Article title Graduate Students' Perceptions of Academic Coaches in Online Courses at a Predominantly Hispanic Institution: A Unique Investigation

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Abstract: An investigation of the effectiveness of an asynchronous accelerated online instructional program was conducted by surveying the graduate student perceptions of a master's educational leadership degree leading to principal certification. The research design used a mixed-method approach, using surveys and focus student group interviews to determine graduate student satisfaction with the online methodology. The study included a sample population of former and current graduate students in the program. This study focused on the role of academic coaches in supporting graduate students in an accelerated online program. Results from the study underscored the importance of academic coaches' qualifications, emphasizing the need for them to have proper principal certification credentials, experience as a principal, and preservice for the population of graduate students whom they would support at a particular university. Despite the mixed reviews, the study revealed a significant positive impact of academic coaches on student satisfaction, with a high percentage of graduate students reporting being extremely or somewhat satisfied with the academic coaches' role in supporting the learning environment.

Keywords: term, academic coaches, accelerated online programs, graduate students

1. Introduction

Online instruction in higher education is not new, as universities strive to become more marketable and increase student enrollment. Online courses became popular in 1997 when Blackboard became the first eLearning platform (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). Add to this the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic placed on higher education to transition to online instruction, where substantial numbers of students were enrolled in courses with the assistance of a professor. With the popularity of online courses came the innovation of providing academic coaches to assist professors, playing a crucial role in supporting students. This resulted from increased class sizes and demands on grading, lack of instructor engagement with students, and, most importantly, the quality and promptness of feedback to students (Hawthorne & Sealey, 2019). Consequently, some companies and private consultants began to offer coaching services to universities for profit. In a study by Gazza and Matthias (2016), concluded that using instructional academic coaches increased student enrollment, reduced faculty stress, and increased student success and satisfaction.

According to Barkley (2011), the term academic coach refers to an individual assigned the role of "using a coaching style relationship to enhance student learning" (p. 79). Academic coaches at the university where the study was conducted have been employed when the enrollment has 30 or more students in a course. In this case, the professor of record is responsible for all curriculum-related activities and some grading of assignments. The academic coach's primary role is to grade exams and discussion boards and share responsibility with the professor to provide feedback on written assignments to graduate students. This model of role responsibility is supported by Hawthorne and Sealey's work (2019). This model, which includes role responsibility, is supported by the research of Hawthorne and Sealey (2019). Implementation of this model is typically for online graduate courses that are 100% online in accelerated seven-week modules. Many universities have adopted this model in response to the need for a compressed course of study. Adult learners who are primarily teachers accomplish the necessary skills, knowledge, mindsets, and credentials faster through a compressed program (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010).

The University of Phoenix, in 1989, was noted for first implementing online academic instructional coaches. Consequently, the literature on academic coaches' use seems limited for both the bachelor's and master's programs. However, the increased use of online instruction across higher education institutions has brought about significant positive effects related to the use of academic coaches. The coronavirus helped move online instruction to the greatest need to avoid the limit of exposure to the disease from traditional face-to-face to online at home. Since the reliance on online instruction became a necessity for marketability and increased enrollment, the need for academic instructional coaches was essential. Evaluating how they supported graduate students and the academic coach's role in online learning was essential to inform the stakeholders of an institution in higher education. The study was meant to investigate the perceptions and effectiveness of academic coaches in asynchronous accelerated online instruction.

2. Review of Literature

2.1.1 History of Academic Coaching

Where does the concept of academic coaching come from? Interestingly, the concept came from the sports industry to prepare athletes for athletic performance and to realize their vision and goals (Barkley, 2011). Moreover, Kappenberg (2008) stated that coaching was also associated negatively when athletes performed poorly; however, with time, perceptions changed into positive perceptions, transforming the concept of coaching into academics (Smith, 2009). The concept of coaching has also transitioned into other industries in the business world, such as executive coaching and mentoring (Bettinger & Baker, 2011). In 2000, InsideTrack, a firm, marketed the concept of academic coaching to help universities increase student retention (Bettinger & Baker, 2011). Consequently, academic coaching has been instituted across the country in higher education.

The demand for online degrees drives the discourse of change in higher education, where online instruction is becoming more popular with degree-seeking adults (Flanagan, 2012). We are experiencing an increasing use of the Internet for student learning and greater student interest in the advantages of online instruction over face-to-face instruction. 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). Some of those advantages determined by Daymont et al. (2011) include online learning, which does not require sitting in a classroom to access the course. It avoids travel to campus and saves money and time by providing flexibility to log into courses and complete assignments based on personal schedules. Moreover, another advantage is that online instruction supports student voices, who might be introverted or shy to engage in class conversations but prefer chats and online discussions.

