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ACADEMIC COACHES AND STUDENT SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A
QUANTITATIVE STUDY

by

Nicole C. Letchworth

A Doctoral Project Submitted to,
the College of Education and Human Sciences
and the School of Education
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine academic coach perceptions of the effect of their role in the online classroom on student engagement and self-efficacy. Additionally, this study sought to identify and describe the strategies that academic coaches use to assist students academically in the online classroom. A quantitative descriptive survey research design was used to systematically examine academic coach perceptions of their role in the online classroom on student engagement and self-efficacy and the strategies they use to assist students academically. Data analysis identified that academic coaches perceive that those students in the online classroom struggle more in the area of self-efficacy than in student engagement. Further, the following themes emerged in terms of the strategies that academic coaches perceived as effective for students in the online classroom; encouragement, consistent communication via email and course announcements, clear and consistent feedback, continued virtual presence in the online classroom, and engaging underperforming students. Utilizing the obtained findings, this study provides implications for research and practice in the area of promoting success of students in online classrooms and offers recommendations for future research.

Keywords: academic coach, student self-efficacy, student engagement, online learning

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DEDICATION

A special thank you to my best friend and husband, Brian, for all of his support and encouragement during my work on this degree. Without his love, support, and patience, I would never have earned this degree. From being my biggest cheerleader to keeping the kids out of the room while I worked, and all the nights that you prepared meals while I conducted research to the many times where you had to remind me of why I even started this process- had it not been for your unconditional love and commitment to seeing me reach my goals, I would never have been able to finish this degree and I can't thank you enough. You have supported me from the very beginning and pushed me to stay the course. I love you and am so glad you were part of this journey.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

<i>IC</i>	Instructional Connections
<i>AC</i>	Academic Coach
<i>USM</i>	The University of Southern Mississippi

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Student success in online learning could be one of the most critical issues currently facing higher education (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). In 2010, a unique company called Instructional Connections (IC) entered the arena of online learning in higher education and created the role of the academic coach (AC) to assist universities in maximizing student success. IC has proven to be the only US company to date that utilizes academic coaches for student success in higher education. IC works with universities to tailor academic coach roles based on individual course needs. The academic coach has, on average, over 17 years of experience in their field combined with a master’s degree or higher, making them an invaluable tool for student success in online college classrooms that far surpasses the benefit of teaching assistants (Instructional Connections, 2020).

Over 30,000 students across 27 different universities have access to academic coaches and the services they provide. These services include but are not limited to answering student emails, live student support sessions, grading of student work, supplemental instruction, and even face-to-face observations and live tutoring sessions online. According to IC (2020) and their mission, they assist universities by adding value-added services of the highly qualified academic coach at a low cost to maximize student success while also enabling more students to complete a college degree. Indeed, given the experience and credentials of the academic coach, their impact on student success is expected (IC, 2020). However, the impact of having an academic coach in the classroom to assist students in their online education must be examined.

Background

In the last decade, online courses in higher education have become a commonplace of instructional delivery. In fact, many higher education institutions have implemented or expanded

upon their online course offerings to meet students' needs effectively (Traynor-Nilsen, 2017). In the fall of 2019, over seven million students enrolled in online programs in higher education (National Center for Education Statistic [NCES], 2019). In 2017, 98% of higher education institutions offered online courses, and over 80% offered degree programs entirely online (Traynor-Nilsen, 2017). Over 70% of students taking college courses have enrolled in at least one online course, with an estimated eight million students currently enrolled in an online degree program (James et al., 2016). As institutions increase the demand for the faculty's workload by adding online courses to their teaching rotations, the ability of faculty to mentor students decreases. To exacerbate the problem further, the hiring of adjunct faculty has historically become a more common practice simply to fill inundated online course sections, which raises the question as to how faculty members can effectively mentor and support their students in the online classroom (Salerno, 1998). Since online courses in higher education offer the flexibility and convenience that traditional face-to-face courses do not, the influx in enrollment into these programs has been staggering (Gregory & Lampley, 2016). Online courses in higher education have allowed students with families and career obligations an opportunity to complete degrees that they otherwise may not even have considered.

Despite the massive number of students enrolling in these online programs, student success rates have dropped drastically, and faculty have expressed concern over the rigor and sanctity of online programs due to staggering enrollments reaching well into the hundred range in a single course (Robinson, 2015). Managing such high student enrollment positively impacts the effectiveness of professors to teach and the success of students (Instructional Connections, 2020).

