

Article 75

Academic Coaching Programs for Students with Disabilities: Outcomes at a Four Year University

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This work is a program evaluation of an academic coaching program for students with disabilities at a four year university. In reviewing the existing literature pertaining to the effectiveness of academic coaching programs on retention rates for students with disabilities, the authors noticed that such studies are scarce. The literature base primarily details the difficulties inherent in the postsecondary experience for students with disabilities. Like so many other areas in disability studies and support, there is more data about the problems than the solutions per se. Given what we know about the importance of achieving a postsecondary degree as a gateway to increased employment opportunities, higher salary, and greater career satisfaction, it is surprising that more effort is not focused on detailing the programs that might contribute to better retention rates for students with disabilities through to graduation.

Retention

Navigating through the freshman year in college requires students to learn in many domains. Students are expected to grow in the responsibilities of daily living, socialize with a new circle of peers, and move forward academically. Recent statistics regarding retention rates of college students from freshman to sophomore year is 79.5% in a traditional public institution and 80% in a traditional private institution (College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2013). Taking into consideration that the number of undergraduate students who report having a disability has increased over several decades, we found that statistics from the 2007-2008 academic year showed that 11% of all freshman reported having a disability (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009).. Many of these students with disabilities may have faced a lifetime of adversity and are at high risk for not succeeding (Orr & Goodman, 2010). With so much change occurring in the lives of freshman students, how do we support students with disabilities who may have even more change and obstacles than their peers during their college years?

A study conducted by Gansemer-Topf and Schuh (2006) concluded that resources dedicated to instruction significantly contributed to first year retention and 6-year graduation rates. These resources included general academic instruction, vocational instruction, special session instruction, community education, preparatory and adult basic education, and remedial and tutorial instruction conducted by the teaching faculty for the institution's students. Additionally, researchers have found that minority students are more likely to remain enrolled at a university when the following are evident: peer support, involvement on campus, cross cultural engagement in organizations, and relationships between students and faculty that are perceived as positive (Palmer, Maramba, & Holmes, 2011-2012).

Programs such as learning communities can lead to the aforementioned outcomes. Learning communities, service learning, and first year seminars encourage students to interact more and increase the likelihood of continuing college into a second year (Heiman, 2010; Keup, 2005). Students who utilized these programs and other support services showed higher levels of self-esteem and social and academic adjustment, leading to increased retention (Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali & Pohlert, 2004). Relationships and social connectedness is vital to student success as well (Orr & Goodman, 2010). If we use a minority model for students with disabilities, we can hope that some of these same support services would prove helpful.

Services

While much has been written about the increased numbers of students with disabilities who are opting for postsecondary education, much of that literature details the historical legislation and social changes that led to these new academic opportunities. Far fewer studies detail the specific collections of services and supports that foster the types of campus climates that promote retention of students with disabilities. It is not uncommon to find a campus "disability service program" that is actually just one individual in an office which provides minimally compliant services for both students and employees with disabilities, thus just technically meeting the letter of ADA compliance, but not the spirit of true access for all. Wilson, Getzel, and Brown (2000) cited the existence of such minimal services and called for greater efforts to enhance campus climates in ways that facilitate retention for students with disabilities.

Sharpe, Johnson, Izzo, and Murray (2005) found that both instructional accommodations and assistive technologies were provided at much higher rates at the postsecondary level than the secondary level and that these supports may have facilitated the persistence that resulted in successful graduation rates. DaDeppo (2009) looked beyond accommodation and assistive technology and found that both academic and social integration were unique predictors of persistence in college students with disabilities.

