Easing the transition to college: An investigation into when and how transition coaching is effective

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Context and Intervention: Access to jobs—and to the middle class—increasingly requires postsecondary credentials. Six of ten jobs demand postsecondary education,¹ and by 2020, over 70 percent of the state’s jobs are estimated to require postsecondary credentials, a proportion higher than the likely supply of college graduates.² Yet the six-year college graduation rate for 2005 high school graduates from a large city in the state was 47 percent.

The connection between college completion and future economic stability drives an ambitious city-wide collaboration. Citywide Coalition for Coaching (CCC) targets the city’s public school graduates to reduce barriers in students’ transitions to and success in college, particularly for students from groups traditionally underrepresented in college, including first-generation and economically disadvantaged students. The coaching model, shown in Exhibit 1, is implemented across a network of nonprofit organizations in partnership with institutions of higher education. The initiative builds on prior research³ by providing one-on-one college transition coaching for students’ first two years of college that purposefully focuses on easing high school to college transitions, and, ultimately, increasing college completion. The initiative’s long term goal is that at least 70% of the city’s high school graduates who enroll in college will earn a credential within six years of high school graduation.

CCC is a promising intervention designed to help students overcome many of the obstacles to college matriculation and persistence. Prior research on CCC found preliminary evidence of effectiveness. Other research focused on practices designed to support students as they transition to college suggests that transition coaching may be a cost-effective intervention that can demonstrably increase FAFSA completion, college enrollment, and persistence in college-entering students, especially those from low-income backgrounds and racial/ethnic minority groups. Offering one-on-one support and guidance to students as they transition into college, CCC offers an opportunity to learn more about the effectiveness of transition coaching.

Research Questions, Sample, and Design: This evaluation addresses both implementation-focused and impact research questions; the implementation question examines how coaching is implemented across the initiative, and the impact questions ask about impacts on outcomes (college persistence, credit accumulation, GPA, FAFSA completion, and degree completion) and variation in those outcomes as a function of implementation.

The sample includes 2,977 high school graduates and graduates from similar districts across the state who enrolled in college in the fall following high school graduation. About one-quarter of the sample (717 students) participated in coaching and the three-quarters (2,260) did not. Over 60% of the sample is Black or Hispanic, 55% is female, 75% are eligible for free-or-reduced priced lunch, and the average SAT score is 1330 (out of a total score of 2400).

The impact design uses propensity score matching to identify the comparison group, which controls for any observable characteristics that can lead to confounding factors in the treatment

¹ Note that until the report describing results is officially released on March 23, 2017, the location and identifying details for this study have been anonymized.
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This is important, since students who choose to receive coaching may have different motivational and cognitive characteristics, and these factors may directly relate to differences in their interest in coaching, and ultimately their college outcomes.

Employing a quasi-experimental design to compare coached students to a group of similar students helps account for as many potential confounders as possible. The design relies on a local and focal approach to matching such that the comparison group is composed of students attending the same college, the same high school graduation cohort, and a similar high school to the coached students. Within each block, a separate propensity score matching process considers student level factors related to the outcomes of interest, such as high school GPA, gender, socio-economic status (SES) and attendance.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Matching and outcome data, collected from the city and the state educational systems, includes student demographics, student academic performance, and high school characteristics. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse provide evidence of college enrollment and completion, and partner colleges provide short-term outcomes data (e.g., FAFSA completion, GPA, and credit accumulation).

To understand and identify the components of coaching likely to be effective in increasing college persistence and completion, the study collected quantitative and qualitative implementation data. Data from the program’s administrative database measures dosage, timing, mode, and content of coaching. Descriptive and qualitative data from a student survey, coach interviews, and interviews with college leadership and staff provide perspectives on implementation of coaching.

**Findings and Conclusions:** A previous report found preliminary evidence of effectiveness through a quasi-experimental evaluation of the coaching intervention that compared the city’s 2009 graduates who did and did not receive coaching at seven local colleges. Descriptive data from an earlier cohort (class of 2009) show that overall coached and non-coached students have similar rates of college persistence and completion. For example, about half of both groups completed college within six years. However, these data also suggest that persistence and completion rates for those enrolled in two-year colleges differ for coached and non-coached students; specifically, 35% of coached students and 24% of non-coached students who enrolled in two-year colleges completed credentials within six years.

It is possible that transition coaching helps to explain any differences in completion rates for students; it is also possible that the differential reflects individual student characteristics related both to receptivity to coaching and motivation to complete college. More sophisticated analyses that can control for individual characteristics can help determine whether participation in coaching causes greater college completion rates, and it is precisely that type of analysis that we are conducting. Results will be released in mid-March 2017.

This evaluation has the potential to build on prior research about transition coaching, both in the target community and elsewhere, through the combination of implementation- and impact-focused data collection strategies. The study’s planned examination of implementation through multiple lenses assesses the short- and long-term impacts on student college outcomes as well as
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how observed variation in coaching is related to variation in outcomes. As such, the evaluation can contribute meaningfully to the knowledge base about successful strategies to improve the college completion rates for students.

**Exhibit 1. City-Wide Coalition for Coaching Model**

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