These changing demands for more online degrees have pushed colleges and universities to adapt their online degrees and course offerings to new instruction formats. One of these new formats that has gained popularity is accelerated online programs, which bring new opportunities and challenges to online learning. Universities cannot lose sight of the advantages and student accessibility of online courses. These accelerated formats of instruction, where instructional time is compressed quicker, have increased graduate programs' popularity (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010). Consequently, changes have imposed an increased enrollment in accelerated online programs. Taylor and Holley (2009) support the idea that students have received formal and informal academic and social support from their brick-and-mortar institutions. These types of support are still available in separate ways, even with online programs. Felder-Strauss et al. (2015) state that this support has promoted universities to pursue specialized services for online students. Additionally, Gazza and Matthias (2016) support using academic coaches for student success, increasing enrollment, and reducing faculty stress

2.1.2 Online Learning.

Online learning has several advantages as an instructional tool since it transformed from distance education. Allen and Seaman (2017) state that now the internet permits two-way transmission, allowing for video conferencing and other media. One specific advantage is teaching over vast geographic distances, allowing students to access learning materials and instructors virtually (Anderson, 2008). The second advantage considered is greater time flexibility for students who work full-time and can now complete degrees from their homes (Lee & Choi, 2011). Online learning is delivered by three primary modes: synchronous, asynchronous, and blended learning. Rudestam

and Schoenholtz (2010) define synchronous learning as "when the transmission of the material to students is simultaneously received" (p. 165). During synchronous learning, instructors can connect virtually and simultaneously through video conferencing or computer screen sharing. This modality allows for live interaction between students and instructors. Differently, asynchronous education occurs "when the transmission of the educational material precedes the student's receipt" (Rudestam & Schoenholtz, 2010, p. 165). Asynchronous is pervasive and more popular, allowing students to log in and work at their own pace and time availability. The last modality is blended learning, "combining online and face-to-face instruction" (Graham, 2006, p. 3). This approach blends the best aspects of the synchronous and asynchronous modalities.

3. Methodology

This study utilized a mixed methods approach to evaluate graduate students' perceptions of a university's academic coaching program and assess its effectiveness. By combining quantitative data from an online survey with qualitative insights from focus group interviews conducted over the Internet, the researchers aimed to create a comprehensive understanding of the coaching program's impact. The quantitative survey provided a broad overview of trends and patterns in student perceptions. At the same time, the qualitative focus group discussions offered detailed personal narratives and nuanced perspectives on the student's experiences with academic coaching. This dual approach allowed the researchers to capture both the breadth of student interactions and the depth of their reflections, resulting in a more strong and holistic assessment of the instructional academic coaches' role and influence. The mixed methods design was particularly effective in this context, enabling the researchers to identify critical variables and themes through qualitative data before exploring them quantitatively. This integration of methods bridged the gap between qualitative and quantitative paradigms and uncovered insights that might have been overlooked if only one methodology had been employed. Ultimately, the study highlighted the value of a mixed methods approach in providing a richer understanding of complex phenomena, such as the effectiveness of academic coaching in higher education. =

3.1.1 Research Design.

This research utilized a mixed methods approach, specifically the Exploratory Research design, which prioritizes qualitative data collection before quantitative data. As outlined by McMillan (2012), the study began with online focus group interviews involving graduate students to gather rich insights into their experiences with the academic coaching program. The Exploratory Research design allows researchers first to explore a topic qualitatively, identifying key themes and variables that inform subsequent quantitative analysis. Creswell (2012) highlights the importance of this sequential approach, as it uncovers nuances that might be missed with quantitative methods alone. By starting with qualitative interviews, the researchers gained a deep understanding of student perspectives, which could shape the development of quantitative measures. This mixed methods framework aimed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced assessment of the academic coaching program's effectiveness from the graduate students' viewpoint.

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?
Research Question 3: What level of satisfaction did the online graduate students report in working with an academic coach?