One of the problem areas in postsecondary retention may stem from differing expectations. Students may expect more comprehensive “hand holding” particularly if they completed their K-12 years with extensive IEP interventions. Simultaneously, faculty may expect to provide minimal accommodations to remain ADA compliant without sacrificing the integrity of their assessment process. In a postsecondary setting with minimally compliant standards, there may be no one available to mediate these differing expectations. However, when more comprehensive services, such as academic coaching, are available, these disparities can be discussed, and coaches can fill the gap between the individuality and directiveness of an IEP and the minimal support required of postsecondary faculty. Hong, Ivy, Gonzalez, and Ehrensberger (2007) provided detailed strategies for bridging this gap, which may help with student success and retention rates. Though their recommendations are intended for secondary service providers, postsecondary providers, like academic coaches, can use these same guidelines to bridge a gap in information for students with disabilities who have unrealistic expectations about the postsecondary experience.

A second problem area is the expectation of content area tutoring services, when most programs primarily provide skills-based tutoring services and academic advisement. Vogel, Fresko, and Wertheim (2007) cited such major discrepancies in perception and expectations as factors likely to undermine the effectiveness of peer tutoring and coaching programs. Reed et al. (2009) concluded that perhaps students with disabilities come to their postsecondary years with the requisite knowledge and know what they need to do to succeed, but find that translating that into action is more difficult than they expected. Thus, students with disabilities may benefit from academic coaching which clarifies instruction in applying academic skills at the postsecondary level. Additionally, academic coaching can help students understand faculty roles and attitudes, which often differ from those of the K-12 system, by providing an opportunity for open discussion of faculty and student roles and responsibilities in the educational process (Jensen, McCrary, Krampe, & Cooper, 2004).

Similar to the findings of Blackorby and Wagner (1996), a study conducted by Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, and Edgar (2000) examined postsecondary attendance and graduation rates of students with learning disabilities over a 10 year period. Not surprisingly, they found that students with learning disabilities were significantly less likely to graduate from postsecondary programs. To change this, students may need a consistent support system to maintain their progress through graduation. Zwart and Kallemeijn (2001) found that peer-based support may be an effective means for enhancing general self-efficacy as well as facilitating the growth of some key areas of learning strategies and study skills for postsecondary students with disabilities. Other researchers (Vogel & Adelman, 1992) found that having a group of highly trained academic advisors who maintain close weekly contact with their advisees benefits high risk students such as those with disabilities. More recently, a study conducted by Wessel,

Jones, Markle, and Westfall (2009) found the mean number of years that were required to obtain a bachelor's degree was essentially the same for all students in the study, regardless of the presence or absence of a disability. They examined supports such as orientation for students with disabilities, training faculty regarding disabilities, advocating for accommodations, and developing extracurricular groups in which students with disabilities can participate as reasons for the decreasing gap in retention and graduation, but did not mention academic coaching per se. Indeed, there seems to be slim to no research on the benefit of academic coaching. In an attempt to begin to fill that gap, we would like to share our experiences with academic coaching for students with disabilities at West Chester University of Pennsylvania (WCU).

West Chester University's Office of Support Services for Students with Disabilities (OSSD) uses the weekly advisement model recommended by Vogel and Adelman (1992) as the basis of their Academic Coaching program. Students with disabilities meet with assigned academic coaches for approximately one hour per week during the academic semester. The academic coaches are graduate students trained to monitor student progress and encourage student success. The content of the sessions is based on student needs with session topics ranging from organizational skills to study skills and even to social skill building. The WCU OSSD coaches are expected to clearly outline the boundaries of their roles as coaches and make appropriate content based referrals to the Learning and Resource Center's tutoring, the Writing Center, and/or the Math Center.

Method

This research was approved by the Human Subjects Committee at WCU. Archival data was used with University permission. Academic coaching outcome data was collected by the OSSD for the purposes of program evaluation. This data include demographic information as well as GPA, academic standing, enrollment status, and graduation status. Spreadsheets were generated by the Access software program and the Director and Assistant Director of the OSSD used the software to generate outcome data. For the purposes of the outcome data used in this study, the operational definition of retention is retaining students from freshman year to first semester sophomore year. For the purposes of this study, a cohort is operationally defined by the academic year in which the student began full-time study. For example, a student who began full-time study at WCU in the Fall 2009 semester would be a member of the 2009 cohort (which has not yet been examined as they have not yet graduated.)

