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Context and Setting: Today, earning a college degree is seen as crucial for future well-being. College graduates earn more, are less likely to suffer job losses in a recession, and are projected to have superior long-term labor market prospects. The connection between college completion and future economic stability motivated an ambitious city-wide collaboration. Citywide Coalition for Coaching (CCC) provides one-on-one college transition coaching to a large city's public school graduates[1] to reduce barriers in students' entry into and success in college, particularly for students from groups traditionally underrepresented in college.

Research focused on practices designed to support students as they transition to college suggests that 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.[i]

Intervention: CCC is a promising intervention designed to help students overcome many of the obstacles to college matriculation and persistence. Initially launched in 2009, CCC is implemented across a network of nonprofit organizations in partnership with local colleges. The initiative provides one-on-one coaching during students' first two years of college. Since the fall of 2015, CCC has been scaled up expanding the program's reach from several hundred to 1,000 young adults per cohort.

Research Questions: This evaluation addresses both implementation and impact research questions; it examines how coaching is implemented, the impact on a diverse set of outcomes (college persistence, credit accumulation, GPA, FAFSA completion, and degree completion), and variation in those outcomes as a function of implementation.

Participants: The sample includes 13,550 students from four cohorts of high school graduates (classes of 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016) who entered college in the fall immediately after graduation. About one-sixth of the sample (2,299 students) participated in coaching (treatment group) and the remainder (11,251) did not (comparison group). Over 50% of the sample is Black or Hispanic, 55% is female, 62% was eligible for free-or-reduced priced lunch, and the average SAT score is 1394 (out of a total score of 2400).

Research Design: Given that is was not feasible to conduct an experimental design that would yield two groups of students balanced on all observable and unobservable confounders, we use a quasi-experimental design that (1) compares CCC students with a comparison group of similar students and (2) can account for as many of the observable confounders as possible. Guided by the current methodological research on best quasi-experimental design practices, we constructed such a comparison group using a matching process that had two features: matches were local (the comparison cases drawn from the same settings—matching blocks based on of unique combinations of cohort, high schools, and college) and also focal (matching was done using baseline characteristics that we believed to predict both selection into treatment and the outcome, including gender, race/ethnicity, high school academic achievement, socioeconomic status).[ii]

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[1] Note that until the report describing results is officially released in March 2019, the location, program name, and identifying details for this study have been anonymized.

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. Radius matching is implemented to match each treatment student with all potential comparison students whose propensity scores whose propensity scores are within the pre-specified caliper of his/her score within his/her block.

Data Collection and Analysis: To measure the impacts of CCC, we estimate a linear regression model that includes indicators for matching blocks and matching characteristics. The model is estimated separately for each outcome with the corresponding matched treatment and comparison groups. Matching data collected from the city and the state educational systems includes student demographics, student academic performance, and high school characteristics. Impact analyses rely on data from the National Student Clearinghouse, which provide evidence of college enrollment and completion, and partner colleges that provide short-term outcomes data, including Free Application for Federal Student Aid (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: An earlier report on the classes of 2013 and 2014 found that CCC improved short-term outcomes along several important dimensions on the path to college completion, including how long students persist in college, academic achievement while in college, and timely completion of the FAFSA. For example, coached students persist into the second year of college at a rate that is 11 percent higher than that of non-coached students. This winter, longitudinal impacts will be available following the 2013 and 2014 cohorts for five and four years after initial enrollment, respectively. Furthermore, short-term results will be available for the two more recent cohorts (2015 and 2016). These new results will provide insights into the scalability of CCC and potential to improve college completion, the ultimate outcome.

This evaluation's design aims to balance interests of stakeholders and funders eager to understand the effectiveness of coaching as soon as possible with the reality that the full effects of coaching cannot be seen for a number of years as students progress through college. For example, a limited set of outcomes data were collected annually to a means to examine interim indicators likely to affect graduation outcomes.

Implementation data, too, offered real-time insights to practitioners about common practices across organizations and helped to codify the coaching model, which was of particular interest to stakeholders as the program scaled up in the 2015-16 year. A key limitation, however, is that these early implementation findings were only descriptive and could not offer evidence about coaching practices associated with improved outcomes.

This evaluation builds on prior research about transition coaching, both in the focal city and elsewhere, and offers an opportunity to learn more about the effectiveness of transition coaching. As such, the evaluation can contribute meaningfully to the knowledge base about successful strategies to improve the college completion rates.

