

PROMISING PRACTICE

Greater Innovation, Greater Success: Academic Outreach and Recovery Coaching

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Heather Caudle, MScEd, is a dedicated higher education professional with over 8 years of experience championing student success across private and public institutions. As the assistant director of Student Success and Coaching at SHSU, she leads transformative academic support initiatives that have shown remarkable results, including a 390% increase in student coaching appointments within her first year of leadership. In her current role, she supervises a dynamic team of learning coaches while overseeing initiatives for academically at-risk populations. Beyond her administrative role, Caudle actively contributes to the academic community, co-chairs the Student Success Advisory Board, and is a key member of the Graduate Undergraduate Instructor Academy planning committee.

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The COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to academic engagement and learning for college students but also sparked innovative opportunities to support them in obtaining success. The pandemic deepened academic inequity and widened achievement gaps (Office of Civil Rights, 2021). One emerging challenge that impacts college student success has been learning loss, or a lag in learning content and mastering critical academic skills in pre-college years (Pier et al., 2021). Learning loss is a phenomenon that, due to COVID-19, created shifts across postsecondary instruction, engagement, and support (Salazar, 2023a). As highlighted in a report by Salazar (2023b), learning loss is a “drastic shift in preparedness and learning behaviors that come with entering the classroom post-pandemic” (p. 1), potentially increasing numerous academic skills gaps. Additionally, students have been more frequently prioritizing their *life loads*—the sum of a student’s work, family, health, and social commitments (Hews et al., 2022). In many instances, these life loads are overprioritized to the extent that it is detrimental to students’ academic responsibilities and overall learning. As part of their post-pandemic academic experiences, students have shown a greater need for digital competencies, flexible learning, and teacher care and enthusiasm (Hews et al., 2022). To effectively cater to the evolved learning needs of students, institutions may have pivoted their approaches and interventions, especially within learning and academic support areas. In response to the growing need for creative, innovative, and intentional academic support, the Academic Success Center (ASC) at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) has launched various academic coaching-based initiatives and interventions to empower students to evolve metacognitively and thrive academically.

Academic Coaching

Academic coaching is a process distinctly different than mentoring and advising (Deiorio et al., 2017). It is a practice that can support students in their self-regulated learning through collaboration and the facilitation of self-reflection, goal setting, and skill development. Alzen et al. (2021) indicated that through participation in academic coaching, students earned higher GPAs and were more likely to enroll and earn more credits in subsequent semesters. Academic coaching has the potential to support and enhance student academic performance and retention (Singhani et al., 2022). According to Howlett et al. (2021), academic coaching also exhibits promise in enhancing students’ capacities for metacognition and fostering skills for self-regulation in the learning process. Despite its demonstrated impact and potential, academic coaching has room for optimization,

including tailored approaches for diverse student populations (Pechac & Slantcheva-Durst, 2021).

Academic Outreach and Recovery Coaching Initiatives

SHSU’s Academic Support Center’s academic outreach and recovery coaching initiatives are comprised of three programs: (a) Learning Coaching, (b) Academic Recovery Coaching (ARC), and (c) Jumpstart Success Coaching. These academic coaching programs incorporate peeragogical and heutagogical elements into practice to support student success. *Peeragogy*, or peer-facilitated learning (Zhang & Bayley, 2019), is embedded within each program. Students who participate in academic coaching at the ASC are given the space and opportunity to receive assistance from someone who may be more approachable and have similar real-time experiences. *Heutagogy*, the instructional approach of self-managed learning, encourages autonomy in students and cultivates lifelong learning (Chamo et al., 2023; Moore, 2020). In conjunction with peeragogy, heutagogy is unique to the experience of ARC, as its primary component is course-based programming. As noted by Amiruddin et al. (2023), the combination of these approaches can effectively improve self-regulated learning in students. The various initiatives offer coaching services in both in-person and online environments, both of which effectively boost students’ conscious awareness of their thought patterns (Howlett et al., 2021).