The Coronavirus pandemic has also drastically changed the educational landscape of higher education and online classrooms. In fact, in 2020, governments worldwide, including the United States, shifted most, and in some cases all, of their courses to an online platform. The historical shift in online learning in higher education has many faculty members now teaching online classes for the first time in their educational careers. It is apparent that there is a great need for support for online students and online teaching faculty in higher education online classes (Allen & Seaman, 2007). As a result, the role and impact of the academic coach should be considered.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of how a single professor can create a connected atmosphere to ensure student engagement and self-efficacy and the strategies used to assist students academically has yet to be examined. Over the past decade, online learning in higher education has drastically expanded. In fact, as of 2020, over 20%, or 3.5 million students in higher education, took at least one online course (NCES, 2019). Online education in postsecondary institutions has become such commonplace that one in four faculty members have reported teaching at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2009). Despite the growth of courses in higher education shifting to the online platform, teaching courses online has proven to be a time-consuming endeavor for faculty members. In fact, according to the Sloan C survey, 64% of faculty reported that the demands of teaching students in higher education online required far more effort than teaching face to face (Allen & Seaman, 2009).

According to Garrison and Anderson's community of inquiry framework, for faculty members to successfully teach online classes in higher education, faculty must establish adequate amounts of teaching and social presence in the online classroom setting (Garrison & Anderson,

2011). Since the academic coach's role is to support faculty in this regard by assisting in the daily tasks of course facilitation, perhaps adding in an academic coach could have an impact by allowing faculty the time to create more of a teaching and social presence in the online classroom. It is certain that as the demand for online courses increases, additional support for both faculty and students is necessary to ensure student success. However, research to date has not yet determined the degree to which the support of an academic coach impacts student engagement and self-efficacy in the online classroom.

Given the added demand of online teaching and the additional time it takes to prepare the instruction for this modality, the question should be raised as to whether these added demands impact student engagement and self-efficacy in the online classroom. Student engagement directly impacts and improves student performance in online courses (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). There is also a strong association between student learning outcomes and student self-efficacy in the online classroom (Bartimote-Aufflick et al., 2018). However, despite direct correlations between student engagement and self-efficacy in student success, little is known regarding how the use of an academic coach can impact student engagement and self-efficacy by supporting faculty in online instruction in higher education. Further, there is also a gap in research when examining the strategies that can be used to increase student engagement and self-efficacy in the online classroom using the academic coach.

Purpose of the Study

Currently, very little is known regarding the impact of academic coaches on students taking online courses in higher education and how academic coaches view their effect on student engagement and self-efficacy. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine academic coach perceptions of the effect of their role in the online classroom on student engagement and self-

efficacy. Additionally, this study sought to identify and describe the strategies that academic coaches use to assist students academically in the online classroom.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are academic coach perceptions of the effect of their role in the online classroom on student engagement?
2. What are academic coach perceptions of the effect of their role in the online classroom on student self-efficacy?
3. What strategies are used by academic coaches to assist students academically in the online classroom

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze and present contemporary research that examined the role that tutors and mentors have in assisting students in online classes in higher education. At the time of this study, the use of the academic coach in the online classroom in the way that IC uses coaches had not yet been studied. In addition, the term academic coach was new to Instructional Connections. In fact, IC branded the term academic coach and utilizes them much differently than universities use tutors or mentors. Thus, search terms for this study primarily focused on tutors and mentors though an attempt was made to search unsuccessfully for academic coaches. The databases used to locate research for this study were EPSCO, ERIC, and Academic Search Premier. Keywords used in the searches included “academic coaches and student success,” “struggling students and academic coaches,” “tutors for struggling students,” “online students and tutors,” “strategies for helping struggling college students,” “tutors and failing college students,” “online student struggles and tutors,” “strategies for online students,” and “mentors in higher education,” “tutors in higher education,” and “academic coaches in higher education.” Parameters that were used were peer-reviewed articles that have been published since 2015. The following sections of this chapter are organized according to the main themes that emerged from the reviewed scholarship.

Student Support

Providing adequate support to students in the online classroom can have a considerable impact on student success. For instance, James et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study that examined student retention and progression in online courses by examining 656,000 student records. When given proper support such as ease of access to faculty, quality feedback, tutoring sessions, and access to university services such as the writing center and library, students were

more likely to persist and succeed in online education programs. Additionally, taking online courses allowed many participants to progress in their programs at a faster rate. The results of this study suggested that students may benefit from taking online courses in higher education, provided they are adequately supported.

Similarly, Gregory and Lampley (2016) conducted a quantitative study of over 4,000 students enrolled in a two-year community college. They found a significant difference in the success rates of students taking online courses compared to those taking face-to-face courses, with those in online courses failing and quitting more often. Namely, students who took online courses were offered only minimal college support. For example, students had to independently seek help when needed via the student success center, library, or office hours with their instructors. Students also reported not being given built-in support that was accessible through their learning platforms. Instead, they were made to go outside of the online classroom for support. Gregory and Lampley (2016) argued that the institution's built-in services such as tutoring and added faculty support directly impact student success in online courses. Results of this research indicated that student success in online learning depends on the support offered by university programs.

