

Excerpted from **Becoming Self-Determined: Creating Thoughtful Learners
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Sharon Field and David Parker, Editors
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**Academic Coaching:
Using a Coach Approach to Build Student Self-Determination**
By Jodi Sleeper-Triplett and Christina Fabrey

The Fundamentals of Academic Coaching (pages 89-93)

The fundamentals of academic coaching start with a shift in the relationship between the professional and the student. In an academic environment, a student is the client meeting regularly with a coach who is fully present, holding the agenda of the student. The student has the opportunity to choose the direction in which the coaching proceeds while the coach uses powerful questions and active listening to promote the student's independent thinking and growth. The coaching relationship is non-judgmental and non-directive, providing a safe space for the student to experiment with new ideas for meeting life's challenges, knowing that there is no "wrong answer" -- only an opportunity to look at the situation from a new perspective in order to achieve a different, more positive, outcome. Both the coach and student must be active participants in the coaching process in order for it to be successful.

The relationship between coach and student is defined by trust, openness, and positivity, making room for student self-expression, independent thinking, and exploration of options and opportunities. All information discussed during the coaching relationship is confidential, unless there is imminent danger to the student or others, allowing the student to feel comfortable sharing information and taking calculated risks to accomplish goals. The coaching agreement

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clearly outlines the parameters of coaching and puts the student in charge of his or her own future.

The ICF has developed a list of 11 core coaching competencies that are an integral part of all ICF-accredited coach training programs worldwide. Three of these core competencies are, in our experience, the centerpiece of the coaching conversation, which provides students with a platform for discussion and self-discovery and can be applied by higher education professionals in a variety of settings.

Active Listening

Active listening is defined as listening beyond the spoken word. What is the student's tone of voice, demeanor, or level of confidence? What might be the subtext or the hidden agenda? Example: "I notice that you say that you're ready for the exam, but your body language is suggesting something else."

Powerful Questioning

This method involves posing open-ended, non-judgmental questions that will help the student identify and articulate next steps and goals. Example: "What is your level of confidence around doing well on the exam?"

Direct Communication

Direct Communication is clear and effective and communication that conveys feedback to students, often complemented by reframing and offering alternate perspectives to help them identify options. Example: "As I watch you

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squirm in your chair, I wonder how you might look at this exam prep in a less stressful way.”

Through the skills of active listening, powerful questioning, and direct communication, the coach guides the student, who is *always* working through an evolving set of choices. Being in charge of their own future direction is a novel experience for many college students. As the coach asks questions that evoke personal exploration, the student is able to assume the role of the expert working in partnership with the coach. This dynamic is quite different from both the student’s high school experience and traditional college support services. While these skills may seem simple at first, and higher education professionals can include coaching skills in their current role, in-depth coach training provides a level of expertise necessary to guide students into the realm of discovery by deepening their awareness. A skillful coach can work with students to support their academic and personal goals and can additionally guide their transition to college.

Ideally, academic coaching begins as soon as the student enters college. It is not uncommon for students to find this transition stressful, and sometimes even overwhelming, due to the added responsibilities of college life, the increased degree of independence, and the need to learn new skills to manage a multifaceted environment. Academic coaching offers students that safe space to work through their transition issues and learn skills to better

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navigate the new environment. The coach and student can map out goals for both the short and long term, providing a more manageable map to a successful transition. Academic coaching provides structure and support for students as they learn strategies and build skills for success. The end goal of the coaching relationship is that students develop their metacognitive skills and begin to self-coach.

Often one area of support that coaching focuses on is building executive functioning skills, which each of us needs in order to execute tasks and move forward successfully in daily life. Executive functions include planning, time management, self-regulation, activation, focus, and completion. Executive functions take place in the pre-frontal cortex of the brain, which matures more slowly than other areas of the brain. In citing a finding from Sowell and colleagues (2001), Blakemore and Choudhury (2006) reported:

Recent MRI studies indicate that the time at which the brain reaches maturity may be much later than the end of adolescence. One such study of participants aged between 7 and 30 revealed that the loss of grey matter in the frontal cortex accelerated during adulthood between the early 20s and up to the age of 30 (pp. 296-312).

This process of brain development is important because students at the postsecondary level are usually expected to master independent living skills and academics without external support at a time when their executive functioning

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skills are still developing. Coaching has emerged as a successful intervention to support students during this time of brain maturation and skill development.

Academic coaching helps students by offering a realistic view of challenging tasks or situations. For example, when a student has difficulty with the executive function skill of time management or planning, a coach can ask specific questions that help the student determine a realistic time frame for completion of a project, or identify specific steps that might be taken to improve planning for assignments and preparing for exams. These are basic life skills that provide the student with tools to be a more successful adult.

Academic Coaching and Self-Determination

As noted, the ultimate goal of academic coaching is to help students become self-determined. As Deci and Ryan (1985) wrote, self-determination is “the capacity to choose and to have those choices be the determinants of one's actions” (p. 38). Academic coaching provides a strength-based framework through which students can create a step-by-step action plan for reaching their goals, including a review of the reality of their goals and the various options that are available if a course correction is needed. In coaching, the student is making thoughtful choices and has the power to determine the best course of action to meet the chosen goals.

This is especially helpful for students working through specific challenges to sustaining attention, which make it more difficult to focus effectively on the

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variety of tasks before them. In a two-year college coaching research study, Parker, Field, Sawilowsky, and Rolands (2012) found that:

...students reported that ADHD coaching helped them become more self-regulated, which led to positive academic experiences and outcomes. Students described ADHD coaching as a unique service that helped them develop more productive beliefs, experience more positive feelings, and engage in more self-regulated behaviors. (p. 215)

The coaches in that study utilized the JST Coaching model (Sleeper-Triplett, 2010), which allowed coaches and students to create realistic steps toward the achievement of goals and an accountability structure designed to support students as they navigated the college environment. As the coaching process unfolded, students became more self-regulated. In addition, they gained a better understanding of the importance of paying attention to *all* aspects of their lives, not just academics. In turn, the study's participants became more self-determined as their work with coaches helped them strengthen beliefs and practices that supported their autonomy.

In their 2012 study, Parker et al. conducted individual interviews with two representative students on each of the 10 campuses included in the research project. Two student quotes illustrate the manner in which coaching helped the students become more self-determined by learning how to set reasonable goals and achieve those goals through specific action steps:

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Student 1

I set a goal for a GPA but I think that's before I started taking a lot of the chemistry and biology classes. I think it was a little bit too high of a goal or unrealistic. I guess I didn't realize how difficult college was... So I think [my coach] has kind of helped me relax a little bit with that and try and set goals that are going to be more effective and realistic. Before [coaching], if I didn't reach my goal, it just really brought me down. (p. 224)

Student 2

[Coaching] is very individualized and [my coach] is really forcing me to come up with it. "What will work for you? What will you do? Are you going to follow through?" And she'll give me reminders but it's not, she's not here tapping on my shoulder following me around going, "You're not doing what you're supposed to." (p. 225)

These interviews are consistent with the cyclical nature of the *Action Model for Self-Determination* (Field & Hoffman, 2015) where each attempt at self-determination builds the self-awareness and confidence that leads to greater self-determination. Coaches encourage this sense of experimentation by empowering students to feel comfortable with trying out new plans – even making mistakes – while learning to make adult decisions. In doing so, academic coaching implements practices and beliefs that align closely with

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Deci and Ryan's *Self-Determination Theory* (2000) that describes how relatedness, autonomy and competence foster intrinsic motivation.