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## **Graduate Student's Perceptions of Academic Coaches in Accelerated Online Courses**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the graduate student's perceptions of the effectiveness of academic coaches in asynchronous accelerated online instruction in a master's Educational Leadership program. A mixed method research design was used to examine student satisfaction using surveys, focus student group interviews on an accelerated online master's in educational leadership program. The sample population for this study included participants from former and current graduate students in an Educational Leadership Master of Education program. The study is a step forward in understanding the role of instructional coaches and the support provided to students and professors in accelerated online programs. Results indicated that sample of students believed that instructional coaches needed proper credentials, experience, and training to be serve students whom they worked with. In addition, both positive and negative experiences were both reported by the sample of graduate students. Over fifty-three percent of the students reported as being Extremely or Somewhat satisfied with their Academic coach. Many expressed those Academic coaches were a supportive element in the courses in they were assigned.

**Key Words:** instructional coaches, accelerated online instruction, asynchronous, synchronous

### **Introduction**

Fully online courses became possible in 1997 with Blackboard serving as the first eLearning platform in higher education. Although online education in higher education is not a new phenomenon, there is a need to measure the effectiveness of accelerated online instruction and the use of academic coaches (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). The term academic coach generally has refereed to some one that has been assigned the role of "using a coaching style relationship to enhance studentlearning" (Barkley, 2011, p.79). Some companies and private consultants offer academic coaching services to universities for profit. The use of academic coaches has been primarily as a response to an increase in class sizes and a lack of faculty engagement with students, grading demands on professors, and the quality of providing feedback to students (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). Traditionally academic coaches have been employed by universities to assist professors teaching online courses with an enrollment of more than 30 students. The professor's main role is to be the professor of record and include the responsible for all curriculum-related activities. Whereas the Academic Coaches' main duties may include grading exams, overseeing and grading discussion boards, and grading and providing feedback on written assignments (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). A study conducted by Gazza and Matthias (2016) concluded that the use of academic coaches assisted by increasing student enrollment, reducing faculty stress, increasing student success and student satisfaction (Cipher, Urban, & Mancini, 2018).

Accelerated online graduate courses are typically graduate level education courses that are 100% online 7 weeks in length and where academic coaches support faculty responsible for teaching online courses. Many university programs have adopted the accelerated online program models as a response to the need for a compressed course of study that helps adult learners achieve necessary skills and credentials at a faster step (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010).

The literature is somewhat limited on the use of academic instructional coaches particularly since online instruction was first launched at The University of Phoenix in 1989 for both the bachelor's and master's program. Since then, the growth of distance learning programs has increased across universities in the nation and have provided many important positive effects on higher education. It is important to evaluate how academic instructional coaches support professors while facilitating the learning in online courses. Most recently due to the Coronavirus Pandemic worldwide, there has been a greater increase for a need to deliver instruction online to limit the exposure of the disease for courses were designated as traditional face-to-face. The significance of this study will inform stakeholders in higher education about the role of the instructional academic coaches in a model of an accelerated online instruction program as a viable model for continued enhancement of online instruction.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the graduate student's experiences and perceptions of the effectiveness of academic coaches in asynchronous accelerated online instruction in a master's of Educational Leadership program.

### **Literature Review**

Online education has been a large component of higher education with more degrees and courses being offered by colleges and universities. According to Flanagan (2012), "As technology continues to evolve, students' demands change, and higher education attempts to adapt. For an "...institution to stay competitive and cutting-edge, change is inevitable, and they must adapt" (p.1). As a result of the demand for online degrees, enrollment for such programs have skyrocketed. Times have changed and now online instruction is becoming more popular with degree seeking adults (Flanagan (2012). With the increasing use of the internet and the growing number of students enrolling in online classes, this brings new opportunities and challenges in online learning. Universities cannot discount that accessibility of online courses and offers many perceived advantages. For example, according to Daymont, et al. (2011) online learning does not require students to sit in a classroom, saves travel time and money, and provides flexibility to log into courses and complete assignments based on personal schedules. Additionally, online classes provide student voices to be heard as opposed to face-to-face classes where individuals might be too introverted or shy to engage in class conversations.

As a result, of the changing demands for more online degrees, colleges and universities have adapted their online degree and course offerings to other formats such as Accelerated online programs, otherwise known as AOP. Particularly graduate programs have begun to move to accelerated formats, where instructional time is compressed to quicker pace (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010).

Consequently, with more and more student enrollment in accelerated online programs, the need for student support has increased. Traditionally students have received academic and social supports both formally and informally from their brick-and-mortar institutions (Taylor & Holley, 2009). These types of supports are not available in the same manner for online programs and have promoted universities to pursue development of specialized services for students (Felder-Strauss et al., 2015). One type of approach to providing support to the student is the use of academic coaches. This model provides a basis for ongoing support and assists online students by being a link between students and faculty (Robinson, 2015). The use of academic coaches has not only served to help students need for support and success, but they have also aided in increasing enrollment and reducing faculty stress (Gazza & Matthias, 2016).