3.1.2 Population Sample.

This study employed purposeful sampling, where researchers intentionally choose participants and locations to gain insight into the central phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2012). Sixty-three graduate students participated in the online questionnaire. The sample comprised 81% (51) currently enrolled students and 19% (12) recent graduates from an accelerated online master's program in educational leadership. The gender distribution of respondents was predominantly female, with 87% (55) women and 13% (8) men

3.1.3 Data Collection.

The primary instrument for this case study was a carefully crafted questionnaire consisting of 20 items. The survey utilized a 5-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from "extremely satisfied" to "extremely dissatisfied." To enhance reliability, the questionnaire intentionally included related questions designed to elicit consistent responses across related items. Creswell (2003) suggests that qualitative studies can employ face-to-face, telephone, or focus group interviews with six to eight participants. These interviews typically involve unstructured, open-ended questions to elicit participants' views and opinions. Johnson (2002) emphasizes that in-depth interviewing seeks "deep" information and knowledge, often addressing personal matters such as lived experiences, values, decisions, and perspectives.

3.1.4 Instrumentation.

The first source of data is the online questionnaire. The 20-item questionnaire was designed to solicit demographic data and satisfaction levels 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 two weeks. Once the deadline for the online questionnaire was reached, the researchers downloaded the raw data.

The researcher used the Zoom video conference and open-ended, in-depth interviews as the primary source of data collection. Five individual, open-ended interviews were conducted. Patton (1990) contended that qualitative interviewing aims to understand how participants view the program, learn their terminology and judgments, and capture the complexities of their 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).

3.1.5 Data Analysis.

Data analysis is a crucial process that brings meaning and structure to collected information, as noted by Merriam (1988). It encompasses several stages, including data preparation, conducting various analyses, deepening understanding, data representation, and interpreting significant findings, as Creswell (2003) described. This study analyzed two primary data types: quantitative data from an online questionnaire and qualitative data from focus group interviews.

The online questionnaire consisted of 20 questions based on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from "Extremely satisfied" to "Extremely dissatisfied." The collected data underwent a systematic analysis process. Initially, it was downloaded and saved as a Microsoft Excel file. Subsequently, this file was imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for further examination. Using SPSS, the researcher conducted descriptive analysis, focusing on frequencies. The results were then saved in table format for in-depth analysis and interpretation.

The qualitative data, derived from focus group interviews, was analyzed following Merriam's (1988) suggestion that the collected data and the accompanying analysis shape the final product of a qualitative study. The process began with securely downloading and saving the raw audio data. These recordings were then meticulously transcribed into Microsoft Word files. Following Creswell's (2012) recommendations, the researcher engaged in preliminary exploratory analysis through repeated readings of the transcripts. This process involved memoing ideas and organizing the data to understand its content comprehensively.

As the researcher delved deeper into the transcripts, short phrases, ideas, and concepts emerged, captured in memos. These memos served as the foundation for developing codes, which Creswell (2012) describes as segments and text labels that aid in forming descriptions and broad themes in the data. Through this coding process, the researcher identified significant themes related to the research questions.

This comprehensive analysis allowed the researcher to make sense of the vast data, reduce information volume, identify significant patterns, and draw meaningful conclusions. The rigorous analytical approach yielded valuable

insights from quantitative and qualitative data sources, providing a holistic understanding of the research questions. By employing this thorough and systematic data analysis approach, the researcher extracted meaningful insights from diverse data sources, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the subject under investigation.

The first data collected for analysis was the online questionnaire, which consisted of 20 questions based on a 5-point Likert scale, with the following response choices: Delighted, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, and extremely dissatisfied. After the online questionnaire data was collected and downloaded, a Microsoft Excel formatted file was saved and imported into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Afterward, they began descriptive analysis with SPSS. Reports were run, which gathered frequencies and were saved in table format for analysis. This study's second data type was qualitative data from the focus group interviews. Merriam (1988) suggested that the final product of a qualitative study is shaped by the collected data and the analysis accompanying the entire process. The raw audio data was first downloaded and saved into a secure location in the researcher's office. Afterward, it was transcribed into a Microsoft Word file. The process of preliminary exploratory analysis began by reading, memoing ideas, and thinking about the organization of the data, as Creswell (2012) suggested. Reading the transcript data occurred several times and resulted in memos that had short phrases, ideas, concepts, or hunches. These memos resulted in the production of codes, which Creswell (2012) states are segments and text labels that aid in forming descriptions and broadening themes in the data. The researcher found significant themes related to the research questions after coding and analyzing the transcriptions of the five audio-recorded individual interviews. The researcher made sense of the massive amounts of data, reduced the volume of information, identified significant patterns, and drew 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 the student faced.