Learning Coaching

During fall 2022, the ASC employed its semesterly at-risk interventions for high DFW-rate courses. This practice is locally termed *progress reports* and is designed to provide critical, time-sensitive check-ins with resources needed to persist to the end of the semester. Upon completion of this practice, support staff continued to meet with their assigned student clients well after their required check-ins. While tutoring, mentoring, and recovery services were available, students expressed the desire to have an individual who would not just reinforce the classroom content but would also help them keep up with the demands of being a student. With the increasing demand for proactive and continuous academic support due to learning loss and a growing first-time probation and suspension population, Learning Coaching was established as an early academic intervention program for those in good standing through continuous support. The *Learning Coaching* program focuses on complementing the classroom experience by promoting student metacognition and self-regulated learning strategies. It is best said by Howlett and Rademacher (2023) that “how you learn can become as important as what you learn” (p. 108). Determined

by student needs, coaching sessions are centered on student empowerment through accountability, time management, study tips, note-taking strategies, test preparation, and goal setting.

Learning Coaching Promising Strategy

In early program design, both the relevancy of student needs and skills gap identification were core considerations. As institutional research shed light on a greater emphasis on outreach that stretched beyond classroom performance predictors, partnerships with essential support services (i.e., financial aid) were formed. The program now provides specialized intervention for students who are ineligible for financial aid due to failing satisfactory academic progress and federal aid eligibility validation. This promising strategy provides a space for students to reflect on how they have found themselves in this space and helps them implement a sustainable success plan to move forward. Student clients have expressed that extending a helping hand beyond policy adherence has a profound impact on their academic journey.

Academic Recovery Coaching

At SHSU, students are placed on probation when their term institutional GPA falls below 2.0. If, in a subsequent semester, they do not obtain the GPA requirement, they are placed on academic suspension. Per university policy, once a student for the first time enters academic probation or suspension, they are required to take Academic Recovery I: Activating Academic Success (UNIV 2001) or Academic Recovery II: Promoting Academic Resilience (UNIV 3001), respectively. UNIV 2001 and UNIV 3001 are zero-credit course-based academic recovery programs to help students get back on track. Officially launched in the fall of 2021, the ARC program was embedded within UNIV 2001 and UNIV 3001. ARC coaches manage designated caseloads of program participants, which vary in size from semester to semester based on course enrollment. The ARC coach's primary responsibilities include coaching students on academic skills and habits of mind, assisting them with designing individual academic recovery plans, goal setting and follow-through, and connecting them to academic success center services and other support services on campus. The goal of the ARC coach position is to help students achieve academic success and overcome the challenges that have led to their academic struggles. Through one-on-one

sessions, ARC coaches provide guidance, accountability, academic support, and resources to help students develop the academic skills and habits of mind necessary to succeed in college.

Academic Recovery Promising Strategy

In spring 2024, a *coaching map* was launched as part of the academic coaching sessions conducted by recovery coaches on a one-on-one basis with students who are on academic probation. The coaching map is a document designed to guide recovery coaches through the four coaching sessions a student must have during their semester on academic probation. The coaching maps assist recovery coaches on how to steer conversations that result in more meaningful and flourishing results. The main goal of the coaching map was to establish the theme of the session, work through the activities tied to the theme, and be able to establish the next steps concisely and clearly. In this online course, students work through modules that teach them the skills they need to succeed in higher education. The four required coaching sessions are directly linked to four of these modules: Setting Effective Goals in College, Understanding Academic Advising, Maximizing Success Through Office Hours, and Acing Your Finals. These four modules have been carefully selected as focus topics to be completed during the coaching sessions for a better peer learning experience and understanding based on the student population's presented academic needs. Finally, the coaching map is divided into four sections—Coach Meeting #1, Coach Meeting #2, Coach Meeting #3, and Coach Meeting #4. Each meeting starts with five to 10

steps to follow throughout the coaching conversation. The steps begin with making basic introductions and establishing a personal line of communication. The student then works through the module while the recovery coach explains important details and answers questions for the student client. By the end of the coaching session steps, the student has completed the connected module, has answers to their questions, and leaves the session with a sense of accomplishment and new knowledge about the subject, as well as a set of upcoming goals for the course. This process has had a positive impact on student clients and recovery coaches alike; via their feedback, we have found that this coaching map model has proven to be effective for both parties involved in the coaching sessions and in the student's overall course experience.

