

# **Student Success Coaching Program: A Targeted Retention Strategy for At-Risk First Year Students**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper reports the implementation and evaluation of a coaching program designed to provide individualised support to a range of at-risk first year student populations: commencing, continuing, and probationary students. An initial Pilot Coaching Program with 19 students at-risk of early failure in their first semester provided evidence for the efficacy of this approach, and informed the design and implementation of an institutional coaching program (33 coaches and 319 at-risk students). Outcome evaluations of the Student Success Coaching Program indicated positive increases in participants' academic performance as indicated by the number of courses passed. Academic performance was particularly evident in first-year probationary students who had failed two or more courses in their first semester and were engaging in coaching for purposes of academic recovery. Process evaluations indicated that students experienced coaching as safe and supportive and particularly helpful in developing their time management, organisation skills, academic confidence, and motivation.*

## **Overview**

Australia is working towards the goal of enhanced universal higher education provision (Gale & Parker, 2012) but this commendable goal is not without its challenges. Increasing the number of university graduates is not simply a matter of widening student participation and boosting university enrolments: success requires more than access. In Australia, one third of students entering university fail to graduate, and one third of all first year students actually consider withdrawing during their first semester (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). Thus, the early first year experience is recognised as critical to a student's longer-term academic success requiring them to learn new academic skills while simultaneously needing to acquire new social skills and adapt to their role as an independent, self-regulating learner (Richardson, King, Garrett & Wrench, 2012). Tinto (1998) identified that a successful transition requires a high quality academic experience with academic support, paired with social involvement and peer support. Not surprisingly, successful integration into both the academic and social worlds of university reduces the likelihood of student withdrawal (Lizzio, 2006; Wilson et al., 2014). However, non-traditional students in particular, with lower levels of academic capital, and consequently greater challenges in navigating the "hidden curriculum", are potentially at increased risk of early drop-out or failure if not provided with timely targeted, appropriate support for a successful transition to university life (Gale & Parker, 2012).

Comparisons of institutional practices to support student retention and completion (Noel-Levitz, 2013) reveal a breadth of promulgated co-curricular and curricular strategies for facilitating student transition (e.g. academic support and advising, peer mentoring, career

counselling, learning communities). What might be the features of an intervention intentionally designed to scaffold the success of ‘at-risk’ students? Research indicates the importance of four key design principles: forming non-judgemental working relationships with students, proactive outreaching to identified students, consistent pattern of contact adjusted to students’ needs, and an underpinning strengths-based philosophy. A focus on *relationships* is strongly supported by research indicating firstly that contact with a significant person at university remains an important factor predicting a student’s decision to persist with their studies (Heisserer & Parette, 2002), and secondly that a number of co-curricular interventions using personalised contact (Peer Mentoring (Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) and Student Advising (Shamah & Ohlson, 2013)) have consistently demonstrated positive student outcomes. One of the persistent paradoxes of higher education is that students who may be in most need of support are those who are least likely to access it (Ciarrochi, Deane, Coralie, & Rickwood, 2002). There is also evidence to suggest that the value placed on ‘being an independent learner’ may discourage students from seeking help because of a concern, in doing so, that they may be perceived as failures (Clegg, Bradley & Smith, 2006). In support of this, Griffith institutional data indicates that these students are typically under-represented in traditional institutional academic support programs such as PASS (Peer Assisted Student Sessions), and are least likely to approach their tutors for assistance. Thus, interventions with at-risk populations often have to involve an *intentional invitation or outreach* (Earl, 2006). De Angelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor and Tran (2011) present evidence that cross-institutional differences in degree completion rates are, for the most part, explained by systematic variations in students’ characteristics and support needs, and argue that interventions are more effective when purposefully aligned with the needs of specific student populations. Thus, in the present context, an *individualised case management* approach to high risk students, involving consistent negotiated contact matched to their level of educational maturity, may offer the greatest chance of success (Smith, 2013). Finally, the concept of student risk is often associated with a deficit view of students and thus it is important to affirm that so called ‘at-risk students’ have the potential to succeed or fail, depending on the type and level of positive institutional support they receive (Bradley et al., 2008). In this regard, interventions which aim to scaffold self-regulation need to intentionally *affirm students’ strengths* and activate their resources and provide positive expectations.