3.1.6 Theoretical framework.

The focus group interview design was grounded in established qualitative research principles. Rubin and Rubin (1995) advocate for guided discussions that allow conversations to flow naturally, encouraging participants to share their experiences and thoughts openly. This approach aims to capture rich, detailed insights that complement the quantitative data.

4. Results

The analysis revealed three main themes: the need for proper credentials and experiences, positive experiences from the student's perspective, and student challenges. These themes emerged as central to understanding the research questions and provided a framework for interpreting the collected data

4.1.1. Credentials and Experiences of an Academic Coach.

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

First, a graduate degree has been beneficial to my experiences because they do have experience and expertise. And I guess it 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

> A person at that level should have the same academic experience or credentials that the students have at a bare minimum. So, like let us say that I am taking a course in data management right, then the coach for that class should have already been through that.

4.1.1.2. Experience.

In terms of experiences, students discussed how an academic coach needs to be at least a teacher and leader. For

example, one student said that "So, as far as experiences and credentials for an academic coach, my expectation would be that, of course, they would obviously have been teachers. They would have started from the bottom. They would be in some administrator position."

Another student agreed that academic coaches needed administrative experience. They stated that,

They need to have considerable experience in academic leadership to support students, and just like Student A said, they need to have the background as a teacher, administrator, and central office administrator. Ao, they really can provide that guidance.

The need for solid experiences like superintendents, principals or supervisors resounded many times throughout the focus group interviews.

4.1.1.3. Training.

In addition to having the appropriate education and work-related experiences students expressed the subtheme of being trained by a coach that gives feedback. One student was heard as saying that, "I think that they should also have some sort of experience in coaching another individual." Students overwhelmingly expressed the need for academic coaches to be well trained and have experience in coaching and providing feedback. One student expressed the importance of proper training and said that "Having feedback training. I think that is one of the components in my part that I've missed in several of the ones that they grade. Because I know that they help grade. Sometimes that feedback piece does affect the outcome for the grades of others. If I do not get it in time or more accurate to what I need to focus on if it is too general. I think that something that would really work if they had that training, or they have that knowledge."

4.1.2. Experiences of Assistance Reported by Online Graduate students

In analyzing the online questionnaire and the focus group interview's data, the researcher identified positive and negative experiences.

4.1.2.1. Positive Experiences.

Students spoke about several positive experiences in having an academic coach with their professor. First, most students interviewed said that one benefit was that the academic coach was 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, and providing additional support to the professor.

4.1.2.2. Communicating with students.

For example, students expressed appreciation in having academic coaches available to answer questions or to clarify the assignments. One student noted that "…sometimes the professors are completely asynchronous. They do not meet with us during Zoom, so we do have questions and we like for the academic coach to help." Another student was also satisfied with individual attention as well. They commented that, "So then the academic coach comes in and one on one individually helps students understand the content or the concepts that are, that are being taught in that particular subject." Along those lines, students expressed appreciation for academic coaches because they felt it was easier to ask specific questions. A student commented that "The academic coach I know that its someone who is going to help me excel and become better at what it is that I, or to master the course." Another student stated that,

We ask the questions that we do not want to ask the professor because, like, this question is just not ridiculous because you do not want to feel silly asking that question. So, having a chance to provide that communication with someone more like, okay, it is not the instructor, but if I do my concerns, they will tell the professor the concerns.

Furthermore, some students felt 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."

4.1.2.3. Student Advocate.

Students also expressed those academic coaches were of benefit by being student advocates. Some felt the academic coach's role was beneficial since they were there for support. Students felt that the academic coach We're always on their team. They were rooting for you. They were like the person who sent you reminders. Hey, remember to check your APA. Hey, remember to submit this tonight. Or, hey, what, you have two more days? Like, they were always someone that sent those extra like reminders, and always someone to be like you, like, hey, you are killing it. Keep it up. You have three more weeks. Like someone like your coach who wants to amp you up and get you excited about your work. When someone is there as an academic coach, they tell you missed a comma, okay, get out of the way.

Students expressed comfort 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, then I know that they have been 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 expressed satisfaction and said that it was "phenomenal. She would take the time to call and, just, guide. Coach. Mentor. And it was wonderful."

4.1.2.4. 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 "be another voice that we can reach out to for help and helps to provide feedback and share with the workload." One student commented that, "…so imagine me times forty or times thirty, so, it's good so they can provide the feedback when the feedback is reliable and useable.

4.1.3. 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 feedback and clarification of assignments.

