connections with students early in the fall semester. When students came in to set up an appointment to review disability documentation or to complete an accommodations request form, DS staff introduced the student to the academic coach and encouraged them to set up an appointment. When possible, the academic coach had a short, informal meeting that day before the student left the office. Many students who participated in the program attended one-hour sessions once or twice a month. Not all students continued with the coaching sessions through the semester or the academic year.

The program focused on identifying and mobilizing effective learning strategies and increasing students' self-regulation as a way to promote student success and progress toward graduation. The coach

facilitated learning by providing guidance, while supporting and challenging the student as he or she thought through ideas and strategies and chose those that were the most meaningful. This approach encompasses the foundations of the humanistic approach as well as aligns with the inquiry model used in previous coaching literature.

## **Session Structure**

Academic coaching sessions were structured around students' self-selected goals. At the beginning of each session, the academic coach asked the student what he or she wanted to achieve during the session, took notes, and allocated time to each goal. The focus of the first session was to begin to build rapport with the student, understand the student's questions or concerns, and identify the strategies that had been applied—successfully or unsuccessfully—in the past to address the student's concerns. Using this information, the academic coach and student discussed strategies that aligned with the student's goals or the concerns the student identified during the session.

In subsequent sessions, the academic coach asked the student about how he or she implemented the strategies discussed in the previous session. The academic coach asked the student not only to focus on what did and did not work, but also to focus on why the strategies may or may not have worked. The coach used this information to refocus future efforts to avoid similar pitfalls. This conversation served three additional purposes: (a) it allowed students to improve their ability to think critically about the strategies they were using and ways to adapt in the future, (b) it provided an accountable environment where the student had to communicate their needs and concerns, and (c) it provided information from the student that the academic coach could use to guide the conversations and link back to the student's experiences. The first two purposes reflected the active role necessary for self-regulation, while the third purpose reinforced the collaborative, humanistic approach.

Through the process, the goal was for the student to learn how to learn and process information as well as how to identify and mobilize resources to adapt to situations, change behaviors, and promote success. The collaboration between the student and academic coach is foundational to the humanistic approach. The student's ability to learn, process, adapt, and make sense of situations and information are foundations of self-regulation. These foundations are especially important when working with SWD because many times in practice the disability can overshadow the person. A humanistic approach creates the opportunity

to focus on the individual needs of the student instead of focusing on the assumed limitations of the disability.

### Program Assessment

A Backward Design approach informed the development of the program. Backward Design is a method whereby program outcomes and student learning outcomes are developed, and then program sessions are designed to meet these outcomes (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). These program outcomes, session outcomes, and student learning outcomes subsequently guided the assessment activities (Huba & Freed, 2000; Schuh, 2009). Six program outcomes were identified:

- develop collaborative relationships with students;
- help students relate academic/educational goals to life goals;
- encourage students to achieve self-awareness (e.g., identifying strengths, values, and interests);
- assist students in becoming more responsible and developing decision-making skills;
- identify resources to enhance both academic success and personal development; and
- assist students in developing plans of action—and being accountable—to achieve substantial results.

Table 1 illustrates how session outcomes and student learning outcomes aligned with the program outcomes. These outcomes guided individual coaching sessions as well as the development of the assessment.

### Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

At the end of the academic year, the program was evaluated through a web-based survey of program participants. The survey questions were modeled after the program, session, and student learning outcomes. A section of the web-based survey included open-ended questions about the student's experience, which allowed the student to provide narrative feedback. An anonymous survey design was chosen instead of a focus group or interview protocol to respect and preserve the privacy of the participants.

The survey was administered during a three-week period at the end of the spring semester. Students received two email reminders, as well as verbal reminders when they visited the office. Of the eligible participants, 29% ( $n=17$ ) started the survey; 26% ( $n=15$ ) completed it.

The majority of students who completed the survey ( $n=11$ ) identified having someone to talk to as the primary reason they attended the coaching sessions. Time management ( $n=10$ ) and study strategies ( $n=9$ ) were also frequently mentioned reasons. When asked about their overall satisfaction with the academic coaching program, 87% reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their experience. Notably, all respondents thought coaching should be offered in the future.

Participant responses illustrated that the humanistic and self-regulated learning approaches were utilized within the sessions. Eighty-seven percent agreed or strongly agreed that they were asked what they wanted to achieve during the sessions (i.e., humanistic approach). Ninety-three percent agreed or strongly agreed that they had support to come up with solutions or strategies to problems during the session or that they worked collaboratively with the academic coach (i.e., humanistic approach). Eighty-six percent agreed or strongly agreed that the sessions helped them identify resources and develop an action plan (i.e., self-regulation).