Feedback

Feedback to students on their assignments serves as a roadmap to success and is crucial to student success in the classroom. Feedback is fundamental to teaching students, especially students in their first year of school (Dowden et al., 2013). Research has shown that only 35% of online college students felt that they received helpful feedback that could be implemented on future assignments (James et al., 2010). Further, online students in higher education seek to have explicit feedback that explains how they can improve upon their work. Thus, faculty support

around giving valuable and meaningful feedback to students is vital to student success. Often, faculty may think they are providing students valuable feedback when this is not the case. As an illustration, Carless (2007) documented that many students were concerned about the lack of helpful feedback, yet faculty believed that their feedback was valuable and practical. To further support this finding, Dowden et al. (2013) recorded that feedback should consider that some students are first-generation, and others have been out of school for many years. In addition, the literature has revealed that faculty should give attention to quality feedback and ensure that their feedback focuses on writing technique and formatting issues while also including comments on the paper's overall content. This approach is necessary as only 49% of students reported seeking further clarification or assistance when their feedback was unclear or not helpful (Dowden et al., 2013).

In addition, evidence exists that students have an emotional response to feedback they receive on their assignments. Thus, feedback must work to connect to the emotions of the student. When feedback was obtained from a trusted source that the student deemed they had built a relationship with, it was better received (Dowden et al., 2013). Consequently, it is vital that faculty and any course assistant or coach work to build meaningful relationships with students through targeted, actionable, and student-centered feedback.

Connections

Peacock and Cowan (2019) argued that students who were made to feel like they belong in a program by added student supports such as tutors and coaches were more likely to be successful in their coursework and complete their degree programs within the designated timeframe. The student-tutor relationship has a wide array of benefits and positive student experiences (Yale, 2020). Overall, the theme of research surrounding student and tutor

interactions showed that students tended to feel valued and belonged in their programs when services were built into their programs and were not something they needed to seek independently (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Examining first-generation students and continuing-generation students, Lee et al. (2017) sought to determine if students' success after completing their first semester in college had any connection to their emotional perceptions of faculty support. The study concluded that first-generation students had a greater sense of belonging and higher success rate after their first semester when they felt that the faculty connected with them emotionally and showed emotional investment in their success. The results, however, did not demonstrate the exact correlation for continuing-generation students.

Research further illustrates that students were more likely to feel valued in their higher education programs when professors or teaching assistants reached out to them to check in on a regular interval, like what would occur in a face-to-face classroom setting (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). The tutor/student and faculty/student relationships are particularly vital for online college students. Yale (2019) noted that by having the student develop a positive relationship with their tutor and faculty, many common first-year challenges were minimized, and students felt more of a sense of belonging. Also, common hindrances associated with understanding course concepts were reported most from students who had difficulties passing first-year courses after failing the classes one time due to lack of support (Ainscough et al., 2018). Overall, students reported that when professors and assistants/tutors reached out, they felt more connected and more of a sense of belonging (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). It has also been found that when students were able to build relationships with faculty, their self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy increased (Gregory & Lampley, 2016).

Student Engagement

Student engagement and faculty-student interactions also play a role in student success in online courses. In fact, the tutor/student relationship is especially vital for first-year college students. In addition, when students can build relationships with faculty, their self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy increase (Gregory & Lampley, 2016). This correlation is especially true for minority and at-risk students. In fact, minority and struggling students reported seeing the relationship with their tutors and mentors similar in importance to what they have with family (Salinas et al., 2020).

Comparably, Sax (2002) discovered that tutors in an online classroom could be invaluable to student success, especially when they were a regular part of online discussions and are part of the classroom dynamic. Shy and at-risk student populations both tended to communicate more comfortably with a classroom tutor who was routinely present when compared to a professor who was often seen as unapproachable (Sax, 2002). Having someone other than the professor participate in course discussions can directly lend to conversations that can strengthen the learning process by adding additional insights. Having a tutor in an online course that fully participates and engages students decreased students' failure rate by half (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). As Kuh et al. (2005) indicated, one of the most critical environmental factors related to students' persistence may be their ability to make meaningful connections with at least one university community member. The literature reveals that students' relationships with faculty and staff are a reliable predictor of student success (Habley et al., 2012).

Strategies

Given the abundant evidence on the direct impact of tutors and mentors on student success, the question must be raised as to what specific strategies can effectively help students in

their courses. Several self-regulated strategies that tutors use to assist within the online classroom have been associated with increased student success. When examining student self-regulated strategies and motivation variables, a quantitative study by Kitsantas et al. (2008) revealed that time management and self-efficacy significantly impacted student GPA and overall success in the online classroom. In fact, soft skills taught by tutors, such as time management skills, continued to impact student GPA a year after the skills were taught to students indicating that the tutor-student relationship is long-lasting. According to Ainscough et al. (2018), students found the most significant hindrances to success were their lack of understanding of course content and time management. These and other hindrances, in return, led to student disengagement with the learning process (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Sadly, when students disengaged with their courses, the result was a lack of motivation and, even in many cases, attrition from university (Krause, 2005; Long et al., 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Strategies suggested to prevent student disengagement included teaching time management skills, goal setting, keeping records, and environmental structuring (Nota et al., 2004). However, research into specific strategies used for online student success is still lacking.