4.1.3.1. Availability

During the focus group interviews several students expressed concerns over the availability of academic coaches. For example, one student commented that, many of them (academic coaches) do not share their availability of time with the students. And sometimes we send emails, or I like to talk to somebody. So, if they were available to speak to or knew their schedule, we could also schedule a Zoom with them.

4.1.3.2. Communication

Students felt that communication was another challenge for them when dealing with the academic coaches. For example, one student stated that, "…this is a point of contact. But I did not really see the mentoring portion of it, or the communication of the feedback." Another expressed expectation that, "I wish we had more opportunity if we wanted, uh, just hey this is a zoom link I am going to have because the professors sometimes do not have that opportunity because they are always busy."

4.1.3.3. Lack of Collaboration

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 it is as though it is not coordinated. It is as though the professor and the instructional coach need to speak on the assignments. And so that confuses me, and it's like a domino effect. Another student further elaborated by specifically saying that part of the problem was that they (academic coaches) don't attend the zooms. They (academic coaches), so when changes get made when assignments are clarified or modified, the instructional coach is unaware of that. Or going back to the discussion board, like when we were posting as a group but only one person posted. It took a couple of weeks for that instructional coach to get into the groove of ok, one person will post, and another will make a reply, so it gets there a lot of drawbacks.

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 agreed upon whether it
> is modifying an assignment or an expectation of the assignment. I have had an experience where
> an instructional or academic coach has given me great feedback on my discussion boards.

For example, one student said that "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." Students expressed concern over the discrepancies about grading.

4.1.3.4. 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 there was no communication otherwise. There
> needed to be a follow-up. Thanks for the comment. Not that it was not harmful, but it was not positive.
> Or it gave me little or change much if that makes sense.

A student plainly stated that, "I did not receive any feedback, and I do not know. As far as the grading, I do not know I imagine it was good". Another student stated that, "there was always a miscommunication piece with the instructor and that coach. Like the grading for some students, they would deduct some points on something because it was graded by someone, and then not deduct the points for the same issue with another person." Students claimed that grading discrepancies were obvious concerning grading styles. For example, on student exclaimed that, "…sometimes the instructor is a little bit more lenient because you are grading at the end of the day. It was just like the person that was grading us as a coach 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 TA 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,

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

Furthermore, one student added that they were genuinely concerned because there was zero interaction other than comments on discussion boards. Or comments on the essay and that was it. Because, like the other student said, there is no contact information, no way to contact these academic coaches for clarification. If you had major disagreement with what they put on an assignment, you had to contact the professor. And that is putting more work on them because they had to go back and review what their instructional coach is doing so that becomes difficult.

4.1.4. Level of Satisfaction of Online Graduate Students with an Academic Coach

To answer research questions three quantitative data were collected from the survey instrument, and the results were reported in the quantitative data findings. The data that were collected from the online survey instrument, and the results were reported in the qualitative data findings. When asked about the overall satisfaction with the accelerated online courses students responded to a 5-point Likert scale used to measure the responses ranging from five (very satisfied) to 1 (extremely dissatisfied). Out of a total of 62 graduate students taking the online questionnaire, the majority, thirty-four (55.74%) were extremely satisfied and twenty-one (34. 43 %) were satisfied with the online course work. Four (6.56%) indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Two students (3.28%) reported being somewhat dissatisfied, while none reported being extremely dissatisfied).

Table 1. Overall satisfaction with the Accelerated online course. n=61

LEVEL OF SATISFACTION	PERCENT	NUMBER
Extremely satisfied	55.74%	34
Somewhat satisfied	34.43%	21
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	6.56%	4
Somewhat dissatisfied	3.28%	2
Extremely dissatisfied	0.00%	0

In terms of satisfaction with the professor of record, out of a total of 61 graduate students taking the online questionnaire, the majority, thirty-two (52.46%) were extremely satisfied and twenty-four (39. 34 %) were satisfied with the online course work. Two (3.28%) indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Three students (4.92%) reported being somewhat dissatisfied, while none reported being extremely dissatisfied).

Table 2. Level of satisfaction with the professor (n=61)

LEVEL OF SATIFICATION	PERCENT	NUMBER
Extremely satisfied	52.46%	32
Somewhat satisfied	39.34%	24
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	3.28%	2
Somewhat dissatisfied	4.92%	3
Extremely dissatisfied	0.00%	0

When asked about the level of satisfaction with the interaction with the Academic Coach, out of a total of 60 graduate students taking the online questionnaire, twenty-three (38.33%) were extremely satisfied and nine (15 %) were satisfied with the online course work. Twenty-two (36.67%) indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Four students (6.67%) reported being somewhat dissatisfied, while two (3.33%) reported being extremely dissatisfied).