The Student Success Coaching (SSC) model seeks to operationalise these evidence-based principles in facilitating the success of at-risk commencing students. *Postgraduate students* were intentionally selected for the coach role and matched to students in their discipline. Thus they could bring to bear not only process and socio-emotional support but also knowledge about specific school/program requirements (navigating local staff and systems), disciplinary content (course/subject and assessment) and socialisation practices. A *one-on-one case management model* assured commencing students a tailored approach based on their identified needs. Students’ transition needs were systematically negotiated using the evidence-based *Five Senses of Student Success* framework (Lizzio, 2006), which identifies student transition needs: staff and student connection; academic self-efficacy and competence; accessing of institutional and school resources, and building inner resourcefulness to achieve work-study-social balance; sense of vocational purpose with the degree and future employment; and building identity as a university student with a sense of personal fit in higher education.

This paper reports on the implementation and evaluation of the efficacy of the Student Success Coaching Program (SSC Program) in supporting the success of at-risk students. An initial proof-of-concept pilot program in two high needs trial sites was conducted in the first

semester and this informed a wider institutional strategy in a range of targeted degree programs with low retention in the second semester. The program was evaluated from the perspectives of both students and coaches and included both process and outcome data.

## **Student Success Coaching Program Pilot**

### *Purpose*

The Coaching Program Pilot was designed to provide an initial small scale assessment of the potential efficacy of intensive individualised support. The specific aims of the Pilot were to: (i) determine the effectiveness of the case management model in developing high risk students' academic skills; (ii) examine the impact of regular contact through the case management approach on retention from Semester 1 into Semester 2; (iii) inform the feasibility of expanding the pilot into an institutional strategy.

### *Coaching process*

Participants were 19 first year commencing students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts (N=10) and the Bachelor of Psychological Science (N=9). Participating students were required to satisfy the baseline criteria of being a domestic student enrolled in a minimum of 2 courses and to be identified by institutional predictive analytics as being at high risk of early attrition. These students typically had lower entry scores, weaker degree preferences, and were more likely to be first-in-family or from a low socio-economic (LSES) background.

Two experienced student advisors were selected to participate as Student Success Coaches (SSCs). The coach role had five key aims: 1) *Developing trusting working relationships* (taking time to know the students and their backgrounds, including their strengths and challenges as university students); 2) *Supporting student achievement* (assisting students to plan their semester of study, knowing when a student's assessment is due, understanding the assessment tasks, working through the assessment task and criteria, providing feedback on drafts, providing personal support, problem-solving and referral); 3) *Advocating for students* with academic staff (where appropriate, negotiating extensions, advising about administrative processes such as Special Consideration, Withdrawal without Penalty etc.); 4) *Clarifying student aspirations* (exploring and nurturing their interest in the degree, and their future aspirations); and 5) *Strengthening institutional commitment* (exploring with the student how their university can meet their needs and aspirations).

Student participation was voluntary, with coaches phoning students in the first instance to recruit them for the Program Pilot. The Program was offered from week one through to week 17 of semester, thus providing students with support throughout the formal exam period. Participants interacted with their coaches on a weekly to fortnightly basis through face to face contact, telephone, text message, and email. The nature and frequency of contact varied as a function of the lifecycle of the semester, with face-to-face contact typically occurring prior to the submission of major assessment tasks. An intensive case management model was employed to engage with student's individual study needs and goals. This involved reviewing goals from previous sessions, problem-solving what did not work and how to improve, and setting new goals for the coming week through the development of an action plan. A great deal of task-oriented support centred on both time management and academic skills work. Time management support included intensive academic planning with coaches helping students to map out the content and timing of what they needed to study, especially when

commencing an assessment task or preparing for an imminent exam. The bulk of academic skills work centred on pre-assessment planning around specific assessment items, such as deconstructing assessment questions, understanding the assessment task criteria, creating an essay plan, essay writing structure, researching, and referencing. Coaches also provided socio-emotional support and pastoral care to build students' academic self-efficacy. This included strategies such as acknowledging achievements and abilities and motivating students through career goal setting. Coaches maintained a weekly spreadsheet structured to record the type and length of contact with each student across the semester.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Overview*

