

Ten Ways Institutional Coaching Makes a Difference

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Since 2017, the [Student Success Center Network \(SSCN\)](#) Coaching Program has extended the capacity of Student Success Centers (Centers) to engage community colleges in institutional transformation through institutional coaching. In the most recent phase of work, supported by Ascendium Education Group, Jobs for the Future (JFF) and Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI) engaged with grantee Centers in four states—[California](#), [Michigan](#), [New York](#), and [Oregon](#)—to build the evidence base around institutional coaching. This brief summarizes what we learned and is drawn from interviews and focus groups with Center leadership, college administrators and staff members, and the coaches themselves.

We found that coaching is an important tool in large-scale change efforts, with coaches filling multiple roles and functions. Through our conversations, we identified 10 common ways that coaching makes a difference for the people and institutions engaged in supporting [guided pathways](#) and other student success initiatives. Many of the ways coaches make a difference are interconnected, reinforcing evidence that coaching has a multiplier effect on how colleges implement transformational reforms.

Top 10 Ways Coaching Makes a Difference



1. Coaches Build Connections

The connections to people and resources that coaches build, both within an institution and across different community colleges, have broad benefits. Through these connections, coaches equip college leaders with meaningful tools, research, and personal contacts that they continue to turn to in their ongoing work for institutional change. Personnel at all levels cited this benefit most frequently, and they recognized these connections as valuable opportunities. One college leader in New York described coaches' contributions this way:

“Coaches help by asking bigger questions, seeing the bigger picture. They provide models, resources, readings, and ideas for new approaches.”

Another in California had this to say:

“[The coach] helps with network building, professional growth, broadening perspectives. There is an added value of being supported and knowing more opportunities and resources are available if you just reach out for them. Using these resources is not a negative—it really strengthens and grows the impact of your work.”



2. Coaches Bring Fresh Eyes and External Perspectives

The different experiences with transformational work and guided pathways that coaches bring, along with their fresh eyes, are considered valuable assets by college faculty, administrators, and the staff members they support. Identifying previously unrecognized opportunities for meaningful change can provide new insights into processes and practices at the college that can better propel their work. One Oregon coach shared the following about their own experience as a college vice president who met regularly with an institutional coach:

“Leadership roles are lonely, and it is difficult to separate yourself from the institution and look at things objectively. The coach provides an external perspective that is valuable in helping you ‘see through your own weeds.’”



3. Coaches Provide Validation, Affirmation, and Encouragement

Beyond their direct resource-, network-, and action-based contributions, coaches are also appreciated for their ability to affirm and encourage the work that college faculty and staff members are doing to effect institutional change—often incremental work that goes unrecognized by the wider college community. One college leader in Michigan shared this perspective:

“You are often running blind—being able to connect with others and confirm that you are heading in the right direction is powerful. Being able to validate the approaches and emphasize the importance of leadership buy-in has been helpful.”

Coaches also validate the feelings of college faculty and staff doing guided pathways work, especially during stressful times such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. As described by a college leader in California, where institutional coaches are known as regional coordinators, the coach’s fresh perspective is also motivating:

“Acknowledgement—having someone from outside recognize our potential [was important]. It gave us a chance to see our work from another’s perspective. Having [the regional coordinator] join our meetings—see that we are amazing and that our work connected with what was happening in the region/state. It gave us more confidence and helped us take ourselves more seriously in this work.”

Coaches also acknowledge the very real impact that the stress of this work can have on the motivation and emotions of those involved. Coaching interactions can create a safe space for college faculty and staff members to express these feelings without feeling judged.



4. Coaches Support Strategic Planning and Prioritization

Working toward meaningful institutional change often involves addressing many different areas of college policy and practice and can quickly become overwhelming—especially if a college attempts to tackle multiple initiatives at once. An experienced coach guides colleges into following specific work sequences to incrementally reach their goals without becoming overwhelmed. A college leader in Michigan highlighted their experience working with mentors, as coaches are known in the state:

“We had discussions on equity and developmental education with the mentors and took those back to the [guided pathways] committee. That helped the committee select priorities. We also just finished another round of [conducting a Scale of Adoption Assessment]. It became obvious that we would love to do 20 things but needed to focus on just two or three. The mentor feedback helped us think about it”

A coach’s ability to help multiple teams prioritize certain aspects of their work can increase the momentum and effectiveness of the work they are doing on a day-to-day basis and streamline it to help them achieve their goals more quickly. Additionally, with strategic planning implemented at the highest level of the college, less time and effort are wasted repeating work that has already been completed or attempted by different departments or groups within the college. A coach in New York shared the following:

“When I am working with a college, I often find that they are already doing some of the work—it is just piecemeal. I help them identify those efforts and how to grow them into something more effective.”