**Online Learning.** With the advent of technology such as the World Wide Web, distant education has transformed into the term online learning. According to Allen and Seaman (2017), the Internet provides a one or two-way transmission, which allows video conferencing and other media to facilitate instruction.

Online learning as an instructional tool has several advantages. For example, one advantage to online instruction as its predecessor, distance education is that it allows teaching and learning over vast geographic distances, permits learners to access materials, and allows interaction with instructors virtually (Anderson, 2008). Secondly, online learning allows for a greater time flexibility. For example, students can work full time and work on their degrees from their homes during their time away from their work environments (Lee & Choi, 2011).

Online learning can occur in three primary modes of synchronous, asynchronous, and blended learning. Synchronous delivery occurs, "when the transmission of the material to students is simultaneously received" (Rudestam&Schoenholtz, 2010, p. 165). This mode allows the instructor to connect with students virtually and simultaneously through video conferencing or by sharing of computer screens.

This mode of instruction is advantageous since it allows for live interaction between students and instructors. Asynchronous education, on the other hand, occurs “when the transmission of the educational material precedes the students’ receipt of the material” (Rudestam&Schoenholtz, 2010, p. 165). This online modality is very popular since it allows students to log in and work at their own pace, during their time away from their work commitments. Blended Learning involves “combining online and face-to-face instruction” (Graham, 2006, p. 3). Thus, the Blended Learning approach brings the best aspects of the synchronous and asynchronous modes.

**Accelerated Online Programs.** As online university programs gain in popularity, so are online courses which have an accelerated format. The accelerated online university programs are often graduate programs which offer the same degree and course content, but at a quicker pace. Thus, completion of a graduate university degree or course credits is obtained in a briefer period of time (Wlodkowski, 2003). With the same course objectives, accelerated online programs are typically offered within a compressed time span that is compacted when compared to the traditional university semesters (Pastore, 2010). The typical sixteen-week semester is accomplished in usually in six to eight weeks. Students typically can finish their programs in half the time that is required from the traditional degree programs.

One of the attractions to these types of programs is the time-compressed format with the online mode of instruction. Graduate students typically are working full time and have other commitments with their families, are attracted to the accelerate coursework since this type of learning is not impeded by time or space (Kasworm, 2008; Wlodkowski, 2003). Graduate students have often expressed content at having the latitude to work quickly in reaching their professional goals, with accelerated online programs (Pastore, 2010; Seamon, 2004; Wlodkowski, 2003).

Demand for these programs has increased over the past decades because they are meeting the needs of working professionals who are seeking graduate degrees or other types of certifications (Penprase&Koczara, 2009). This type of quickly paced format allows for adult students to change careers or update their job skills that are often demanded by a changing economic demand.

Studies which have examined the accelerated online programs effectiveness have produced varied findings indicate that there is still more to be understood concerning this effectiveness (Bekele & Menchaca, 2008). Some researchers have indicated that the effectiveness and quality of accelerated online courses may also vary due to the students’ learning traits and habits. For example, learning might vary due to the way students spend time on the assignments, their motivation to learn, their understanding of new course material and personal discernment of the importance of the new knowledge (Biggs & Collis, 1982).

**History of Academic Coaching.** The concept of coaching began in the sports industry to help with the improvement of athletic performance by use of an ongoing relationship which guided the athlete in realization of their vision and goals (Barkley, 2011). Kappenberg (2008) noted that initially coaching was associated negatively because of its use because of the athlete’s poor performance. As time passed the perceptions coaching changed to more positive ones which began to include academic coaching (Smith, 2009). Coaching also became popular in other industries such as the business world and has been used quite extensively for executive coaching and mentoring (Bettinger& Baker, 2011). Academic coaching entered higher education in the year 2000 when a firm, InsideTrack, offered their services to universities to increase student retention (Bettinger& Baker, 2011). Since then, academic coaches have been utilized by hundreds of institutions of higher education.

## **Methodology**

This mixed methods study was conducted with an online survey and online focus group interviews to determine the experiences and perceptions of graduate students at a university that utilized instructional academic coaches and the effectiveness of instructional coaches. A mixed methods research design is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study or a series of studies to understand a research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). “Mixed methods design is sometimes useful when the results of qualitative data collection and analysis do not adequately explain the outcomes and additional data is needed to help interpret the findings (McMillan, 2012, p. 317). According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2006), “...because of its logical and intuitive appeal, providing a bridge between the qualitative and quantitative paradigms, an increasing number of researchers are utilizing mixed methods research to undertake their studies” (p. 482).

