

Academic Coaching to Promote Student Success: An Interview with Carol Carter

By Amy L. Webberman



Carol J. Carter is an author, speaker, and international student success expert in K-16 with a focus on academic coaching. Carol has visited over 50 countries and has given workshops and keynote speeches for the K-12 international organizations in Asia, Australia, Africa, New

Zealand, and the Tri Association Conference serving Mexico, the Caribbean, and the northern region of South America. Carol promotes a global perspective emphasizing student choice, challenge, and leadership in and out of school. She has authored or coauthored over twenty books in the Keys to Success series for college freshmen and the LifeBound Success Series for 5th -12th graders designed to influence and promote success before students begin college. Carol is a champion for low-income students and has donated thousands of books to promote reading and self-awareness to schools in need. The focus of her professional work aims to improve the quality and preparedness of students beginning in fifth grade when students in the U.S. begin to struggle academically compared with their foreign counterparts in developed countries.

Amy Webberman (A.W.): How has your professional and personal experience influenced your work and perspective on student success and academic coaching?

Carol Carter (C.C.): I began focusing on academic coaching from my experiences in the business world where coaching is common. While conducting faculty training in science, math, and English, I realized the enormity of the need for basic and study skills training when students enter college. I saw as an underlying issue the need to help students know themselves and think critically and creatively.

I also saw a need for college-level curricular materials that address the issues of student success in a way that resonates with students' perspectives. I wanted to create materials that directly link course-based learning to career and life goals

after college. This was based on the idea that it's important to think like students, understanding their perspectives and needs, in order to help them be successful in college.

A.W.: A recent analysis of literature on nonacademic college support identified four processes that appear to be key in encouraging and promoting student success. They are creating social relationships within the college, working with students to clarify aspirations and enhance their commitment to the educational process, developing college know-how, and making college life more feasible (Karp, 2011). Over the past 25 years, you have written books, spoken, and created curricular materials focused on helping students in areas related to these processes. From your experience, what suggestions do you have for developmental educators looking to improve student outcomes through these mechanisms? What approaches would you expect to be most successful?

C.C.: I think it's important for developmental educators to find ways to question students about their passions and their interests. Educators who are trained in academic coaching skills learn how to use powerful questions to facilitate these sometimes personal moments, which can really build an emotional bond between faculty and students. Some students may be facing big life challenges; however, these challenges can provide wonderful opportunities for educators to help students see the power within adversity. Take for example, a single mom raising children. As an academic coach, I might ask: "What experiences and skills do you have as a mom that can translate into your ability to be a fabulous student? How are those things similar?" And then I might add, "After you see yourself as a student who comes to class prepared and able to participate and balance competing priorities, how will these abilities give you an advantage in the world of work?" Using a strong knowledge of powerful questioning, vision, and accountability—the core of academic coaching—educators help students see analogies in one area of their life and apply them to other areas. Coaching can also help them forecast what they need to do to create opportunities all areas of their life. We can help students link some of these different ideas. If

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Amy L. Webberman
Graduate Student, Graduate Program in
Developmental Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Texas State University-San Marcos
601 University Drive
San Marcos, TX 78666
amyweb@austin.rr.com

educators incorporate more question-based and coaching-based teaching, students will come to class ready to share and connect experiences from their personal lives to their learning.

College instructors, whether math, developmental English, or student success, should be mining the gems of experience students bring with them, and they can do so by using academic coaching practices in and out of class. If they can mine these gems, and help students understand the value of their experiences, the students are going to be more committed to working through their obstacles and their difficulties. It's so easy to miss opportunities where students can understand their own value, and not taking advantage of these opportunities for self-discovery can contribute to increased attrition.

A.W.: So then, how do you define academic coaching?