Tutors and Student Success

Despite the positive impacts shown in the literature regarding tutors and mentors, there also exist controversial points. Christie (2014) attempted to offer a more analytical examination of the undercurrents of power and control, which are innate to the mentoring process, and, in doing so, to offer more critical opinions of mentoring projects. The findings indicated that mentoring is a relationship of power and control as there are institutional mechanisms in place for controlling the formal aspects of the mentor/student relationship. For example, institutions hire and train mentors. Second, the mentoring process seems to be heavily socially constructed,

with the relationship between the mentor and the student tailored to support the student. Lastly, this study argued that there are dangers in the mentoring process as mentors can be placed in the positions of being content experts. Even though there seems to be a possible power issue in the mentor-student relationship, mentors seem to find fulfillment in working with students. As an illustration, Beltman et al. (2019) reported that 89% of mentors who worked with students reported positive feelings about mentoring. Their opinions on being a mentor revealed themes that included feelings of fulfillment, positive emotions, and enjoyment in mentoring. Overall, most mentors and tutors shared looking forward to continuing as a mentor, and they felt happy and excited about the prospect of their program. A qualitative study conducted by Carter et al. (2019) supported this idea showing that peer tutors affirmed a wide array of factors that led them to become involved as mentors. Such findings could affect how the mentor/tutor role is framed to potential peer mentors when recruiting campus-wide participants.

As previously stated, student success in online learning could be one of the most critical issues currently facing contemporary higher education (Peacock & Cowan, 2019). Ensuring that students in online courses have the needed resources to maximize their potential for success may be the most paramount concern in higher education today. However, research is scarce regarding the impact of academic coaches on students taking online courses in higher education. Thus, further research should be conducted to determine academic coach perceptions of their role in the online classroom on student engagement and self-efficacy and the strategies they use to develop these skills and practices among students.

CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to analyze academic coach perceptions of their role in the online classroom on student engagement and self-efficacy and the strategies they use to assist students academically. This chapter contains the details of the research design used for this study, research questions, the research setting and participants, the survey instrument used, data collection procedures, and an analysis of the data collected.

Research Design

A quantitative descriptive survey research design was used to systematically examine academic coach perceptions of their role in the online classroom on student engagement and self-efficacy and the strategies they use to assist students academically. A descriptive research design offered a more neutral perspective, which was needed since the study's author is part of upper-level management at Instructional Connections, where academic coaches are employed. Survey instruments used in this study allowed the researcher to measure academic coach constructs and opinions on their role in the online classroom on student engagement and self-efficacy. In addition, the researcher used descriptive research to gain insight into the strategies used by the academic coaches to assist students academically. To describe academic coach perceptions of the effect of their role in the online classroom on student engagement and self-efficacy and strategies used to assist students academically, rating scales, Likert scales, and open-ended Qualtrics questions were used.

This quantitative study attempted to examine the perceptions of 567 academic coaches across various disciplines and schools who have been employed as academic coaches with IC. A quantitative web-based survey was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are academic coach perceptions of the effect of their role in the online classroom on student engagement?
2. What are academic coach perceptions of the effect of their role in the online classroom on student self-efficacy?
3. What strategies are used by academic coaches to assist students academically in the online classroom?

Research Setting and Participants

The target population for this study were currently employed academic coaches actively working in online classes with IC. The researcher of this study is part of IC upper-level management and had access to email accounts for all active academic coaches. Thus, the survey instrument was sent via email to all active IC academic coaches for a total of 1,452 active coaches. The only criteria that each academic coach had to meet to participate in this survey was to have a current and active work status with the company and an active IC email account to send the survey.

To eliminate potential bias stemming from either limited or extensive experience, coaches who were newly contracted and veteran coaches were invited to participate in this study. This research was not delimited to any specific institution, academic field, or academic level selected to eliminate potential bias associated with the coaches' worksite. The researcher sought to gain participation from all academic coaches across all disciplines and universities at multiple academic levels. Lastly, participating coaches were asked to take part regardless of their satisfaction level with the role.

Instrument

The 12-item questionnaire, included in Appendix A, was designed to collect information on the experiences, attitudes, and opinions of veteran and new academic coaches working in various disciplines and at various universities. The written consent of participation was given by each participant within question one, where participants were asked to agree or disagree with taking part in the voluntary study. Of the 12 items within the questionnaire, three Likert scale questions explored participants' satisfaction with working as an academic coach, their perceptions about the areas where students struggled the most in their online courses, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of the strategies they use to ensure student success. Five questions asked participants to select a multiple-choice response pertaining to their years of experience as an academic coach, academic levels of students they support, prior training received, and their definition of student engagement. Lastly, four open-ended questions were used to capture descriptions of strategies used and respondents' perceptions of their impact on student engagement and self-efficacy.