In addition, researchers may elect to utilize a mixed methods approach when they need to “...identify variable, key concepts, and themes through qualitative data collection in advance of using quantitative techniques to further investigate a problem” (McMillan, 2012, p. 317).

### **Research Design**

This mixed methods study used the Exploratory Research design. According to McMillan (2012), in this type of design, qualitative data is gathered primarily and then the quantitative data. In this study graduate students were first asked to participate in online focus group interviews. According to Creswell (2012), The purpose of an exploratory sequential mixed methods design involves the procedure of first gathering qualitative data to explore a phenomenon, and then collecting quantitative data to explain relationships found in the qualitative data. A popular application of this design is to explore a phenomenon, identify themes, design an instrument, and subsequently test it. (p. 543).

In this research design the researcher stresses the qualitative data more than the quantitative data. This emphasis may occur through presenting the overarching question as an open-ended question or discussing the qualitative results in more detail than the quantitative results.

In Exploratory research, questions are designed to help understand more about a particular topic of interest. They can help connect ideas to understand the groundwork of analysis without adding any preconceived notions or assumptions. Exploratory questions typically are also used when asking how a product or service is used or perceptions around a specific topic (McMillan, 2012). This study's research questions proposed to investigate the graduate student's perceptions of the effectiveness of academic coaches in an asynchronous accelerated online Master's in Educational Leadership program are as follows:

Research Question 1: What credentials and experiences should an academic coach have to be qualified to help you as a student?

Research Question 2: What experiences did the online graduate students report in having an academic coach assist them?

This study also used the principles of qualitative research. Qualitative research is a methodology that is used in aiding researchers to further understand or to explain the meaning of a social phenomenon “...with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (Merriam, 2009, p.5). Reality is constructed by the participants themselves and it is the aim of qualitative research to create understandings of the experiences of the participants. What is of utmost importance is to document and construct meanings from the participant's views and not of the researchers (Merriam, 2009). Since it is the goal of the researcher to understand a participant's views, selection of the participants is typically nonrandom and purposeful and in the case of this study.

### **Population Sample**

This study made use of purposeful sampling, which is a sample method that researchers deliberately select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). This study had a total of sixty-three graduate students respond to the online questionnaire. Of sixty-three students, 81% (51) were currently enrolled students while the other 14% (12) were students who graduated from the of an online accelerated master's in educational leadership program. Most students who participated in the online questionnaire, eighty seven percent (54) were female, while the remaining 13 percent were male students.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

#### **Online Questionnaire and Interview**

According to Merriam (2009), “...the case study does not claim any methods of data collection or data analysis. All methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study” (p.28).

As parts of the instrumentation for this case study, graduate students enrolled in the course, were administered a 20-item questionnaire based upon a five-point Likert scale, which had the following response choices: Extremely satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Somewhat dissatisfied and Extremely dissatisfied. The questionnaire in this study employed questions which were purposely similar in nature to elicit similar responses and establish reliability. A total of 200 students had been solicited to take the online questionnaire and out of those 200 students, 63 had responded completely. Therefore, the response rate for the online questionnaire was approximately 30 percent.

The other data source for this study consisted of a focus group interview session, which according to Yin (2003) assists the researcher in directly focusing upon the case study topic. The focus group interviews in this study consisted of thirteen questions which were designed to elicit open ended responses. Interview questions are guided conversations rather than ridged questions that allow the participants to openly remark from their experiences and express their thoughts about events (Yin, 2003). This allows for the process to become free flowing rather than inflexible (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Creswell (2003) suggested that in qualitative studies the researcher can conduct face-to-face interviews with participants, interview participants by telephone, or engage in focus group interviews with six to eight participants in each group. These interviews involve unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few and intended to elicit views and opinions from participants. Johnson (2002) stressed that a researcher who uses in-depth interviewing commonly seeks “deep” information and knowledge. The information and knowledge are usually deeper information and knowledge than what is typically gleaned from surveys, informal interviews, or focus groups. The information generally addresses very personal matters, such as lived experiences, values and decisions, occupational ideology, or perspectives. Due to condition caused by the current Corona Virus Pandemic, the researchers of the study interviewed the informants via Zoom video conferencing utilizing in-depth open-ended questions. Using this data collecting strategy the researcher was able to solicit direct quotations from the participants about their experiences, opinions, feelings, perceptions, and knowledge relative to their association with a particular charter school organization. Direct quotations are a basic source of raw data in qualitative inquiry, revealing respondents’ depth of emotion, the ways they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions (Patton, 1990). Utilizing this strategy, the goal of the researcher was to provide a framework within which to gather high quality information from people and data that would reveal experiences with program activities and perspectives that represented accurately and thoroughly the respondent’s point of view about the leadership traits and characteristics of the charter school organization under study. According to Creswell, (2012), “focus groups are advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information and when interviewees are like and cooperative with each other (p.218). The main purpose of the interview is to acquire specific information. The researcher is striving to find out what the participants feel or think about a specific phenomenon. In other words, researchers interview participants to obtain information that cannot be directly observed, such as feelings and perceptions (Patton, 1990).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The first source of data from the online questionnaire. The twenty item questionnaire was designed to solicit demographic data along with levels of satisfaction with the online course, the professor of record and the academic coach. The questionnaire was launched on Qualtrics and was made available to the 200 solicited students for a period of two weeks. Once the deadline for the online questionnaire was reached, the research downloaded the raw data and stored it in a secure location on their office computer.

