

# COACHING STUDENTS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND ENGAGEMENT ON CAMPUS

*The University of South Carolina improves struggling students' academic success and engagement on campus using a coaching framework of self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting.*

By Claire Robinson and Jimmie Gahagan

**I**MAGINE CASEY. Casey is a first-year student on a college campus. He comes to the university with a 4.5 high school GPA, lots of cocurricular experiences (sports and clubs), and a good group of friends. Given the success he had in high school, Casey is confident he will maintain academic excellence, be highly involved, and have a successful transition to college.

The end of the first semester reveals a different story. Casey's grades went down. He didn't study much because he "never studied in high school." Attendance was different too. Some instructors cared if you were there, while others taught a 400-person lecture class and never noticed. Time management was a foreign concept. Casey never had to manage his time before college. He showed up to school and the day was planned for him.

Involvement changed too. Sure Casey had several interests, but the university is a big place. Student Life advertised over 300 organizations, but it seemed intimidating to show up to a meeting without knowing anyone. Casey had several experiences in high school; does he really need more in college? He thought about

studying abroad in England, but the process seems complicated. So, Casey will likely move through semester to semester maintaining decent grades and eventually reach graduation.

Like Casey, many students come to college with high expectations. Most imagine they will have great academic success, a favorable social scene, make life-long friends, and progress toward establishing a lucrative career after graduation. Coming to college, students may assume that their study habits and high school success will easily translate to a college setting. However, students soon realize that college is very different from any other environment they have previously experienced.

Casey is an example of this. He experienced a lot of success in high school, but college presented new challenges. Randy Moore describes this response to a new collegiate environment as an "academic culture shock." Professors have new demands, attendance may or may not be tracked, classes are not structured to take up the entire day, and independent learning is an expectation. As Moore explains, "Academic stan-

dards and reward systems of high school condition and mold students' academic expectations, behaviors, and outcomes in college." One University of South Carolina first-year student reflected on her experience by stating, "When I think back to [my first] semester, many overwhelming thoughts run through my head leaving me disappointed and saddened. Over the course of my academic career [in high school], I have always had the ability to receive adequate grades by putting in minimal effort. In doing so, I would end up with either A's or B's without a sweat. After a lifetime of success, in my mind there was no reason why the same actions could not apply in college." As seen in Casey's example, students can also face a social or environmental culture shock. As students learn to navigate an unfamiliar campus, they begin to interact with new people who have different backgrounds, beliefs, and values. In addition, students find themselves inundated with a vast array of clubs, organizations, and activities in which to engage. For many students, finding the balance between academic success and engagement can be an exciting but challenging prospect. However, for faculty and staff, the question remains: *how do we help more students purposefully approach their academic success and engagement on campus?*

Academic coaching can be a crucial step in helping students transition to college. Coaches work with students to be strategic in establishing and achieving their academic goals as well as becoming engaged on campus. At the University of South Carolina, academic coaching is defined as a one-on-one interaction with a student focusing on strengths, goals, study skills, engagement, academic planning, and performance. The coach encourages students to reflect on strengths related to their academics and works with the student to try new study strategies. Finally, the coach serves as a constant resource for the student to reconnect with throughout college.

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## THE COACHING FRAMEWORK

**C**ASEY would likely benefit significantly from academic and engagement coaching. Fundamental to this framework are the concepts of reflection, planning, goal setting, and individual support. All of these coaching steps are connected to the concept of self-authorship. Marcia Baxter Magolda and Patricia King describe self-authorship as "the capacity to internally define a coherent belief system and identity that coordinates engagement in mutual relations with the larger world. . . . [Self-authorship] yields the capacity to actively listen to multiple perspectives, critically interpret those perspectives in light of relevant evidence and the internal foundation, and make judgments accordingly" (p. xxii). For example, in Casey's instance, his transition from high school to college is challenging for many reasons. The involvement experiences he enjoyed in high school may not easily translate to college. His study habits may not yield the same academic success he was used to. Coaching provides students with an intentional way to reflect on their interests, academics, and goals, and implement plans, while engaging in a process of integrative learning.

Planning is essential for academic success. As such, a vital component of academic coaching is individually assisting students to complete an Academic Plan and/or a Student Engagement Plan. In addition to traditional course mapping, within an Academic Plan students explore their motivations, academic history, and goal-setting while developing concrete steps they need to take. George Kuh and other prominent researchers have identified that engagement on campus is an important link to general college success and achievement. Having students participate in a planning process to strategically map out their engagement and academic endeavors leads to learning, satisfaction, retention, and, ultimately, persistence to degree completion. The coach serves as one person at the university who is interested in and committed to the student's success. Supplemented with tangible planning documents, coaching sessions serve as a place for students to assess their study habits, reflect on their current involvement, and map out a concrete plan.

Academic coaching focuses on three main steps: self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting. Through this process, students can identify their interests, motivations, and resources. *Self-assessment* offers the coach and the student a baseline of information as well as a starting point for the conversation. By assessing the student's current study habits, strengths, levels of engagement, or other measures, the coach can learn about the student quickly. In addition, self-assessments can serve

as a foundation for learning and provide assessment for improvement throughout the coaching session. Examples of self-assessment tools include the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI), Appreciative Advising Inventory, StrengthsQuest StrengthsFinder, Authentic Happiness Inventory, True Colors, and the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire.