Participants

The archival data used in this study pertained to three cohorts of students with disabilities at WCU over a period of 8 years. A recent demographic snapshot of this population reveals that in 2008-2009, when this study began, the total number of students who self-identified as students with disabilities at WCU for the 2008-2009 school year was 628, inclusive of both undergraduate and graduate students. Of these 628 who identified as having a disability, 157 opted to receive coaching services for the 2008-2009 school year. Some basic demographic data on these 157 students revealed that 76 were male and 80 were female. The students ranged in age from 18-59, with the majority (141)

in the 20-29 range. The students' self-reports indicated that six race/ethnicity categories were represented, with the majority (134) self-reporting as Caucasian. A cohort by cohort examination of demographic variables revealed no significant differences in composition from this sample.

Hypothesis

It was hypothesized that in all three cohorts of students (2003, 2005, and 2007) who were examined, the students with disabilities who were enrolled in the OSSD academic coaching program will have had retention and graduation rates that were equal to or higher than the general student population enrolled at WCU during the same time period.

Data Analysis and Results

The standard equation was used to calculate graduation and retention rates for the 2003, 2005, and 2007 cohorts of students. Only students who began their WCU careers as full-time freshman were included in the calculations. Students who entered WCU with credits that qualified them to rank as sophomores and above were not included. Students who were not registered for full-time credits were also excluded. Based on this data, the researchers calculated the number of students who were retained from each cohort and the number of students who graduated from each cohort.

The graduation and retention rates for the students receiving coaching services from the OSSD at WCU were compared to those rates for the general population at WCU. The data was analyzed using a Chi Square (χ^2) test to see if there were any significant differences between the graduation and retention rates of students receiving coaching services and the general population at WCU. From the class that entered in 2003, we included the graduation and retention rates of 23 students from OSSD and 1,724 students from the general population at WCU. From the class that entered in 2005, we included the graduation and retention rates of 25 students from OSSD and 1,894 students from the general population at WCU. From the class that entered in 2007, we included the graduation and retention rates of 29 students from OSSD and 1,955 students from the general population at WCU.

Column1	Graduation Rate	Retention Rate	Graduation and Retention Rate	Withdrawal Rate
2003				
OSSD	57%	7%	64%	36%
WCU	65%	1%	66%	34%
2005				
OSSD	32%	40%	72%	28%
WCU	43%	28%	71%	29%
2007				
OSSD	41%	43%	84%	16%
WCU	48%	36%	84%	16%

Figure 1. Graduation, Retention, and Withdrawal Rates by Year and Student Population.

Of the class that entered in 2003, 57% of students receiving support services from the OSSD had graduated by 2009, 7% were still retained in school, and 36% had withdrawn. Of the overall class that entered in 2003, 65% of students attending WCU had graduated by 2009, 1% was still retained in school, and 34% had withdrawn. For this class, there was no significant difference in graduation and retention rates versus the withdrawal rate between the students in the OSSD program and the general population at WCU ($p>0.84$).

Of the class that entered in 2005, 32% of students receiving coaching services from the OSSD had graduated by 2009, 40% were still retained in school, and 28% had withdrawn. Of the overall class that entered in 2005, 43% of students attending WCU had graduated by 2009, 28% were still retained in school, and 29% had withdrawn. For this class, there was no significant difference in graduation and retention rates versus the withdrawal rate between the students in the OSSD program and the general population at WCU ($p>0.86$).

Of the class that entered in 2007, 41% of students receiving coaching services from the OSSD had graduated by 2011, 43% were still retained in school, and 16% had withdrawn. Of the overall class that entered in 2005, 48% of students attending WCU had graduated by 2009, 36% were still retained in school, and 16% had withdrawn. For this class, there was no significant difference in graduation and retention rates versus the withdrawal rate between the students in the OSSD program and the general population at WCU ($p>0.74$).