The trial program was evaluated from both coaches and students perspectives as well as data on participants' academic performance and progression

### *Patterns of student engagement*

While all students explicitly committed to maintaining minimum of weekly contact with their coaches, not unexpectedly, given the complex nature of this at-risk population, engagement across the semester was variable. Four patterns of student-coach engagement were evident: *Sustained engagement* (8 or more substantive consultations); *regular engagement* (5 to 7 consultations transitioning from face-to-face to phone/email over the semester); *irregular engagement* (3 to 4 meetings transitioning to contact around a specific assessment question) and *low engagement* (1 to 2 consultations, including the initial face to face meeting followed by a lack of engagement in the Program). Generally speaking levels of engagement were positive, with 79% of students demonstrating sustained or regular engagement, and 21%, irregular or low engagement.

### *Student feedback*

Students were invited by an objective third-party to evaluate their experience of the Coaching Program in an end-of-semester confidential qualitative and quantitative telephone interview. A response rate of 60% was achieved. Respondents were universally positive in their evaluations ('blessing that someone cared'; 'I was lost and needed some help') and identified the greatest improvement in their management, academic skills, motivation, and adjusting to university life ('I needed someone to prod me for motivation'; 'strategies for how to tackle assessment were useful'), and, importantly, their academic confidence ('I continued to build confidence and achieved good grades'). This was reflected in their mean ratings (on a 5-point scale) of increases in their motivation (prior 3.11 and post 4.33) and organisation (prior 2.63 and post 4.38).

### *Academic performance and retention in Semester 1*

Overall, at-risk students completed their first semester with a mean Grade Point Average (GPA) of 4.2 (4.0 in the Bachelor of Arts, and 4.5 in the Bachelor of Psychological Science), with a median score of 4.5 (SD =1.10). Importantly, the data showed that the average number of courses/subjects passed compared to the number taken was 87% (SD =1.12) (88% in the Bachelor of Arts: SD = 0.94; and 87% in the Bachelor of Psychological Science: SD =1.25). This is an encouraging finding, given that the primary goal expressed by these commencing

students participating in the Pilot Program was to pass their courses. Given this level of academic support and consequent success, 100% of students participating in the Coaching Program were retained into Semester 2. This compares favourably to the average student first year retention from semester 1 to 2 for Griffith of 87% and a lower retention rate for similar at-risk students of 70%.

These pilot results provided an early indication that a case management model can be effective in supporting commencing students at risk of early failure and attrition to make a successful transition into the university and progress into their second semester of study.

### *Academic performance and retention in Semester 2*

As a result of the positive findings in semester 1, the Coaching Program was continued with the same group of students into Semester 2 of their first year. The second semester Coaching Program model, in recognition of students' increased academic confidence was less intrusive and intensive and focused more on developing qualities of student self-direction and independence in learning. Thus, contact was primarily student-initiated with an emphasis on just-in-time interventions with specific assessment tasks or challenges. As anticipated, this resulted in reduced face to face meetings and increased contact via email or text message. As a consequence, there was a small drop in student performance in Semester 2. The overall GPA fell slightly to 4.06 (SD = 1.14, Median 4.50), Students passed on average 75% of their courses, down 12% from semester 1. Year one to two retention figures for these students will be calculated after Census in Semester 1, 2015. While these results indicate a small drop in student performance, students self-reported a positive increase in their autonomy and capacity for self-managed study, potentially indicating a longer-term development trajectory.