The researcher used the Zoom video conference, open-ended, in-depth interview as the primary source of data collection. Five individual, open-ended interviews were conducted. Patton (1990) contended that the purpose of qualitative interviewing is to understand how participants view the program, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences. Therefore, to avoid work related distractions and time constraints, all the focus group interviews were conducted after work hours and off campus (Miles & Huberman, 1994)

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of one’s data (Merriam, 1988). It involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning of data (Creswell, 2003).

The first set of data that was collected for analysis was the online questionnaire data, which consisted of the 20 questions that based upon a five-point Likert scale, which had the following response choices: Extremely satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Somewhat dissatisfied and Extremely dissatisfied. After the online questionnaire data was collected and downloaded, it was saved a Microsoft Excel formatted file and imported into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Afterwards, the began descriptive analysis with SPSS. Reports were run which gathered frequencies and were saved in table format for analysis.

The second type of data used in this study was the qualitative data derived from the focus group interviews. Merriam (1988) suggested that the final product of a qualitative study is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the entire process. The raw audio data was first downloaded and saved into a secure location in the researcher's office. Afterwards, it was transcribed into a Microsoft Word file. The process of preliminary exploratory analysis began by reading, memoing ideas, thinking about the organization of the data as suggested by Creswell (2012). Reading of the transcript data occurred several times and resulted in memos which had short phrases, ideas, concepts, or hunches. These memos resulted in the production of codes, which Creswell (2012) states are segments and labels of text that aide in the formation of descriptions and broad themes in the data. After coding and analyzing the transcriptions of the five audio-recorded individual interviews, the researcher found major themes as they related to the research questions. The researcher was able to make sense of the massive amounts of data, reduce the volume of information, identify significant patterns, and draw conclusions from the data. The main themes are as follows: The need for proper credentials and experiences, positive experiences from the student's perspective and challenges that student faced.

## Results

*Research Question 1: What credentials and experiences should an academic coach have to be qualified to help you as a student?*

In response to research question 1, the following themes emerged from the data analysis: Credentials, Experience and Training as being essential for Academic coaches to possess to work with accelerated online masters' students.

### *Credentials*

After downloading, analyzing, and coding the focus group interviews and the survey data the main theme discovered from the student's perspective was the need of the academic coach to have adequate and appropriate credentials and experiences as a prerequisite for being an academic coach.

Most of the students expressed the need for proper credentials such as a graduate degree. For example, one student stated that,

I would say first a graduate degree, has been beneficial to the experiences that I have because they do have experience and expertise. I guess that would be the greatest thing for them to also have some sort of background knowledge that should be able to help us with our needs.

Another student said that,

I think that a person to be at that level should, at minimum, have the same academic, experience or credentials that, that the students have at a bare minimum. So for example, ok, if I am taking a course in data management, then the coach for that class should have already, have had plenty of experience with data disaggregation.

### *Experience*

In terms of experiences students discussed how at a minimum an academic coach needs to be at least a teacher and a former leader. For example, one student said that "As far as experiences and credentials for an academic coach, my expectation would be that of course they would obviously have been a teacher who started from the bottom. Then they would be in some sort of administrator position".

Another student agreed that academic coaches needed some sort of administrative experiences. They stated that, "They need to have significant experiences in school leadership, to you know provide that support to students, and just like Student A said, they need to have the background as a teacher, as an administrator, as a central office administrator, so they really can provide that guidance." The need for solid experiences such as being superintendents, principals or supervisors resounded many times throughout the focus group interviews.

### *Training*

In addition to having the appropriate education and work-related experiences students expressed a subtheme of being trained a coach that gives feedback. One student was heard as saying that, "I think that they should also have some sort of experience in academic coaching another individual." Students overwhelmingly expressed the need for academic coaches to be well trained and experiences in coaching and providing feedback.

One student expressed the importance of proper training and said that “I feel that having feedback training is important for an academic coach. Furthermore, because I know that they assist with grading, that feedback piece does affect the outcome for the grades. It’s important for me and other students to receive timely feedback that is specific to and not too generalized. Therefore, I think that something that would really work would be if they had an appropriate amount of coaching training”.