Data Collection

Data collection began upon the approval of the researcher's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The approval letter is included in Appendix B. The questionnaire was emailed to participants across four different intervals since most academic coaches go through the summer months with no course assigned to them. Initially, in June of 2021, the questionnaire was emailed to all 1,452 active academic coaches. At the start of July, a second email was sent to capture responses from coaches who would be accepting summer two course assignments. By the third email distribution at the start of August, 485 responses were received. However, a fourth and

final email was sent at the end of August to capture responses from any coach who may not have seen the email survey sent over the summer but who had accepted a course assignment for fall one courses. The questionnaire was closed in the first week of September 2021. The final response rate was 567 responses. Financial limitations prevented the researcher from offering monetary rewards for participation. However, the email survey was sent out multiple times by the researcher to encourage participation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics within the Qualtrics program. An item analysis was carried out, and subjects whose surveys were incomplete were automatically excluded. When examining the Likert-scale questions, answers were analyzed for means as well as highest and lowest values. Mean data were examined for the multiple-choice responses within the survey. Lastly, within the open-ended survey questions, recurring themes were identified within participant responses.

CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

Of the 1,452 email surveys sent, 567 academic coaches completed the survey. The response rate was 39%. To understand academic coach perceptions, the researcher first asked questions to understand how long the participants had been serving as an academic coach, if coaches enjoyed their role, and what level of students they regularly work with. In addition, coaches were asked if they had received any special training on specifically assisting struggling students.

Of the 567 academic coaches that participated in the survey, 60% reported that they had been employed with IC for 5-9 years, 10% for more than 10 years, and 30% for less than five years. These results indicate a low turnover rate of academic coaches at IC, suggesting that they are satisfied with their role. Next, participants were asked to share their satisfaction as an academic coach on a 1–5 scale, with five being fully satisfied and one being unsatisfied. From the sample, 56% rated their satisfaction as a level five, 32% as a level four, and less than 1% as levels one to three. The mean score for job satisfaction of academic coaches was 4.65, proving that of those academic coaches that participated in the study, most were satisfied with their role as a coach and have stayed on with IC as a coach as a result.

Participants were asked to report what level of students they were usually assigned to work with. For this question, 41.05% reported working with only undergraduate students, 42.72% with only graduate students, and 16.23% with both graduate-level and undergraduate-level students. Of the 567 participants, 58.71% reported that they had received training on assisting struggling students, while 41.29% had not received any training outside of the training offered through IC. Overall, academic coaches enter their role as coaches expected to assist

students of all levels in higher education. They appear to be satisfied with their role and display meager rates of leaving the role.

Student Engagement

Participants of this study were also surveyed to determine their understanding of the meaning of student engagement. In that regard, 81.01% of participants reported that, from their perspective, student engagement was a willingness to participate in routine school activities such as attending class, submitting work, and following directions. Further, these respondents felt that student engagement was also the students' need and desire to be successful and participate in the learning process. The remaining participants felt that student engagement was one or the other, but not both.

Using a short answer, open-ended survey question, participants were asked to what extent their role impacted student engagement. Through the responses to this question, several themes emerged. Many respondents felt that giving constructive and detailed feedback impacted student engagement by allowing students an opportunity for growth and improvement. Themes emerged that suggest that when academic coaches work in supporting students in challenging courses, such as writing and math-intensive courses, students often email for additional support. Additionally, many academic coaches shared receiving emails from students after these more challenging courses expressing that they could be successful because of the academic coach helping them remain engaged in the course. Themes of helping students stay connected by reaching out to them frequently also emerged as many participants reported emailing and even sitting in on Zoom meetings with students and faculty to help keep students engaged in the online course content. In addition, themes emerged that academic coaches impact student

engagement by participating in discussion boards. Participants felt that their participation led to students engaging with the academic coach and course content more frequently.

Many participants perceived their role as academic coach as an extra layer of support through providing additional examples of assignments, explaining complex concepts or assignments, reviewing grading rubrics, and understanding course expectations. They reported that students often stated that they felt more comfortable coming to the academic coach for help rather than “bothering” the course faculty, thus leading to an overall connection to the course itself. These results indicate that most academic coaches perceive their role as having a direct and significant effect on student engagement in the online classroom in both graduate and undergraduate courses.

Student Self-Efficacy

When asked about the definition of student self-efficacy, 88.56% of survey participants reported that student self-efficacy was the student's belief in their ability to be successful in both their course and in the overall program. On the other hand, 11.45% of the respondents felt that student self-efficacy was just one or the other, but not both.

Using a short answer, open-ended survey question, participants were asked to what extent their role impacted student self-efficacy. Through the responses to this question, several themes emerged. Many academic coaches reported that the encouragement they give students through discussions, emails, and feedback on their assignments impacted student self-efficacy. Many academic coaches also mentioned that they could relate to students because they know how it felt to be a student and remember their struggles, which helps them be a better support system for the students they serve.