## **Student Success Coaching Program Institutional Implementation**

### *Overview*

Based on the positive outcome findings of the Student Success Coaching Pilot Program in the first semester, the University funded an Institution wide implementation in second semester. The targeted degree programs (Nursing, Exercise Science, Psychological Science, Business, Multimedia, Information Technology, and Arts) demonstrated persistent problems retaining first year students (retention rates ranging from 56% to 76%).

### *Methodology*

The Institutional implementation involved 33 Student Success Coaches (SSCs) working in small teams in 7 targeted degree programs across multiple campuses with 319 students judged to be at risk of early attrition. Coaches were postgraduate students with both an undergraduate degree and tutoring experience in a discipline relevant to the targeted degree program. Coaches were interviewed and selected for both their interpersonal skills and their knowledge and experience of the targeted degree program. Coaches were paid for their contact hours and coordinated by Student Success Coordinators (SSCOs) in their School/Program. Coaches were allocated a case load calculated on the principle of 10 student contacts per day (7.25 hours) of employment per week.

### *Student recruitment*

Three priority groups of voluntary participants were identified who satisfied the baseline inclusion criteria of being a domestic student, enrolled in a minimum of 2 courses, who had an orientation interview (Negotiated Engagement Interview: NEI) and did not have a significant mental health issue (as gauged by their Student Success Advisor). The *Target Priority 1 group* (92 students) had *failed half or more of their courses in first semester*, and also appeared on the Predictive Analytics list for semester 2 as being at risk of early attrition. The demographic profile of this group of ‘academic recovery’ students was: 18% LSES, 17% LOTE, average OP 14/25, and generally a second or lower preference for their current degree. The *Target Priority 2 group* (163 students) had also completed their first semester of study and were identified by institutional predictive analytics at the beginning of their second semester as *being at high to extreme risk of attrition*. The demographic profile of this group of ‘continuing at-risk students’ was (18% LSES, 17% LOTE, average OP 14/25, and generally a second or lower preference for their current degree). The *Target Priority 3 group* (45 students) were mid-year intake students commencing their studies in semester 2 identified by analytics as being at *moderate to extreme risk of attrition* (11% LSES, 16% LOTE, average OP 13/25, and generally a second or lower preference for their current degree).

### *Student Success Coach training and coordination*

Both coaches and coordinators were provided with orientation and training. Most coaches were experienced tutors and this allowed the training to focus on the specifics of working with an at-risk student population (i.e., student diversity and working effectively with non-traditional-first-in-family students, engaging and recruiting difficult to contact students, the coaching process, providing assessment and personal support, and referral). This initial foundational training was followed up by coordinators providing ongoing maintenance of case loads, support, practice reflection and problem-solving. An end-of-semester Coaching Forum provided a structured opportunity for reflection and process evaluation.

### **Evaluation and Outcomes**

As with the pilot program, the institutional program was evaluated from a number of complementary perspectives.

#### *Patterns of student engagement*

Students involved in Coaching in Semester 2 did not always consistently engage with the Program across the semester and demonstrated similar engagement profiles as in the Pilot Program. Overall, two-thirds (66%) of at-risk students maintained high engagement with their coach, with 44% maintaining *sustained* (8 or more points of contact) and 22%, *regular* engagement (5-7 points of contact). This was lower than for high engagement in the Pilot Program (79%). About one-third (34%) of students demonstrated either *irregular* (15%) or *low* (19%) patterns of contact, compared to only 21% in the Pilot Program.