Students provided open-ended responses about their experiences, which elicited three themes: (a) their development of study skills and critical thinking, (b) their ability to effectively communicate and self-advocate, and (c) their ability to create a plan and follow-through. Similar to above, these responses reflect how the humanistic psychology and self-regulated learning approaches influenced student learning. These themes also align with many of the outcomes such as, generating solutions (i.e., session outcome), developing self-advocacy skills (i.e., student learning outcome), and developing action plans (i.e., program outcome). See Table 2 for a full summary of the program outcomes assessment.

### Implications and Portability

Results of the assessment found that students perceived the program to be useful and supportive. However, we learned many lessons along the way. Higher education professionals seeking to expand services should consider the availability (and sustainability) of physical and financial resources. They should also be mindful of the availability and interpretation of assessment data.

### Available and Sustainable Resources

The availability of physical space was a limitation to program implementation. Although funding was secured for a year, the academic coach did not have dedicated office space. In most cases, the coach was

able to use a local conference room, as well as professional staff offices when there were not scheduling conflicts. For academic coaching to be successful, there needs to be dedicated, private space for a coach and student to meet one-on-one. If the coach and student will need to work on electronic documents, the space needs to include a computer. If the coach and student will be working on mapping out plans, a whiteboard may be useful.

Financial sustainability was a second limiting factor for the program. Despite being able to secure funding for a pilot year, the program was unable to continue in the original format because of a lack of funding. To minimize the effects of increasingly limited financial resources while promoting collaboration and addressing the needs of SWD, DS and LC staff can coordinate efforts to provide cross-training on issues that are relevant to the success of SWD on their campus (Scott, 1996).

Cross-training allows for better use of existing university resources, builds relationships, and strengthens collaboration. LC staff specialize in academic success strategies and DS staff specialize in the needs of and issues facing SWD—both bring an essential element to effective academic coaching for SWD. For example, a student with ADHD might need a more detailed approach to time management and focus than students without ADHD. Working together, DS and LC staff can create strategies that better meet the academic needs of SWD on their campus.

### **Assessment and Research**

Future assessments that collect data such as grade point averages, retention, and graduation rates can provide further evidence of the effectiveness of academic coaching programs. Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data is critical for program sustainability and improvement. For practitioners, the ability to make data-driven decisions is crucial for securing institutional buy-in and resources (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010).

Finally, academic coaching programs provide opportunities to engage in research on the success of SWD. Researchers could explore the influences of self-regulated learning on specified outcomes. Specifically, to what extent do students' perceptions of self-regulated learning affect their selected pathways to success? How can academic coaching staff co-create experiences with students to promote the development of self-regulated learning skills?

### **Summary**

Academic coaching is a contemporary approach to supporting students with diverse needs as they develop academic and communication skills and transition to postsecondary education. Although empirical data is emerging to support academic coaching as an effective practice, previous literature provided little information to guide theory to practice applications. To aid in this dialogue, we briefly described humanistic psychology and self-regulation, which provided a framework for the pilot program for coaching students with disabilities. Our assessment data reinforce the use of academic coaching as a means to support SWD as they develop academic skills and learn to identify and mobilize resources for academic success. However, higher education professionals considering implementing such a program should consider the availability and sustainability of physical and financial resources.

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Table 1

*Alignment of Session Outcomes and Student Learning Outcomes with Program Outcomes*

	Program Outcomes					
	a	b	c	d	e	f
<b>Session Outcomes</b>						
Identify what the student wants to achieve	•				•	•
Encourage the student to look within to learn more about self		•	•			
Allow/support the student to generate solutions and strategies to problems	•			•	•	•
Teach the student to be responsible and accountable for his or her actions/inactions and decisions		•	•	•	•	•
<b>Student Learning Outcomes</b>						
Develop self-advocacy skills and understand responsibilities related to academic success at the postsecondary level		•		•	•	•
Demonstrate effective communication strategies with instructors and other university partners				•	•	•

*Note.* Program outcomes *a* through *f* are included in the Description of Practice section.

Table 2

*Percentage and Frequency of Student Agreement with Program Outcome Assessment Questions*

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	<i>n</i>	<i>percentage</i>				
During my sessions we worked collaboratively to identify my needs and goals	15	-	-	7	47	47
During my sessions we worked collaboratively to meet my needs and goals	15	-	-	7	53	40
During my sessions we made connections between my academic/ educational goals and life goals	15	-	-	20	27	53
I was encouraged to become self-aware	15	-	-	7	47	47
I was encouraged to identify my strengths	14	-	-	7	36	57
I was encouraged to identify my values or what is important to me	14	-	7	7	29	57
I was encouraged to identify my interests	14	-	-	7	50	43
My sessions helped me become more responsible	15	-	-	36	7	64
My sessions helped me develop decision-making skills	14	-	-	29	14	57
My sessions helped me identify resources to enhance academic success	14	-	-	14	36	50
My sessions helped me identify resources to enhance personal development	14	-	-	21	36	43
My sessions helped me develop an action plan	14	-	-	14	43	43

*Note.* Percentages may not equal 100% because of rounding.