Discussion

Our analysis found that in all three cohorts of students (2003, 2005, and 2007) who were examined, the students with disabilities who were enrolled in the OSSD academic coaching program had no significant difference from the general population at WCU in retention and graduation rates during the same time period. Given that the literature indicates that students with disabilities are expected to have significantly lower retention and graduation rates, we believe that the support services, particularly the academic coaching program offered by the OSSD at WCU, is making a positive difference for students with disabilities who choose to participate.

The implications of these findings to the increasing numbers of students with disabilities enrolling at postsecondary institutions and the faculty and administration who assist them is that coordinated academic coaching programs may lead to improved retention and graduation outcomes. If this is true, then the WCU academic coaching program, and others like it at universities with comprehensive services, can serve as models for postsecondary institutions looking to provide service beyond the basic accommodations afforded by the law and thereby potentially increase their retention and graduation rates.

In looking beyond our initial hypothesis, the authors note that the WCU OSSD students participating in academic coaching may graduate at a slower pace than the overall student population at WCU, but are on pace with students nationally at the 6-year mark. Our 6-year graduation rates for OSSD coached students were lower than the general WCU rate, but similar to the rate for students nationally at 4-year institutions.

Limitations

This leads us to some limitations of our study. First, since students with disabilities self identify and volunteer to participate in academic coaching, we can track and monitor their progress, but no data can be recorded for students who do not come forward voluntarily to participate, thus there was no control group for use as comparison data for students with disabilities not participating in the coaching program. Also, there was no baseline data and a lack of “between groups” data to demonstrate that it was indeed the coaching program that contributed to higher retention and graduation rate. This situation begs us to wonder if there are other characteristics that lead students to self-select for participation in the coaching program, thus indicating that it may be these characteristics and not the coaching per se that led to this group’s improved retention and graduation rates.

Another obvious limitation is that there is only one university and one coaching program used in this study, so we cannot demonstrate correlation between outcome numbers and OSSD coaching services, as many other factors could attribute to student success at WCU. Added to that is the fact that the OSSD cohorts were a very small sample size, especially as compared to the general population, and this small study is revealed as simply a small program evaluation which points future researchers toward the possibility of a larger planned study of interventions worth examining more closely. Thus, this study is a preliminary look at a small data sample and a call for further research into this area of student service provision for students with disabilities.

Future Research

In making future comparisons, it is important to identify performance indicators that essentially serve as “best practices” for disability service provision in postsecondary education. Shaw and Dukes (2005) called for institutions of higher education to implement and validate their services for students with disabilities so that we can make cross program comparisons and better understand how we can ensure equal educational access for students with disabilities. Additionally, in order to better support students with disabilities, the United States Government has recommended a coordinated approach to better utilize agency resources and share knowledge with technical assistance to postsecondary schools which support students with disabilities (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009).

The authors of this study hope to see future research which focuses on the personality attributes of students who utilize coaching services in terms of self-efficacy and self-esteem. We’d like to know how these personality correlates might predispose students to greater success with or without coaching. We’d also like to see the use of multiple university programs on a comparative basis to examine coaching versus minimally compliant services. We’d like to call for a survey of higher education disability coaching/extended services programs to examine what is working well in higher education disability support nationwide.

In a future study, we would like to analyze data for students with disabilities who are not full-time students, as this is sometimes done by design when the student is advised to only take a part-time course load to improve the likelihood of success. Many universities define 6-9 credits as full-time for students with disabilities. We’d like to call for greater clarity in the field as to what constitutes full-time for students with disabilities

so that comparisons can be made between studies. We'd also like to look at graduation rates beyond the standard 4-6 years used for such studies as it would be important to know how many of our students graduate after 6 years, thus allowing for eventual graduation as a measure of success even when it falls outside the realm of traditional graduation rates.

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