#### *Student survey feedback*

As with the Pilot Program, students were invited by an objective third-party to evaluate their experience of the Coaching Program in an end-of-semester confidential qualitative and quantitative telephone interview. A response rate of 30% (95/319) was achieved. Student feedback was very positive and largely reinforced themes identified in the Pilot Program. Students identified the coaching process to be most useful with the areas they found most

challenging: time management (75%) ('I procrastinate, so getting things done was difficult'), assessment preparation (84%) ('Helped me try to understand assignments'), and advice on improving grades (84%). It is important to highlight the contribution of non-judgmental support and relating with almost all (90%) students endorsing the importance of their coaches' general encouragement and support ('I felt like my SSC was a person who genuinely cared about my problems and took them seriously'). In terms of *self-reported student gains*, similar to the Pilot Program, about four-fifths of students indicated increased academic confidence (80%), sense of motivation (83%) and organisation of study (85%). In terms of the *coaching process*, students experienced it as both safe and supportive (90%), and helpful (92%) ('My coach is a pretty cool dude to hang out with and I would recommend it to any students who were considering dropping out of uni').

### *Student Success Coach Feedback*

An end-of-semester Coaches Forum was conducted and processes of directed discussion and completion of a survey were used to evaluate the program from the coaches' perspective. A total of 29 of 33 coaches completed the survey (88% response rate).

Coaches were highly positive about the value of the program and reported that they felt they had the most positive impact with their students in *providing a safe and supportive environment* (97%), *enhancing academic confidence* (76%), and *enhancing motivation* (63%). Interestingly and reassuringly, coaches' perceptions of the specific areas or topics where the process was most useful mirrored those of students: *general encouragement and support* (100%) ('I discussed why do they want to be here, what is the end goal, is it worth it'); *developing students' academic skills* (97%) ('I helped with finding academic sources and how to use them'); *support with specific assessment tasks* (97%) (students needed help with 'unpacking the question and making a plan'); *support and advice on improving grades and academic performance* (96%) ('I helped with how to revise for exams'); and *working with students on academic recovery* (62%) ('I helped them to work out why they failed'). Given that all coaches were postgraduates, it is relevant to note their own development in the coaching role: *opportunity to contribute* (100%), *positive learning experience* (93%), *developing a sense of professional identity* (90%), and *career-relevant capabilities* (97%).

Coaches reported that generally their client-students fell into three categories: *initially eager* students who subsequently evidenced the most regular and most consistent contact; *initially wary* students who only became engaged after the first assessment item was due; and *initially minimally or non-engaged* students who often did not engage because of internal feelings of shame concerning help seeking and often exacerbated by external barriers such as commitments with employment and carer responsibilities.

### *Academic performance and retention*

Findings for student's academic performance in semester 2 were calculated separately for the three first year student sub-groups in two different cohorts: semester 1 continuing at-risk first year students on probation in their second semester; semester 1 continuing first year at-risk students in their second semester; and semester 2 commencing (mid-year intake) at-risk students enrolled in their first semester.

*Target Group 1: Continuing first year failing/probationary students* This group comprised 92 probationary students in their second semester of study who had failed half or more of their

first semester courses. In their previous semester this academic recovery group achieved an average GPA of 2.62 and had passed only 32% of their courses. These students generally presented with lower academic self-efficacy, reduced motivation and a greater sense of shame and ambivalence about their 'fit' with university. Reflecting these challenges, the gains with these probationary students from the coaching program were positive but modest. Collectively these students passed more courses in second semester (50% compared to 32% in first semester) with the strongest gains from students having regular (58% passed) and sustained (50% passed) contact with their coaches. Very few students (only 3%) withdrew, indicating a positive effect of the Program on persistence.

*Target Group 2: Continuing at-risk first year students* This comprised a diverse group of 163 students identified by predictive analytics to be at risk of attrition at the end of their first semester. Students had an average first semester GPA of 4.2 and had collectively passed 89% of their courses in first semester. This was a complex and diverse group of students with a broad spread of risk factors ranging from those with poor prior academic performance to other students with 'reasonable' levels of achievement but with lower, and potentially declining, levels of motivation to persist either in their current degree program or with an intention to transfer to another institution at the end of the year.

In terms of academic performance, this coaching group overall achieved a similar average GPA to first semester (4.1) but actually passed fewer of their attempted courses (77%). However, whole group averages can be misleading. The fact that students with lower levels of frequency of contact passed more of their courses (89%) than those in the sustained contact group (77%), once again indicates that frequency of contact may be, in part, understood as a proxy for student need. In this sense the number of coaching sessions cannot be simplistically understood as an 'additive treatment effect'.