Research Question 2: What experiences did the online graduate students report in having an academic coach assist them?

In analyzing both the online questionnaire and the focus group interview’s data, the researcher was able to identify both positive and negative experiences.

### *Positive Experiences*

Students spoke about several positive experiences in having an academic coach with their professor. First, most students interviewed expressed that one benefit was that the academic coach as of valuable assistance to them and the professor. Several subthemes appeared with the type of assistance that students felt were of benefit. These subthemes were: assistance in communicating with students, being an advocate for students, and providing additional support to the professor.

### *Communicating with students*

For example, students expressed appreciation in having academic coaches being available to answer questions or to clarify the assignments. One student noted that “...sometimes the professors are completely asynchronous. They don’t meet with us during Zoom, so we do have questions and, we prefer to have help such as from for the academic coach.” Another student was also satisfied for individual attention as well. They commented that, “The academic coach comes in and helps us individually. They help students understand the content being covered.” Along those lines students expressed appreciation for having academic coaches because they felt that it was easier to reach out to them and ask specific questions. A student commented that, “I feel that the academic coach is someone who is going to help me excel and, become better at what I need to master the course.” Another student stated that, “

We ask the questions that we don’t really want to ask for the professor because we feel reluctant to since our questions might seem ridiculous, and we don’t want to feel that way. So, its nice to have another person to communicate besides the professor and go over concerns or questions that we might otherwise be reluctant to discuss with the professor.

Furthermore, some students felt that there was some synchronization between the professor and the academic coach. For example, one student pointed out that they were satisfied by noting that, “I’ve had good experiences with the academic coach because they are on the same page with the professor, so they understand the professor’s expectations.”

### *Student Advocate*

Students also expressed those academic coaches were of benefit by being student advocates. Some felt that the role of the academic coach was beneficial since they were there for a form of support. Students felt that the academic coach was one stated that,

They were always on their team and rooting for us. I feel that having someone send reminders, checking our APA formatting and telling us not to forget to submit the week’s assignment is very important and helpful. Its almost like having a sports coach who boosts the team morale and gets us excited about what we are doing.

Students expressed comfortable in reaching out to the academic coach. One said that “I think it would be a great benefit because if there is something that I am not getting, I feel comfortable that they are there to help.”

Another student commented that the academic coach took time to reach out to her and provide not only feedback on assignments but personal guidance. The student express satisfaction and said that it was “absolutely phenomenal. The academic coach would take the time to call and, just, guide, coach or mentor. I just think that it was wonderful.”



*Additional Support*

A third subtheme that appeared was with students reflecting that the academic coach provided additional support to the professor. For example, one student expressed how the academic coach was another set of eyes for the professor and “gives us a little more of their expertise and best practices of the topic that we’re covering and how we can, better prepare for the assignment.” Another student said that the academic coach was “another voice that we can reach out to for help and helps to provide feedback and share with the workload.” Students realized that the grading workload was large. One student commented that, “...so imagine me times forty or times thirty. I feel that it’s good that they can actually provide the feedback when the feedback is actually reliable and useable in a way. This feedback has value to what they’re bringing in.”

*Negative Experiences*

Some of the challenges or negative experiences that students perceived manifested the following themes: Availability of the academic coach, communication, lack of collaboration between the professor and the academic coach, and a need for feedback and clarification of assignments.

*Availability*

During the focus group interviews several students expressed concerns over the availability the academic coaches. For example, one student commented that, “...many of them (academic coaches) don’t put their time availability out for the students. And sometimes we send emails, or we might, I know for example myself I like to talk to somebody. So, I feel that they were available to talk to, or if we knew their schedule, we could schedule a zoom with them.”

*Communication*

Students felt that communication was another challenge for them when dealing with the academic coaches. For example, one student stated that, “I feel that the academic coach should be a point of contact for us and a mentor. I really didn’t see that happening and there was a lack of communication with us.” Another student expressed the expectation that, “...the communication part with the mentor coach is lacking. I wish we had more opportunity if we need to contact them viz zoom meeting for example. I feel that its important to be able to communicate with the academic coach, because the professors sometimes don’t have that opportunity.”