Academic coaches revealed in their short answer responses that their regular communications to students often motivate students who may struggle with self-efficacy. Moreover, participants shared that the additional support offered students the confidence they need to persevere and complete their course work as they gain confidence by completing the assignment successfully. Overall, the coaches revealed that by grading student work timely and offering encouragement and detailed feedback and support when needed, their role has a tremendous impact on student self-efficacy.

Strategies

Survey respondents were asked to what degree they felt students struggled in both student engagement and self-efficacy. They were asked to rate these struggles on a scale of zero to five, where zero was not a struggle, and five represented a considerable struggle for the students. Overall, the respondents felt that students struggle more with self-efficacy than student engagement. Further, as seen in Table 1, the mean scores suggest that participants perceive that students in the online classroom struggle more in the area of self-efficacy than in student engagement.

Table 1

Average Scores for Self-efficacy and Student Engagement

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Count
Self-Efficacy	0	5	3.67	.86	.75	567
Student engagement	0	5	1.87	.99	.99	567

In open-ended questions, academic coaches were asked to share strategies to assist students in each of these areas. When examining strategies used to assist students in self-efficacy in the online classroom, the following themes and strategies were mentioned: encouragement, consistent communication via email and course announcements, clear and consistent feedback (especially on repeated errors and mistakes), continued virtual presence in the online classroom, and engaging underperforming students. The prevalent strategy that emerged more than any other was providing precise and detailed feedback and taking the extra time to leave feedback when students repeated errors to ensure that these mistakes would not continue to occur.

Participants were also asked about specific strategies to assist students in student engagement. Academic coaches did not feel this was a significant area of concern but provided strategies that included consistent communication via phone and email, with email being the primary source of communication. Another theme that emerged was how the academic coach alerts faculty when students are not engaged so that the professor can also work to guide the student back into the course. Some participants reported sharing their own experiences with the students to encourage them not to give up when struggling.

When asked to rate the effectiveness of the strategies as mentioned above on a scale of zero to five, where zero was not at all effective and five was highly effective, as seen in Table 2, the academic coaches who participated in this survey perceived their strategies as highly impactful for the students they serve.

Table 2*Average Scores for Effectiveness of Academic Coach Strategies*

Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Count
Self-Efficacy	0	5	4.9	.87	.76	567
Student engagement	0	5	4.79	.99	.99	567

Overall, when examining survey results, it was clear that academic coaches have a long-lasting relationship with IC. They tend to remain in the coaching role once they begin working with students. Further, participating coaches work in both undergraduate and graduate courses within higher education. Overall, academic coaches did perceive that their role impacted both student engagement and self-efficacy. However, the impact on student self-efficacy was more compelling which was fitting since participants reported that students struggled more in this area when taking online courses. Participating academic coaches felt that strategies such as communication, clear feedback, and encouragement impacted both areas for students. Overall, simply having an academic coach in the classroom had an impact, from the academic coach perspective, on student engagement and certainly on student self-efficacy.

CHAPTER V – DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to analyze academic coach perceptions of their role in the online classroom on student engagement and self-efficacy and the strategies they use to assist students academically. This quantitative study attempted to examine the perceptions of 567 academic coaches across various disciplines and schools who have been employed as academic coaches with IC. The rise in the number of students taking online courses has led to a need for higher education institutions to support students in a much different manner than they have in the past. Simply sending students to the student success centers is no longer enough.

Discussion of Student Engagement

Research question 1 asked, “What are academic coach perceptions of the effect of their role in the online classroom on student engagement?” Several themes emerged from research question 1. Many respondents felt that giving constructive and detailed feedback impacted student engagement by allowing students an opportunity for growth and improvement. This finding supported James et al. (2016) who suggested that with proper feedback, students are more likely to be engaged and thus progress in their programs. Additionally, similar to the conclusions made by Gregory and Lampley (2016), many academic coaches shared that they frequently receive emails from students after completion of more challenging courses expressing that they were successful because of the academic coach helping them remain engaged in the course. The current further study supports the findings of Dowden et al. (2013) who showed how helping students stay connected by reaching out to them frequently and even sitting in on Zoom meetings with students helps keep them engaged in the online course content. In addition, themes emerged that suggested similar findings those of Peacock and Cowan (2019). This study showed that, like Peacock and Cowan argued, academic coaches impact student engagement by

participating in discussion boards because their presence and participation allows the student to feel like they belong in their programs. Participants in this study also felt that their engagement led to students engaging with the academic coach and course content more frequently. These findings support the idea that the academic coach contributes to improving student outcomes in the online classroom and can be very helpful to higher education administrators who are seeking to improve how students engage with and perform in their courses within their colleges.