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Jumpstart Success Coaching

Jumpstart Success Coaching is the newest academic coaching initiative at SHSU, which was designed to help students who have not obtained benchmark scores on the Texas Success Initiative, a Texas-based college readiness assessment. The program helps these students get a jump start on a developmental English course they will need to take once enrolled at SHSU. Beginning in the summer of 2023, the JumpStart@Sam program successfully launched its first summer bridge program. This virtual 4-week summer program allows participants to complete two courses, Composition I (ENGL 1301, 3-credit hours) and Integrated Reading and Writing (INRW 0111, 1-credit hour), as well as to satisfy their reading and writing college readiness requirement at no cost. Jumpstart Success coaches support program participants by communicating with a designated caseload of participants from summer enrollment through transition into the fall semester at SHSU. Communications may include uplifting and motivational messages, reminders about milestones and next steps (e.g., scheduling and meeting with an academic advisor), or tips and tricks related to academic habits.

Built as an extension of the JumpStart@Sam summer bridge program, Jumpstart Success Coaching reaches the broader population of first-year students who have not met the TSI readiness benchmark in reading, writing, or math. Officially launched in the fall of 2024, the coaching program assists this population by focusing heavily on acclimation to college life. Students have an opportunity to discuss experiences related to their college transition as well as their triumphs and challenges related to their college readiness.

Jumpstart Success Coaching Promising Strategy

The Jumpstart coaching initiative operates through two distinct pathways. The first pathway begins with the summer bridge program participants who aim to complete their TSI requirements. These students receive coaching support during the summer and continue to receive support through their early fall transition. The second pathway serves both non-summer bridge students as well as summer bridge students who have not met TSI requirements. Both pathways emphasize college knowledge development and sustained academic support, with coaches supporting students as they navigate their college transition needs and specific academic requirements.

Additionally, a Blackboard organizational site was created to support Jumpstart Success Coaching during the academic year. This platform provides a hub where students can stay up to date on campus deadlines, learn about campus resources, and access academic materials. A more recent implementation is continued support for JumpStart@Sam summer

bridge cohorts. This initiative is an extension of their summer experience and aims to provide workshops, community building (e.g., JumpStart@Sam reunion), and designated milestone-focused coaching throughout the remainder of their undergraduate journey with the program's graduate assistant.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Facilitated by a team of five professional staff and an array of peer educators, SHSU's coaching initiatives exemplify the meaning of meeting as well as seeing students where they are in their learning—or as described in the words of one parent, as approaching students as individuals and not just another number. The coaching initiatives have seen tremendous success in their efforts to increase student persistence and academic good standing. Although still in their infancy stages, collaboration and data analysis with the university's Office of Institutional Research has illuminated marked academic impact for students participating in coaching initiatives. This impact is evidenced by participating students showing a 1.0 GPA increase and being 1.5 times more likely to persist, demonstrating the tangible benefits of personalized academic support.

As the coaching programs gain recognition, particularly within the Houston area's higher education community, other institutions have sought best practices and guidance in employing similar initiatives. Stemming from the emergence of academic coaching and its promising potential for student success, various institutions (including SHSU) have banded together to form the Houston-area coaching forum. The forum serves as a collaborative space for sharing student success challenges, strategies for practice, idea generation, and academic coaching-related trends and literature. Additionally, the forum is not bound by location and rotates between participating institutions' campuses to house each convening.

As institutions continue to address post-pandemic learning challenges, the SHSU academic coaching model may offer a replicable framework for combining peer support, professional guidance, and technological tools to promote academic achievement. Moreover, as SHSU's academic outreach and recovery coaching initiatives look to continue to innovate approaches to academic support, it has been rewarding to encounter other institutions' requests for guidance in starting similar programs. It is a testament to the power of peer-facilitated education and the value of innovating scalable approaches to student success. Looking ahead, SHSU's Academic Support Center aims to expand these initiatives through enhanced cross-departmental collaborations and innovative approaches to reach more students, particularly those most impacted by learning loss and academic challenges.

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