*Lack of collaboration between the professor and the academic coach*

Another challenge that was uncovered in the data analysis concerned the perceived lack of collaboration between the professor and the academic coach. Most students expressed concern over the lack of professors and academic coaches “being on the same page”. One student expressed that, “I feel that there’s not any type of agreement and it’s almost as though they are not in sync with each other. It’s almost as though the professor and the instructional coach are not speaking on the assignments. Because of this, I sense that this causes confusion and it’s like a domino effect in the form of emails, or group chats.” Another student further elaborated by specifically saying that part of the problem was that “They (academic coaches) don’t attend the zoom meetings. Therefore, when changes get made, assignments are clarified, or modified, the instructional coach is not aware of them. For example, when posting to discussion boards it takes time for the professor and academic coach to agree upon our replies.” A lack of collaboration seemed to be a common comment from the students. For example, students also expressed concern over the professor and the academic coach being in better communication with one another by having the academic coach attend the class meetings at the same time as the students. One student said, “As far as the academic coaches not attending any of the zooms, I don’t know if that would maybe have been a little bit more beneficial for us as students because as the professor and the academic coach need to be on the same page”. Students expressed a desire for more cohesive agreements between professors and academic coaches. For example, one student stated that, “...I feel like the professor would have, and the academic coach, could have, you know, agreed upon a whether it’s modifying an assignment, an expectation of the assignment, and also, I have experience where an instructional coach or an academic coach has given me really great feedback on my discussion boards.”

Students also noted they were due to grading discrepancies and inadequate involvement with students and miscommunication and between the professor and the academic coach. For example, one student said that “And the other experience I’ve had was a little more on the negative side because the academic coach didn’t know what the professor was expecting on behalf of the assignments and explanations of the assignments, so the grading”. Students expressed concern over the discrepancies concerning grading.

### *Feedback and clarification*

Students also expressed concern with the quality of feedback from the academic coach. The students had expected "...more specific feedback instead of general" feedback. They attributed this to a lack of agreement between the professor and the academic coach. Similarly, another student also felt dissatisfied with the type of feedback received from the academic coach. Some students pointed out that there was a "communication barrier". That student expressed that "she (the academic coach) left comments on papers, but then there wasn't any communication otherwise. There wasn't no follow-up. It was like thanks for the comment kind of feeling. Not that it wasn't negative, but it wasn't very positive. Or it didn't give me much to change." A student plainly stated that, "I didn't receive any feedback. As far as the grading, I don't if my was it was good or bad." Another student stated that, "there was always kind of like a miscommunication piece with the instructor and that coach. For example, in the grading for some students they would deduct some points on something since it graded by someone else, and then not deduct the points for the same issue if it was graded from another coach". Students claimed that grading discrepancies were obvious concerning grading styles. For example, one student exclaimed that, "...sometimes the instructor is a little bit more lenient. I don't understand why this such a great disparity between the instructor and academic coaches grading. I feel that there is a strong disconnect with the academic coach grading harder grader." Another student remarked "I also noticed that between her and the professor they were not linked on the grading. One was about that the that the academic coach was stricter than the actual professor." At times grading discrepancies appeared over grammar and paper format of American Psychological Association (APA) citations. A student noted that "her (academic coach) critiquing or grading was on my grammar it wasn't on the content., I'm looking for that kind of feedback versus if I missed a comma or not." Adding to that one student said that,

Or sometimes the feedback was more generalized when coming from one person. I think that's the challenge that I had in one of the classes when depending on who was kind of like grading or providing the communication. Sometimes they were not communicating with us it was kind of a little bit like, well we heard this from her (academic coach), and we heard from the professor.

Furthermore, one student added that they were very concerned because

I noticed that there was zero interaction other than comments on discussion boards. I felt that there was no way to reach out to these academic coaches to seek clarification. For example, if you had a major disagreement with what they put on an assignment, you had to reach out to the professor. To me that that creates delays, because the professor had to go back and review what their instructional coach is doing so that becomes difficult.

### **Discussion/Conclusions**

Research Question 1: What credentials and experiences should an academic coach have to be qualified to help you as a student?

From the data, it was revealed that most of the students in this study, reported being satisfied when the academic coach had proper educational leadership credentials such as principal certification, K-12 school administrative experiences and academic coach trainings. Students were comfortable knowing that their academic coaches have credibility with their credentials and experiences. For example, one student stated that, "So that also helped a lot because they've been a superintendent, principal, supervisor so all that has greatly helped us and has molded us throughout the modules". Students reflected that some of the reasons for having these credentials was so that academic coaches could provide the type of guidance students felt they needed. Students wanted to feel secure and felt that by having the proper experiences "as a teacher, as an administrator, as a central office administrator academic coaches could really provide that direction" needed for the assignments. For students to be successful in online courses, there needs to be a professional relationship or connection between the instructors and the students. Students need to trust and have confidence in the instructors that are leading the course. Barkley (2012) reinforced this when he stated that, "The concept of "academic coaching" refers to a relationship between teachers and students that is proactive, responsive to student learning outcomes, and committed to student success. The teacher's role becomes less like a formal instructor and more like a coach" (p. 76).

In terms of training students felt that academic coaches needed some form of standardized training to be fair and consistent with all students throughout the program. For example, one student echoed this when they stated that,

having feedback training is one of the components in my part that I've kind of missed in several of the one that they grade (sic). Because I know that they help grade. Sometimes that feedback piece does affect the outcome for the grades of others. You know if I don't get it in time or, um, more accurate to what I need to focus on if it's too general. I think that something that would really work if they had that training.