Discussion of Student Self-Efficacy

Research question 2 asked, “What are academic coach perceptions of the effect of their role in the online classroom on student self-efficacy?” In this current study, many academic coaches from IC that participated noted that they recall their own struggles as a student which in turn motivated them to be a support system for the students that they work with. Academic coaches also indicated that their empathy for students allowed them to form unique bonds where they feel connected to the students and their experiences. Further, academic coach participants felt that they had a direct impact on student self-efficacy by encouraging students to be more connected to their courses through their participation in discussion boards, by promptly responding to emails and by leaving robust and helpful feedback to students on their assignments. These findings contribute to the work of Yale (2020) who discussed the importance of students feeling connected to their courses and programs. Finally, academic coaches revealed in their short answer responses that their regular communications to students often motivate those who may struggle with self-efficacy. Similar to what Lee et al. (2017) found, these regular communications allow students to feel like their faculty and teachers care about their performance and overall well-being. Moreover, participants in this study shared that the additional support offered students the confidence and connection needed to persevere and

complete their course work as they gain confidence by completing the assignment successfully. Overall, the results of this study show that academic coaches increase student self-efficacy by increasing their feelings of being connected to the course and university. This feeling is accomplished by the academic coach grading student work timely and offering encouragement and detailed feedback and support when needed.

Discussion of Student Success in Online Classroom

Research question 3 asked, “What strategies are used by academic coaches to assist students academically in the online classroom?” The study conducted by Kitsantas et al. (2008) revealed that time management and soft skills such as help with note taking and goal setting greatly impacts students GPA and self-efficacy. However, specific strategies for student success were lacking in the existing research. This study found that encouragement, consistent communication via email and course announcements, clear and consistent feedback, especially on repeated errors and mistakes, continued virtual presence in the online classroom and engaging underperforming students are all strategies that can assist students taking courses online. The prevalent strategy that emerged more than any other was providing precise and detailed feedback and taking the extra time to leave feedback when students repeated errors to ensure that these mistakes would not continue to occur. Since feedback is frequently mentioned in research for student success, it is clear that the feedback that the academic coach provides certainty has an impact on the students they serve. Further, consistent communication via phone and email, with email being the primary source of communication were also mentioned as a strategy to assist students in the online classroom. Given that the academic coach often alerts faculty when students are not engaged in their course, their role also lends some support to faculty.

Overall, results from this study indicate that academic coaches can potentially fill the gap between traditional student support services and the current need for student support specifically in the online setting. The knowledge obtained in this investigation also indicates that academic coaches perceive that they have an impact on student engagement as well as self-efficacy in the online classroom. As such, this study further supports current as well as past research that addresses student success while bringing to the forefront the need for additional supports for students taking classes online.

Limitations

Since the study participants included only academic coaches, this study was not able to capture students and faculty perceptions. Further, the scope of the study was limited because only the reported academic coach perceptions of their role on student self-efficacy and student engagement were examined. Also, the lack of previously tested or widely used assessment tools in this area is another a limitation. Since IC is the only company currently utilizing academic coaches in their current capacity, there have been no studies to examine the effectiveness or impact of academic coaches on student performance in the classroom. Overall, there is a relatively small body of data-based literature on this topic.

Another limitation is that this study only included self-reported data from the academic coaches, thus the coaches' perceptions portrayed in this study should not be understood as objective assessment of the impact of their efforts on student success. Objective measures of their work should be examined through the use of student grades, student GPA, and even faculty impact of the academic coach. Lastly, it is important to bear in mind the possible bias in the responses. Since academic coaches are a part-time contracted position, even though they were told that participation would not impact their coaching assignment, consideration must be given

to the fact that coaches may have skewed their answers and perceptions to what they think upper-level management would want to have them report within the survey.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provided a considerable amount of new information in a much-needed area of higher education, a further study with more focus on student grades and performance is recommended to determine if the academic coach does in fact have an impact on student performance in the online classroom. Further studies should also be conducted on faculty perceptions of the use of an academic coach as an additional layer of support to students. It is also recommended that studies take place both at the 2-year and 4-year college levels to determine if the need for supports varies at both institutions and if the academic coach can bridge the gap in both areas. Lastly, it is recommended that qualitative studies are conducted to elicit student experiences with the use of academic coaches in their online classes.

Implications for Practice

The researcher examined the perceptions of the academic coach in student self-efficacy and student engagement and the strategies used to assist students in both areas in the online classroom. Since online learning is continuously growing and is a critical component of many higher education institutions, effective and appropriate supports for students must be identified. When analyzing the results of this study, the findings indicated that the academic coaches perceived that their role impacts student engagement and self-efficacy. Further, findings indicate that the strategies that are commonly used by the academic coach such as providing detailed and timely feedback and communication to students also impact their success in the online classroom.

This study's results might be of interest to higher education institutions who have large-scale online learning programs. Higher education institutions wanting to strengthen their online programs and support services should consider the addition of the academic coach into their online programs as an additional layer of student supports.

Others who can benefit from these findings would include the upper-level management team from Instructional Connections. This study would allow them to present much needed research to possible partners as to the possible impact their value-added services have on the programs for these partner schools. Stakeholders who would also benefit from this study include the students who get to work with the additional support of the academic coach, faculty to get the additional help, and of course higher education administrators.