C.C.: Academic coaching is an ongoing partnership to help students produce fulfilling results in their lives. Through the process of coaching, students deepen their learning, take responsibility for their actions, improve their effectiveness, and consciously create their outcomes in life. Faculty members, staff members, counselors, advisors, and even peers can be taught to become academic coaches, and we are starting to see many successful postsecondary programs now emerging around the country

Academic coaching is also about making emotional connections. It's understanding that change at the deepest level requires more than just marching through teaching concepts. Coaching is about connecting with students. If students understand that their professor or advisor is interested in who they are as a person, they are going to take a greater interest in solving their own problems. Coaching is based on emotion and not on a logical model. Coaching is asking: "How is your day going? How is your week?" It's going beyond just explaining the math problem and asking: "Are you able to commit to meeting with me at the same time next week? "Would you be willing for just this week, to study math after class before you do anything else?" "Will you put math first for one week, even though it's not what you like to do, and we can talk about how it works for you when you see me next week?" Coaching involves a lot of small commitments. The next week, when the student comes back and says: "I studied my math," you might ask questions such as: "What was it like?" or, "What did it feel like to be prepared before the professor explained the concept?" This dialog is very pivotal and has very different results than situations where the student just comes to class and doesn't engage in any conversation with the instructor following the completion of each commitment. The goal is to continue this coaching dialog and for students

to make bigger commitments each time, whatever they may be. If we had faculty, tutors, and students doing that we would be retaining more students.

A.W.: Recent studies report increases in student success and retention and graduation rates among students who participated in postsecondary academic coaching programs (Bettinger & Baker, 2011; Franklin & Franklin, 2012). What are the key components to becoming a successful academic coach?

C.C.: Coaching is a process in which there are nine or ten tools, but the one that is the most important for students is asking powerful questions.

An effective powerful question is pointed, specific, and often open-ended, like: "If you could do anything in your life, what would you be doing?" Another example is: "If you knew you couldn't fail, what would your life look like?" The ultimate goal of a coach is to use question-asking to help students see their options in various situations. We have not

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traditionally been adept at teaching students vision so they can self-manage at any given-point, in any given setback, in any situation with an understanding of all their options. Coaching teaches students the process of "opening up the parachute of their minds," which is the first step in removing stress. A series of powerful questions gives students the vision they need to be able to consider how one setback might actually be very valuable to their development overall, and what's to be appreciated in difficulty and failure.

There are three main ways faculty and staff can promote the coaching model. One, use powerful questions. Two, ask students for a commitment. Three, ask students to evaluate their own progress and tell you what they did, how they did it, what results they got, and how they might improve in the future.

There is a difference between a professor who teaches through lecturing and a professor who facilitates learning. If a professor is a facilitator, asking powerful questions and creating a dynamic classroom where the learning comes from students thinking and sharing, he or she is teaching like a coach. Students must come to the table prepared and ready to discuss the issues person to person and not hide behind technology. So much research shows that this type of classroom is much more effective for student engagement, student

retention, and student motivation than the lecture model. Technology can facilitate discussion with a teacher or tutor who can ask the right questions. This sets the stage for students to build commitment by being actively involved as thinkers and problem-solvers.

A.W.: Recent research has also found positive effects on student success using academic and personal coaching models with students who have certain disabilities and executive function disorders, such as AD/HD (Field, Parker, Sawilowsky & Rolands, 2010; Parker, Hoffman, Sawilowsky, & Rolands, 2011). However, much is still unknown about the specific aspects of coaching that are most important to its success with this particular student population. What has been your experience with this population of students with executive function disorders?

C.C.: I think coaching is enormously helpful for individuals diagnosed with AD/HD. Academic coaching models—like those developed by Quinn, Ratey and Maitland (2000)—focus on incorporating more structure and support for these students which gives them a better sense of order. These structures—whether around setting up their desks, managing folders, or allotting their time—can help them establish environments so that they don't feel impeded. Coaching in this instance involves asking questions to help students identify choices to organize their worlds, their materials, and their "to do" lists. Academic coaches for these populations of students do take a more active role at first. They sometimes send reminders to students about their homework assignments and upcoming exams, for example, and they often require students to become accountable to them for the goals that they have set together. However, at the core of the coaching relationship is always having the coach ask powerful questions to help students become as self-sustaining as possible.