Most of the students in the focus groups echoed this sentiment and stated that this was lacking in the course work that they wished had been in place.

Research Question 2: What experiences did the online graduate students report in having an academic coach assist them?

Students reported as having both positive and negative experiences in their accelerated online courses. In terms of positive experiences students expressed satisfaction when academic coaches were effective communicators, student advocates and supportive.

According to Muljana and Luo (2019), "maintaining continuous engagement with students, at all-times or ongoing support is brought up as one of the top recommendations" (p.34). With that said the sample of students in this study reflected that in some cases their academic coaches acted more as a mentor rather than a "grader" and enforcer of American Psychological Association (APA) styling and grammar in their assignments. Students sometimes felt more comfortable in communicating with their academic coaches prior to reaching out to the professor of record. This may be the case as Barker (2012) explains that "most important characteristic of academic coaching is to seek and develop a relationship with students. A coach, or mentor, type of relationship might be more typical at small schools or colleges that take pride in student success" (p.79). One student phrased it as academic coaches where someone to "to reach out to when you need that support. Especially when those papers are due or something. That we can have someone on hand and uh (sic), they're very knowledgeable" Another student explained that they viewed the academic coach like they were always on your team. They were rooting for you. They were like the person that sent you reminders. Hey, don't forget to check your APA. Hey, don't forget to submit this tonight. Or, hey guess what you have two more days. Like, they were just always someone that sent those extra like reminders, and always someone to be like you just like hey you guys are killing it keep it up you got three more weeks. Like someone like your coach that would like amp you up and get you excited about what you were doing. Um, so when someone is there as an academic coach and then they're just telling you that you missed a comma you're like, okay get out of the way.

This aligns to what Barkley (2012) explains, when he stated that "changing from a traditional instructor with rigid expectations to an "academic coach" provided for large enhancements in the learning environment, and higher levels of learning" (p. 76). Academic coaching provides a means of addressing matters. Gazza and Matthias (2016) found that the use of academic coaches help boost enrollment, reduce faculty stress and encourage student success. In addition, academic coaches have a positive impact on student experiences resulting in greater student satisfaction (Cipher, Urban, & Mancini, 2018).

Students in this study reflected that this level of collegiality with their academic coach as refreshing and took away some of the stress associated with a traditional teacher and teacher role. As Alman, et al. (2012) expressed that academic coaching if properly conducted can serve as a bridge between deep learning and student engagement when students feel a presence from an instructor or academic coach. Furthermore, when these conditions exist in an online environment, knowledge acquisition is strengthened from meaningful dialogues (Alman et al., 2012). As one student explained,

It's what they are doing right now like instructing us, and leading us, and being there when we need them and guiding us through those modules. And, I know that there's a professor that does not meet at all. No zoom, no nothing. But, she's there all the time if you have a question. She, I'll email her and not even like 15 minutes later she is answering me back

It was the clear and consistent communication between the academic coaches and students that made the student feel confident in completing most of their assignments. Students in this study expressed an appreciation in guidance and communication with their academic coaches.

Conversely students reported dissatisfaction when there was a perception of a lack of collaboration between the professor of record and the academic coach. Additionally, students reported dissatisfaction with feedback received from the academic coach.

### **Collaboration**

The data revealed that many of the students were unhappy with the professor of record and the academic coach not agreeing with several aspects of the course such as the assignment's expectations and the rigor of grading, for example students were noted as stating that they believed that the professor of record should set the tone and deliver clear expectations of each of the assignments. Students cited that there was a barrier between the professor of record and the academic coach in terms of collaborating the assignment expectation and level of rigor. One student was quoted as saying,

that it gets challenging because you want to, you kind of tailor your papers towards the professor's expectations and sometimes the academic coach is not on the same page at all. So, again, that gets difficult but then also I've had some great guidance. So, it just, you know, they vary. They're very different personalities that you kind of must mold to. And it's difficult when you don't know who's going to be grading either your discussion boards or your assignments.

Furthermore, a lack of collaboration, according to the students did not occur since many of the academic coaches were not present during the professor of record's weekly Zoom meetings. One student stated that, "... if the academic coach wasn't on that Zoom to understand how the professor wants it kind of spun, then they're going to grade it, you know, based on what the syllabus says". Students felt that this disconnect led to problems in students not being as successful as they could have been. One student felt it was disheartening for the academic coaches not attending the weekly Zoom meetings and that, "if the professor maybe changed an assignment or altered things because of the hurricane or the polar freeze or what not, they didn't clue in the academic coach. That, you know, became a problem". Attending the Zoom meeting concurrently was of paramount importance for the students. Not agreeing caused discord among the students since it was expressed that misunderstanding and disparities in grading could occur. Students cited that, "It could be a very different result the academic coaches are not really beneficial to us because it seems like you don't know their expectations." Students were recorded as saying that there was confusion "because you're trying to mold yourself to what the professor wants". Students expected a uniform consistency in the course and perceived the professor of record and academic coach as "not being on the same page" and stated that, "because if they're not on the same page, and you're turning in something that is not what's supposed to be turned in. It's going to hurt your grade. I think they must be on the same page and again, just that extra support for us". It was this lack of collaboration or synchronization that troubled many of the students that as one student phrased it that it "causes confusion and it's like a domino effect. Confusion, emails, group chats, and any of that".