5. Coaches Contextualize What Works

Coaches apply their knowledge of best practices to help community colleges address the question, “What has worked, and where has it worked?” Even within a state, contexts—such as rural versus urban settings—can be vastly different. Coaches are aware that there is no “one size fits all” solution to institutional change at community colleges, and this enables them to approach situations with an open mind and a willingness to familiarize themselves with each institution’s specific challenges. A college leader in Oregon shared this perspective:

“There is a level of credibility [with the coach] that is important for things as potentially contentious as institutional transformation. The encouragement from someone who knows the work is so important. The [coach also helped with] benchmarking—understanding our progress against the larger work happening across the state...The coach can highlight similar struggles and opportunities from other colleges.”



6. Coaches Help Put Theory Into Action

While the theory of the guided pathways framework is often well understood by the colleges adopting it, coaches help ensure that the theory is translated from plans to actionable steps that will lead to institutional change. In a focus group session, one New York coach described their work this way:

“Our role is to connect the dots about how the theoretical guided pathways framework applies to each institution; it must be tailored to the context. The role of the coach is to understand the needs of the institution, know how to capture student voice, know who to engage.”

Coaches ensure that actual issues are being put at the forefront of colleges’ plans and initiatives, ensuring that no time, effort, or capacity is directed toward a goal that does not result in contributions to institutional change. A college leader in Michigan shared the following:

“The mentor helped us understand that guided pathways is not a standalone, siloed initiative. This isn’t just a one and done initiative, not just checking boxes, giving a presentation and a report. This is rethinking the way we do things, and it can’t be a single approach. You have got to have multiple tools to help people get the message out and multiple connections to help folks be supported and hear it in different ways.”



7. Coaches Put Students at the Center

Given the many shifting components of transformational work across different states and colleges, it is easy to lose sight of the goal: improving student success outcomes. As college faculty and staff members do the incremental work toward this goal, coaches can help them see the connections between the actions they are taking and ensure that students’ success is prioritized and centered in their work. A college leader in Oregon shared this:

“When you are making big changes, there are so many competing interests. [The coach] helps to keep it anchored in the students.”

Coaches also help colleges examine current practices, policies, and resources to identify areas that could be better tailored toward students and their experiences to keep the focus on student success.



8. Coaches Promote Silo Busting and Collaboration

Given the bureaucratic and siloed nature of most college departments and programs, it can become difficult for institutions to streamline their work into collaborative efforts—a practice that can save time, effort, and capacity. Coaches actively work to break down walls between faculty members, staff members, and administrators at their colleges to better integrate the guided pathways framework and facilitate change across the college instead of in just one area or department. A California college counselor who interacted with a coach offered this feedback:

“[The coach] helped me see different people’s roles and helped me to stop seeing my work as ‘just a counselor.’ [They] broadened my view on how people come together to support students.”

Coaches continue to promote a more collaborative environment at their colleges and strive to mitigate silos and divisive aspects of the workplace culture, given that collaboration and connection are necessary to implement successful institutional change that benefits students. Coaches also actively promote collaboration across colleges within a state. A college leader in Michigan shared this experience:

“Working with [a mentor] helped us understand the value of continued sharing and the importance of working with colleges across the state. There is a danger to working in isolation; having connections is so important. It has improved our efficiency and we are being intentional about building connections and doing outreach.”



9. Coaches Improve Internal and External Communication

The ability to engage with those working toward institutional change and employ active listening, ask good questions that spark conversation, and ultimately assist colleges with their internal communication is a key aspect of coaching. Coaches can help staff and faculty members have more productive conversations with their peers and ultimately improve communication on a collegewide level. Rather than leading conversations, coaches help people understand how to have discussions related to their transformational work and equip them with tools and methods so they can comfortably navigate all types of conversations and meetings. A college leader in New York shared this reflection:

“Working with [my coach], I learned how to communicate with the naysayers and not dread those conversations. Now I try to bridge the gap by addressing their concerns and getting them involved.”



10. Coaches Promote Accountability

Coaches play an important role in ensuring that community colleges are working toward their goals. They keep institutions accountable by regularly checking in with team leads and asking whether they need assistance to meet their objectives. This attention from the coach helps to ensure that the college leader and the planning team are making progress. One Oregon college leader described the following impact:

“Change now is moving a little bit faster. The coach’s ability to keep us on task increases the pace of change. The fact that [the coach] helped facilitate and reach out to the various groups so the leads didn’t have to—all that kept things moving along. [The coach] keeps us on task and focused.”

Conclusion

We hope that this brief spurs Student Success Centers, community colleges, and others to explore how institutional coaching could benefit their own transformation efforts. The grantees and institutions we spoke with confirmed that coaching is making a difference in the work colleges are doing to improve student outcomes.

It is important to remember that coaching, like the work of institutional transformation itself, takes time, patience, and commitment. JFF and the SSCN are committed to driving change in postsecondary education to better meet the needs of students, their families, and their communities. Information about the SSCN Coaching Program, a coaching toolkit and other resources, and contact information for JFF’s coaching team are available on the JFF website at <https://jff.org>. Please reach out to learn more.

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