

Chapter 14

Utilizing Online Academic Coaching as an Added Value for International Student Support

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the utilization of academic coaching as a way to support international students in the online higher education environment. International students and online learners experience barriers to academic success which have been amplified by the COVID pandemic. Given the lack of a widely accepted definition of academic coaching in academia, the author describes what academic coaching is and why it is different from other academic services such as advising or tutoring. This chapter also offers an implementation guide for campuses and departments considering the implementation of such a program on their campus, especially given the budget constraints caused by the pandemic. This guide includes suggestions of who can serve as an academic coach, ideal training topics for coaches, and logistical considerations for the online environment. The chapter concludes with a recommendation for future research on the topic of academic coaching, especially as it relates to online learners and international students.

The coronavirus disease of 2019 (“COVID-19” or “COVID”) and subsequent pandemic resulted in “a major disruption to colleges and universities across the country, with most institutions canceling in-person classes and moving to online-only instruction” (Smalley, 2020, para. 1). International students were disproportionately impacted by this abrupt change to online learning and faced additional barriers to their collegiate success. Given the financial impacts of the pandemic, campuses may be seeking ways to maintain a high-quality student educational experience, especially for international students, while also being conscious of budgetary restrictions. Academic coaching is a relatively newer concept in higher education, and is a service that can be provided to international students online. Coaching can provide one option to add support and value to international students in the online environment while not dramatically increasing university costs.

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The objective of this chapter is to explore the concept of academic coaching as a potential added value for international student support in the online environment. Specifically, it will describe the background of the pandemic's effect on higher education, including budgetary challenges and international student barriers. Then, it will describe what academic coaching is and how it is different from other academic services. It will also specifically discuss how academic coaching is beneficial, and how it relates to the online international student experience. The bulk of the chapter includes recommendations and suggestions for implementing an online academic coaching program in a COVID or post-COVID university setting. This includes a discussion on who can be an academic coach, how they are trained, logistics for online coaching sessions, campus partnership ideas, garnering support from campus leadership, advertising coaching services, and assessing program impact and success. The chapter will conclude with suggestions for future research directions on the topic. The target audience for this chapter includes higher education professionals or administrators who work with or make decisions affecting international students.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought innumerable challenges to higher education. These issues include financial challenges, such as budget cuts and hiring freezes, which run simultaneous with student demand for tuition and fee decreases. Campuses closing and moving to the online environment caused unexpected expenses, such as “refunds issued to students for room and board, increased cleaning operation costs, and growing technology costs from moving courses online” (Smalley, 2020, para. 9). Despite increased costs incurred by universities moving online, many students unsatisfied with the online experience felt like they were getting less value out of their education. This is especially impactful to international students whose desires to study abroad included actually living in their country of study.

There are both short-term and long-term ramifications of the pandemic, even once institutions return to their “new normal.” The largest four-year public university system in the United States, the California State University system, is “working under the assumption that the economic impact of COVID-19 will affect budgets for the next 3-4 years” (Nguyen et al., 2020, para. 10). Budget challenges have caused an impact to higher education staffing as well. Overall, “higher education employment has shrunk over 7 percent already, with almost 350,000 workers losing their jobs” and “additional cuts are inevitable as the pandemic and related economic turmoil continue” (Kroger, 2020, para. 4). With reduced higher education staffing and reduced budgets comes the potential for decreased or discontinued services, such as cuts to student support programs. This is especially impactful in the online environment since “additional academic support services may be needed more in online institutions” (Lehan et al., 2018, p. 290).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, online enrollment in higher education continued to remain high. The Distance Education Enrollment Report of 2017 “reveals the number of higher education students taking at least one distance education course in 2015 now tops six million” (Online Learning Consortium, 2017, para. 1). That number represents approximately 29.7% of all students, meaning that more than one in four students are taking either fully online or partially online courses. Additionally, Pearson Higher Education Services managing director, David Daniels, states that “Distance learning continues to grow, demonstrating that institutions remain committed to expanding programs that meet the needs of today’s students” (Online Learning Consortium, 2017, para. 5). However, the hearty enrollment of students in online courses “has been overshadowed by course dropout and failure rates among online learners” (Britto & Rush, 2013, p. 29). To accommodate the larger student online enrollment,

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