These results could be used as the team of Instructional Connections presents at educational conferences. Instructional Connections now has research to close the gap regarding how their academic coaches perceive they affect students taking online courses. Overall, this study strengthens the idea that the academic coach can be effectively used to assist students in higher education.

Summary

The aim of the present research was to examine academic coach perceptions of the effect of their role in the online classroom on student self-efficacy and engagement. The second aim of this study was to ascertain and depict the strategies used by academic coaches to assist their students within the online classroom. The most obvious findings from this study indicated that academic coaches passionately believe that they have an impact on the students that they serve both in self-efficacy and engagement in their courses. The second major finding was that academic coaches feel that strategies used to assist students have a tremendous impact on

students. Overall, this study contributed to closing the gap in the area of using academic coaches for student success by examining how the academic coach perceives their role in terms of student self-efficacy, student engagement, and the strategies used for student success.

After reflecting on my research experience, I realized that this study could be made stronger by including the perceptions of the students who work with academic coaches in their online classes. More research should be conducted to include the perspective of the students who actually work with the academic coach. Doing so could make this study more robust. It would also be valuable to include the perspectives of faculty in this study to allow stakeholders a different perspective on the use of the academic coach. Despite these recommendations, this research still offers timely knowledge and actionable evidence that can be useful in expanding our understanding of how academic coaches contribute to student learning in online environments.

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APPENDIX A

Qualtrics Survey

Your privacy and confidentiality are important to us. The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records. The researchers will keep all study records, including any codes to your data, in a secure location such as a locked file cabinet. Research records will be labeled with a code. A master key that links names and codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location. The master key and audiotapes will be destroyed 5 years after the close of the study. All electronic files containing identifiable information will be password protected. Any computer hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. Only the members of the research staff will have access to the passwords. At the conclusion of this study, the researchers may publish their findings. Information will be presented in summary format, and you will not be identified in any publications or presentations.

By clicking "I agree," you understand that participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of any benefits.

- I agree
- I disagree

Q1. How long have you been employed as an Academic Coach for Instructional Connections?

- Less than 5 years
- 5-9 years
- 10+ years

Q2. How would you rate your satisfaction with helping struggling students as an Academic Coach?

0 not at all satisfied

5 extremely satisfied

0

1

2

3

4

5

Q3. What level of classes are the students taking that you primarily work with?

- Undergraduate
- Graduate
- Both

Q4. Have you had any specific training on how to assist struggling students?

- Yes
- No

Q5. What is your definition of student engagement?

- students' willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process
- students' willingness to participate in routine school activities, such as attending classes, submitting required work, and following teachers' directions in class
- Both

Q6. Specifically, to what extent and how do you feel your role impacts student engagement?

Q7. What is your definition of self-efficacy?

- the student's belief in their ability to be successful in the course
- The student's belief in their ability to be successful in their overall program
- Both

Q8. Specifically, to what extent and how do you feel your role impacts student self-efficacy?

Q9. In each of the following areas, to what degree would you say students tend to struggle the most in online courses?

0 not often/never

5 Frequent/often

Self-efficacy issues (ex. class seems too difficult, student does not feel confident in materials)

0 1 2 3 4 5

Student engagement (ex. student does not participate, student does not attend, no/limited responses to emails)

0 1 2 3 4 5

Q10. Please describe strategies that you use to work with students who struggle with self-efficacy in their online classes.

Q11. Please describe strategies that you use to work with students who struggle with engagement issues in their online classes. (Example: not participating, not attending, no email replies.)

Q12. How would you rate the effectiveness of the strategies that you use in each of the following areas on student success in their online classroom?

0 not at all

5 extremely effective

0 1 2 3 4 5

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval Letter

Office of
Research Integrity



118 COLLEGE DRIVE • HATTIESBURG, MS | 601.266.6576 | USM.EDU/ORI

Modification Institutional Review Board Approval

The University of Southern Mississippi's Office of Research Integrity has received the notice of your modification for your submission *The Perceptions of the Academic Coach Role on Student Efficacy and Engagement, and the Strategies Used: A Qualitative Study* (IRB #: IRB-21-186).

Your modification has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services regulations (45 CFR Part 46), and University Policy to ensure:

- The risks to subjects are minimized and reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered involving risks to subjects must be reported immediately. Problems should be reported to ORI via the Incident template on Cayuse IRB.
- The period of approval is twelve months. An application for renewal must be submitted for projects exceeding twelve months.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-21-186

PROJECT TITLE: *The Perceptions of the Academic Coach Role on Student Efficacy and Engagement, and the Strategies Used: A Qualitative Study*

SCHOOL/PROGRAM: Educational Research and Admin

RESEARCHER(S): Nicole Letchworth, Masha Krsmanovic

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Approved

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: September 7, 2021

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Donald Sacco".

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chairperson