Part of coaching is to acknowledge your student's wonderful energy and many strengths. However, you must share observations to help your student become aware of behaviors related to the AD/HD that might derail them. For example, you might say: "I realize that in class the past few weeks that sometimes you blurt things out. I'm wondering for the next week, if you would be willing to observe your behavior, and let other people share their opinions first. You have great ideas, but sometimes you give your opinion first and other people defer to you, and then they don't come forth themselves. Would you be willing over the next week to observe the quality and strengths that they bring and try to manage yourself by waiting, and see what that's like for you?"

I've seen this work with students because they initially don't understand the concept of self-management. Coaching helps them see what's it like to become the witness.

A.W.: Academic coaching is still in the early stages of development as a profession. What are the current certifications and credentialing available to postsecondary educators and college peer coaches, and how do these apply or dovetail with other developmental education and learning assistance certifications?

C.C.: Academic coaching is the newest subsection of life and business coaching, coming into fruition over the last decade. The International Coaching Federation (ICF) is the group that services the coaching community, and it focuses primarily on life and business coaching. Few of the K-12 and postsecondary academic coaching companies are part of this group at this time. There are now several groups spearheading and creating standards for the training and practice of academic coaching, and I have been involved in that process for the last decade. I would strongly suggest that the field of developmental education and learning assistance work collaboratively with coaching organizations to set standards, ethics, and best practices; related structures and processes offer professional development to help faculty, especially adjuncts who have few training opportunities, as well as the many advisors and tutors who support the student success process.

Many of the current training and certification programs are offered online or consist of a combination of online and in-person training. I believe that a good model is one that features in-person trainings for a minimum number of hours followed by extensive practice in coaching prior to the coach's certification. Some training programs also give CEU credits and/or credits toward graduate school coursework.

A.W.: You have mentioned links between academic coaching and professional organizations that focus on developmental education and learning assistance as well as counseling and academic advising. What opportunities do you see for collaboration?

C.C.: In developmental education, the more educators work together and look at the whole student, the better the students will be served. This concept is a basic tenet of the National Association for Developmental Education. A fine but distinct line separates coaching from advising and mentoring. These distinctions need to be clear for all practitioners. Counselors and advisors in the institutional setting assist students to navigate the structure and culture of a given campus, like reviewing college credit and GPAs or helping them choose the right classes to make the bridge from developmental studies to their first year of college and, ultimately, to graduation. Coaches, whose role it is to guide students academically, emotionally, and socially, can be a counselor or an advisor, but they can also be a math, English, or biology professor. In

addition, coaching can help them look beyond obtaining their degree and into the professional world. If they have the image of a career etched in their minds, they're more likely to be professional, committed, and mature as students.

Students need to learn to love and embrace rigor and challenge. Helping students build this drive should be the common goal of all educators. Then they will not only learn how to write an effective paragraph and do differential equations, they will learn how to embrace challenge and how to propose and communicate solutions and ideas effectively, both in and beyond academic situations. If students struggle with how to make things happen, how to manage a process, how to be accountable, how to generate ideas, or how to solve problems, it can become an issue for them in their educational pursuits, career, and life. Students need to understand how such shortcomings will impact their future success. Academic coaching focuses on building this bridge between academia

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and life, as well as instructor and coach.

A.W.: What direction would you like to see the coaching profession take as it moves forward, and what do you see as key areas for future research?

C.C.: As the profession moves forward, I think it is important that certain methods of practice and language become codified within the coaching field, and particularly within the postsecondary learning support field. We need to continue to research how coaching is influencing performance factors including grades, involvement on and off campus, retention, community experience, work experience, family experience, and learning that is mixed with know-how. It is not just about what you know, but about what you know how to do. If we could identify the main indicators and markers that are reflective of the most successful students who go on to get their degree or to transfer to a four year school, and coach developmental students in these specific areas, it could level the playing field.

I'd also like to see research that explores the effectiveness of peer coaches versus instructor coaches versus academic advising coaches with various student populations, and more research examining face-to-face coaching versus coaching through technology, using tools such as Skype, e-mail, and Facebook, which some institutions are adopting for efficiency.

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