During the *reflection* step, the coach asks the student a range of positive, open-ended questions to learn more about the student’s interests, goals, and motivations. Students often engage in conversations with their coach that they may not have with anyone else on campus. Such questions may include, “What has been the most positive experience you’ve had as a college student?” and “Tell me about a time when you enjoyed doing a class project or assignment. What made you feel engaged in this setting?”

The *goal-setting* step is crucial to the intentionality of the coaching meeting. Students must leave the session with strategic steps they can take to synthesize the previous steps to reach success. The planning piece can take several forms, but in practice typically has some central components the coach can work with the student to create.

## ACADEMIC AND ENGAGEMENT PLANNING

**WHILE COACHES** use the framework of self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting for all coaching sessions, the strategy may differ based on the focus of academics versus engagement. For example, students on academic probation are likely to benefit from a comprehensive academic plan, while first-semester freshmen may benefit from an engagement plan.

At the University of South Carolina, the Academic Plan is a written document that helps students reflect on their current abilities and motivations in college; identify successful study strategies and potential challenges; establish a plan for future courses; and set strategic academic goals. The Student Engagement Plan includes an inventory of current involvement on campus, reflective questions, mind-mapping techniques,

and defined learning outcomes. The Student Engagement Plan pays special attention to service learning, undergraduate research, study-abroad opportunities, and other high-impact activities. (Both the Academic Plan and the Student Engagement Plan can be found at [www.sc.edu/ACE](http://www.sc.edu/ACE) under “Resources”).

In the academic planning piece, students are asked to complete an assessment such as the Learning and Student Strategies Inventory or the StrengthsQuest StrengthsFinder developed by Donald Clifton, Edward Anderson, and Laurie Schreiner. Students can then bring the results of their assessment to the coaching

meeting for interpretation. Following this step is a self-reflection process answering the following questions:

1. How did you decide to come to this college?
2. How did you decide on your major?
3. What have been some challenges for you?
4. What has been your best experience on campus?

During the planning phase, the student works with the coach on strategic

steps he/she can take to work toward academic goals. This plan includes action items such as connecting with professors outside of class, preparing for advisement, creating an academic map toward degree completion, and using campus resources. In subsequent meetings, the coach can then refer to both the self-assessments and the plan to monitor student progress.

Similarly, in the engagement planning piece, students are asked to complete the Student Engagement Inventory, which is a simple tool developed at the University of South Carolina that gauges students’ interest in a variety of campus activities and cultural events. The inventory not only provides a quick assessment of the types of activities a student is interested in, but also allows the coach the opportunity to use the inventory as a frame of reference for where to begin the conversation. Along with the inventory, the student is prompted to self-reflect using a variety of questions such as:

1. Tell me about a project or activity that made you lose track of time, something that you

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.....

worked on for hours upon hours without even thinking about it.

2. When was the last time you were really excited about something? What was exciting about it?
3. If you were going to create a new special interest club or group on campus, what would it be? Why? What kinds of things would you do?

During the planning phase, the student works with the coach to identify three areas of interest and map a plan for how to learn more about the specific activity or area of interest and the steps he or she will need to achieve the goal. Finally, in subsequent meetings, the coach can help the student connect his or her experience back to the general education learning outcomes through a mapping exercise as well as help the student monitor progress toward achieving his or her goals.

### ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

**A**CADEMIC and student engagement planning have proven to be an effective resource in promoting student success at the University of South Carolina. For example, in 2007–2008, the Academic Centers of Excellence (ACE) Office met and coached 182 academically deficient students appealing the loss of their financial aid. Of those 182 students, 92 percent (168) improved their GPA and demonstrated academic improvement over one academic year. In 2008–2009 the University of South Carolina implemented a new academic standards policy. Any first-year student after the fall semester whose GPA fell below a 2.0 was required to meet with an ACE coach in the spring semester. Of the 218 freshmen on probation after the fall 2008 semester, 22 opted to meet a second time with the ACE coaches, and 10 attended three sessions. The result yielded 40 percent fewer suspended students than predicted.

The success of academic and engagement coaching has not only been evidenced by the numbers themselves but also through the students' experience, as several University of South Carolina students have said in their own words:

*The most important thing I learned from my ACE coach is that people make mistakes and I'm going to be asked about last semester when I want to go to graduate school, but the most important thing is*

*to show everyone that I'm not going to let one lousy semester stop me from reaching my dreams.*

*Without ACE, I am not sure I would be as successful and as happy as I am right now. It was not a major part of my life and yet guided me mentally to succeeding at USC. Building my academic plan, providing me with a planner, regular check-ins, and just one person who believed I could make it made all the difference in the world to me."*

### CONCLUSION

**C**OACHING and academic/engagement planning are becoming increasingly important in college-student success. Millennial students, like Casey, gravitate toward individual mentorship and are more likely to succeed if they feel connected to their university. For students, the process of self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting promotes self-authorship and leads to increased buy-in and empowerment. The process outlined in this article brings together coaches and students to create tangible plans that ultimately help students reach their academic and engagement goals. We encourage you to incorporate a coaching model into your work with students.

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