Student concerns also centered around the lack of agreement in grading of assignments. For example, student felt that there was quite a bit of miscommunication between the professor of record and the academic coach in their grading policies. Inconsistencies resulted and as one student explained that "kind of like the grading for some students they (academic coaches) would deduct some points on something because it was graded by someone, and then not deduct the points for the same issue with, you know, because it was graded from another person (professor)". Students were very concerned about the lack of agreement and felt that the professor of record and the academic coach "were not communicating and when they were not communicating with us it was kind of a little bit like, well we heard this from her, and we heard this from you, and you know kind of like that piece. Some student expressed that sometimes some academic coaches were stricter graders than their professors of record. As a result of these actions, student felt that it was unfair to be subjected to the disconnect in grading rigor and assignment of points.

### **Feedback**

Another area of concern that was revealed by the data, was feedback from the academic coach. Students in this study expressed dissatisfaction because they felt that as in the communication between the professor of record and the academic coach there was discord. Students noted that at times that academic coach was a stricter grader especially when it came to grammar and APA citations. For example, one student stated that, "I feel that he (academic coach) is stricter than the actual professor.

And, uh, that to me was like uh they need to get on the same page because I couldn't, I couldn't satisfy one or the other because they had a different, different ways of grading". Another student explained that they felt that the academic coach focused upon minor details and said that "...her critiquing or grading was on my grammar it wasn't on the content. So, like give me, like if we're engaging in a discussion and were trying to push each other to think in different ways and perspectives, I'm looking for that kind of feedback versus if I missed a comma or not. So, it wasn't, most of, it wasn't all like that, but 75 percent of it was grammatic". Most students agreed and felt that there were gaps in a common way of thinking about the course and assignments. One student was heard as saying that "I feel like the professor would have, and the academic coach, could have, you know, agreed upon how they grade. Zimmerman's (1990) research closely ties into the way the students in this study expressed themselves about the type of feedback. For example, one concept that Zimmerman (1990) outlined of self-regulated learning, giving fast and accurate feedback about how they are doing was what students expected. According to Glenn (2010), universities that have used self-regulated learning have found that these methods have a much greater impact if they are embedded within the course context, and that tutoring, and counseling are not enough. Instead, what is needed a more aggressive plan is needed to build specific skills.

In terms of satisfaction with feedback from the academic coach, student overall was disappointed by the quality, and quantity of the feedback. Students explained that a lack of coordination of expectations and communication between the professor of record and the academic coach was partially to blame for this.

### **Limitations**

The limitations for this study result from the small sample of 63 respondents. In addition, the study's findings could be affected by the number of experiences the participants had with having an Academic coach through their coursework in their accelerated online program. In some cases, the assignment of academic coaches was limited to only one or a few classes that the students were enrolled and therefore student's interactions would have limited to only a few times. Had the students have had consistent assistant with academic coaches throughout all of their course, the findings might have differed.

### **Recommendations**

If a university is considering instructional coaches for online instruction, one recommendation would be a consistent induction and professional development for academic coaches and professors of record. Professional development would be important to help cultivate relationships among the professional team of instructional coaches and professors and secondly for instructional coaches to cultivate relationships with students. One method to accomplish both could be a video that professors and students could view about the role of the instructional coach. Overall, the importance of professional development would benefit the relationship between the instructional coach and the students as well (Bearman & Lewis, 2017; Jones & Andrews, 2019).

A second and just as important recommendation for academic coaches would be that academic coaches should understand the culture of the institution they will be serving. For example, the institution where the study was conducted has a large population of Hispanic students and this study suggests some implications for practice and policy to advocate for students that are academically at risk and the importance of ensuring that they are retained. The partnership of Instructional Connection, Inc., who provides the instructional coaches for this university could consider establishing more connections with other departments to help support the students such as the Writing Center and familiarity with Student Support Services available to students.

Lastly, academic coaches and professors of records should meet regularly and the week prior to any module commencing to discuss the assignments and rubrics. Advanced preparation would greatly assist all the stakeholders since many of the concerns from this study could be addressed. For example, the method and frequency of feedback could be discussed and agreed upon. Another topic could be the details of the grading rubric.

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