Exhibit 1. City-Wide Coalition for Coaching Model
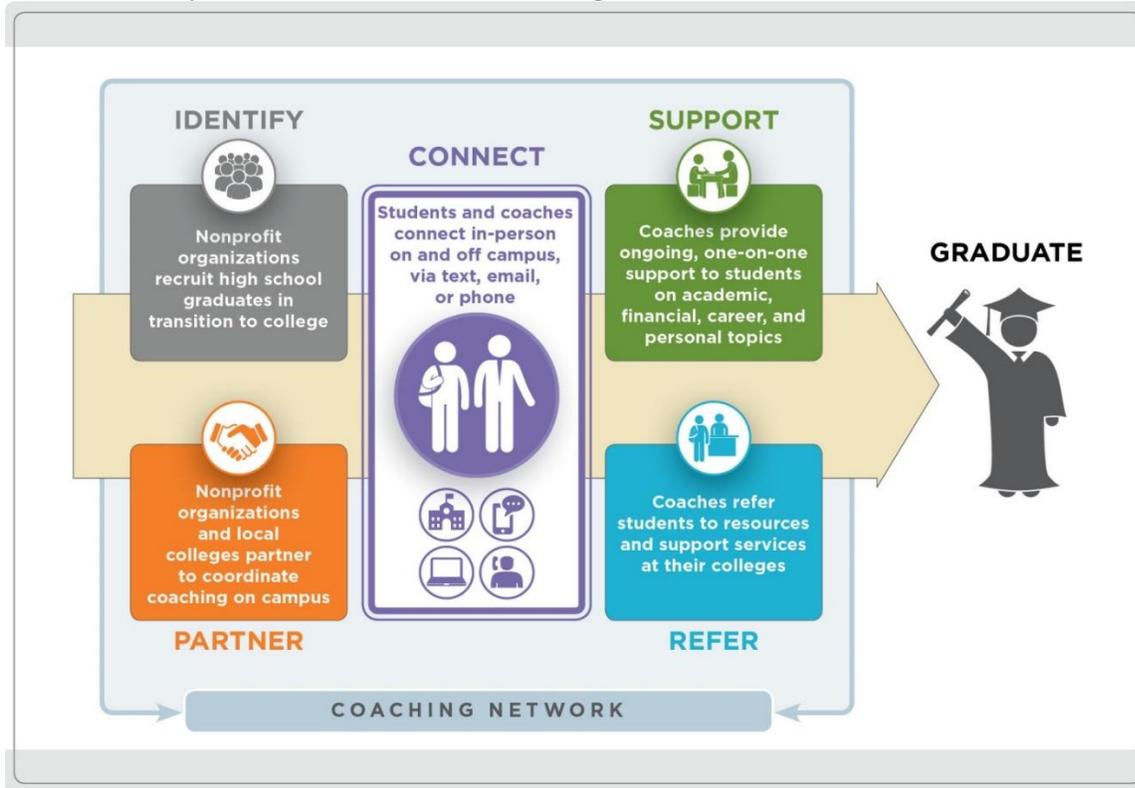
[i] See, for example, Bettinger, E. P. and Baker, R. B. (2014). The Effects of Student Coaching: An Evaluation of a Randomized Experiment in Student Advising. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 36(1): 3-19; Carrell, S. E. and Sacerdote, B. (2013). Late Intervention Matter Too: The Case of College Coaching New Hampshire. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 19031. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research; Castleman, B. L., Arnold, K. C., and Wartman, K. L. (2012). Stemming the tide of summer melt: An experimental study of the effects of post-high school summer intervention on low-income students' college enrollment. Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 5: 1–18; Castleman, B. L., and Page, L. C., and Schooley, K. (2014). The Forgotten Summer: Does the Offer of College Counseling After High School Mitigate Summer Melt Among College-Intending, Low-Income High School Graduates? Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, 33(2): 320-344; Stephan, J. L. and Rosenbaum, J, E. (2013). Can High Schools Reduce College Enrollment Gaps with a New Counseling Model? Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 35(2): 200-219.

[ii] See: Bifulco, R. 2012. "Can Nonexperimental Estimates Replicate Estimates Based on Random Assignment in Evaluations of School Choice? A Within-Study Comparison." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 31(3): 729-75; Clair, T., Cook, T. and K. Hallberg. 2014."Examining the internal validity and statistical precision of the comparative interrupted time series design by comparison with a randomized experiment." American Journal of Evaluation, 35 (3): 311-327; Steiner, P. M., T.D. Cook, W.R. Shadish, & M.H. Clark. 2010. "The Importance of Covariate Selection in Controlling for Selection Bias in Observational Studies." Psychological Methods, 15(3), 250-267.