An academic coaching approach for faculty and staff: Professional development and student support

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ABSTRACT
The Finish Line Project is a multi-year initiative at UNC Chapel Hill promoting success for First Generation College Students and other undergraduates. As part of this initiative, Coach Approach Training (CAT) was developed to train university faculty and staff in effective and positive interactions with students using academic coaching principles, beliefs, and skills. This pilot study examines the potential impacts of professional development in an academic coaching approach on faculty and staff attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in interactions with college students.

INTRODUCTION
Positive interactions between undergraduate college students and university faculty and staff have been linked with improved academic performance, persistence, graduation rates, and use of university resources (Demetriou & Schnitz-Scborskim, 2011; Habley, 2004; Wyckoff, 1998). Many agree that improving student/faculty/staff interactions promotes academic success. (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett & Norman, 2010; McGuire, 2015; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2004). Recent investigations explore the effects of instructor mindset on student-instructor interactions and student achievement (Aguilar, Walton & Wieman, 2014; Rattan, Good & Dweck, 2012). Academic coaching is a form of student support that emphasizes non-hierarchical communication and collaboration. The model seeks to improve students’ self-awareness, self-regulation, problem-solving skills, and goal attainment (Richman, Rademacher & Maitland, 2014).

METHOD
The study’s design consisted of a three-group randomized control trial. UNC Chapel Hill faculty and staff (N = 89) who regularly interact with undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: condition one received CAT (n = 28), a two-day, 14-hour interactive training that included lecture, video, and live coaching modeling, small group and paired practice with constructive feedback from trainers, and collaborative debriefing discussions; condition two received Coach Approach self-study materials (n = 28), an online academic coaching training module; and condition three served as the control (n = 33). All participants completed online pre- and post-surveys via Qualtrics. Post-surveys were administered seven months following treatment. Outcome variables included an adapted measure of participants’ mindset (see Table 2: Dweck, 2000), participants’ perceptions about students’ competence, and participants’ use of academic coaching skills in their work with students.

RESULTS
Faculty and staff predominantly demonstrated a growth mindset about undergraduate intelligence (see Table 2) with no significant differences between groups or change during the study period. Overall, participants who received CAT provided high ratings of the training’s effectiveness, which was significantly different from participants who used online modules (see Table 3). Additionally, faculty and staff who received CAT were more likely to report using academic coaching skills such as collaborating with students and guiding the creation of an action plan than those who received the online materials (see Tables 4 & 5).

CONCLUSION
Participants considered CAT to be an effective professional development program. Faculty and staff largely exhibited growth mindsets about undergraduate intelligence, and CAT increased their use of academic coaching skills in working with students. This study suggests that training faculty and staff in an academic coaching approach helps support the success of First Generation College Students and other undergraduates. Future research should build on this pilot study to further examine the impact of an academic coaching approach on faculty and staff interactions with undergraduates as well as student outcomes.