Table 3. Level of statisfaction with the academic coach (n=61)

LEVEL OF SATISFACTION	PERCENT	NUMBER
Extremely satisfied	38.33%	23
Somewhat satisfied	15.00%	9
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	36.67%	22
Somewhat dissatisfied	6.67%	4
Extremely dissatisfied	3.33%	2

5. Discussion/Conclusions

5.1.2. Credentials and Experiences

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

> Feedback training is one of the components that I have missed in several other courses. Because I know that they (academic coaches help grade, sometimes that feedback piece does affect the outcome for the grades of others. Suppose I do not get it in time, or, more accurately do I need to focus on if it is too general? I think that would work if they had that training.

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

5.1.2. Experiences of Online Graduate Students

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 student supporters.

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 communicating with their academic coaches before contacting 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 coachers where someone "to reach out to when you need that support. Especially when those papers are due. We can have someone on hand and that are truly knowledgeable."

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 substantial enhancements in the learning environment, and higher levels of learning" (p. 76). Academic coaching provides a means of addressing what matters. Gazza and Matthias (2016) found that the use of academic coaches helps 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 was 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 an 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,

> They are doing it right now, like instructing and leading us, being there when we need them, and guiding us through those modules. And I know there is a professor I do not meet at all. No zoom, nothing, but they are always available if you have a question. When I emailed her, not even 15 minutes later, she answered 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.

5.1.3.1. 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 expectations and the rigor of grading. For example, students were noted as stating they believed the professor of record should set the tone and deliver clear expectations of each assignment. Students cited a barrier between the professor of record and the academic coach in collaborating the assignment expectation and level of rigor. One student was quoted as saying,

> It gets challenging because you want to tailor your papers to the professor's expectations, and sometimes, the academic coach is not on the same page. So, again, that gets difficult, but I have also had some excellent guidance. So, they vary. They are pretty different personalities that you must mold to. It isn't easy when you do not know who will grade your discussion boards or 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'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 spin then they're going to grade it 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 changed an assignment or altered things because of the hurricane or the polar freeze or what not, they did not clue in the academic coach. That, 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 the 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 are not on the same page, and you are turning in something that is not

what is supposed to be turned in. It's going to hurt your grade. I think they must be on the same page again, just that extras 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, students 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 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, kind of like that piece. Some students expressed that sometimes some academic coaches were stricter graders than their professors of record. As a result of these actions, students felt that it was unfair to be subjected to the disconnect in grading rigor and assignment of points.

5.1.3.2. Feedback

Another concern revealed by the data were feedback from the academic coaches. 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, the (academic coach) is stricter than the actual professor. And, to me, that was like, uh, they need to get on the same page because I could not satisfy one or the other. After all, they had different, diverse 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, not on the content. So, if we are engaging in a discussion and trying to push each other to think in separate ways and perspectives, I'm looking for that kind of feedback versus if I missed a comma or not. So, it was not, most of it, it was not all like that, but 75 percent of it was grammatic.

Most students agreed and felt that there were gaps in the 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 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 is a more aggressive plan to build specific skills.

In terms of satisfaction with feedback from the academic coach, students overall were 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.

5.1.3.3. Feedback Level of satisfaction for online graduate students

Fifty-three percent of the students in this study reported as being either Extremely or Somewhat satisfied with their experiences in dealing with academic coaches. In other words, students reported balancing positive and negative experiences with their academic coaches throughout their coursework. One student express that,

It has been a 50/50. I have had good experiences with the academic coach because they are on the same page as the professor and understand the professor's expectations. The other experience I have had was a little more damaging because they did not know what the professor was expecting on behalf of the assignments and explanations of the assignments. Hence, the grading was a little different.

These sentiments were due to the variety of academic coaches being hired to assist in the 30-hour graduate program. According to the data, the assignment of academic coach to coaches was random and inconsistent. There was no guarantee that the same academic coach would be assisting the same professor. The only guarantee that was a certainty was only when the professor of recorded requested an academic coach.

6. 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 in and therefore student's interactions would have limited to only a few times. Had the students more consistent assistance with academic coaches throughout their course, the findings might have differed.

7. 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 academic coaches and professors and secondly for academic l 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 academic coach. Overall, the importance of professional development would benefit the relationship between the academic 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 academic 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 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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