However in terms of motivation and persistence, no students who consistently engaged with their coach over the semester withdrew from the program. This may potentially indicate that the coaching program positively impacts on both within program persistence, and institutional identification and loyalty.

*Target Group 3: Commencing mid-year intake students* This group comprised 45 students identified at entry as being at high risk of early failure/attrition. These students receiving coaching completed their first semester of university study collectively passing three quarters (76%) of their attempted courses with a mean GPA of 4.45 (SD 1.58). Students' level of contact or engagement with their coaches was not a direct and linear indicator of their academic outcomes. For example, the highest number of courses passed was achieved by students having both regular (86%, GPA 4.40) and irregular coaching contact (87%, GPA 4.73). Students who had sustained contact passed fewer courses (69%, GPA 4.08). However, students with the lowest contact were the least academically successful, only passing 58% of their courses with a mean GPA of 3.03.

The finding that students maintaining the highest levels of engagement with their coaches (8+ contacts) passed a substantially lower number of their courses was not unexpected. A breakdown of the demographic data for this group of 17 students indicated that a quarter (23%) had English as a second language, and a quarter (23%) were also alternative entry students (compared to only 16% of the total group of participants for both criteria). Clearly, sustained contact can be indicative of not only higher student motivation, but also of greater need and lower academic readiness. Beyond a certain threshold a co-curricular methodology

such as the present coaching program may not have sufficient efficacy (despite student motivation and extent of contact) to scaffold success with very ‘high needs’ students.

However, more reassuringly, only 1 student in the high engagement group withdrew, indicating a very positive influence of sustained contact on persistence, similar to that evidenced in Target Group 2. Further, on average, students from Target Group 3 who engaged with their coaches between 3 and 7 times over the semester did evidence stronger academic outcomes, passing more of their attempted courses (86%) than all coached at-risk mid-year commencing students (76%) and a matched sample of at-risk students (similar demographics) who did not receive coaching (72%).

## **Conclusions**

The findings of the Pilot and Institutional Student Success Coach Programs provide initial support for the value of an individualised coaching process of at-risk students across a range of disciplines and commencing student sub-groups. In terms of *process*, both student and coach feedback affirmed the importance of the underlying design principles, in particular, the centrality of trusting working relationships for effective coaching of vulnerable student populations. In terms of *outcomes*, the coaching process proved to be effective for facilitating students at early risk of attrition in three first year contexts: the initial transition and academic success of commencing students in their first semester of study; the success and persistence of commencing students identified to be at risk in their second semester of study based on semester one academic outcomes; and second semester academic recovery with commencing probationary students who failed half or more of their student load in their first semester of study. This last finding is especially important, given that recovery from early failure is a particularly difficult process for students (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013) and largely unaddressed by most institutions. A clear pattern of academic improvement for students receiving coaching emerged: while GPAs tended to remain reasonably stable between both semesters, the number of courses passed increased in the semester of coaching. This was accompanied by students’ self-reported increases in academic efficacy. While the data on retention is not as yet available for the institutional implementation sample, the 100% retention of students from their first to second semester in the Pilot Program would seem to indicate that individualised coaching can positively impact on students’ commitment and persistence.

Critical reflection on the process of implementation indicates a number of key *success factors*. Firstly, postgraduate students may be an under-utilised source of effective support for at-risk students in their discipline and appear to experience this as rewarding and professionally relevant work. Secondly, the relationship skills of coaches are critical to success. The positive success-focused framing of their initial outreach appears to be particularly important to engaging students to participate. Maintaining consistent contact and engagement over the semester with often ‘hard to reach’ students who are participating on a voluntary basis is often the most challenging aspect of the coaching model. Finally, it is important to appreciate the relative nature of success when working with challenging student populations. Modest gains can be very significant in the wider context of enhancing the persistence of students experiencing diverse and complex challenges.

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