

# Doing No Harm: Perceptions of Student Coach Training at a State College

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## Introduction

This paper details a qualitative case study which describes and interprets the perceptions of student coaches on their initial coach training for a volunteer peer coaching program at a state college. It seeks additionally to describe the motivation of the coaches to devote their time to this effort without financial recompense and finally, pursues an understanding of the recommendations these coaches made for future coaching training. Interviews with two student coaches and two documents were analyzed to extract thematic content, such as the value of helping others.

Few studies of first year programs focus on student to student coaching and fewer still review the impact of student to student coaching as a volunteer activity. Student to student initiatives in learning such as peer tutoring have demonstrated a significant impact on retention in some studies (Bettinger, 2011, Bloom, 1984). There is a need to determine if and in what circumstances voluntary peer coaching could assist community and state colleges with student retention. *s2s Coaching* pairs freshmen students with trained upperclassmen in an effort to improve their likelihood of successfully completing a degree. *S2s Coaching* was introduced as an initiative of the First Year Experience Office to the College in the spring semester of 2013 for the first time. This paper details a study of the perspective of coaching training of two upper division student coaches who participated in the program.

The purpose of this case study was to explore the perspective of student coaches in the *s2s Coaching* program at the College after training in the spring term of 2013. An additional research question was to assess the coaches' perspective of the coach training and their motivation or interest in becoming a student coach. Lastly, the recommendations of the coaches for future coach training sessions are assessed.

## Materials and methods

The students applied to be coaches through the First Year Experience Office, using a website or hard copy applications that were received either in Developmental Education classes or through individuals in the Student Learning Center, Library, or Student Activities. These coaches made up the participants in this study.

Coach applicants were interviewed following coach training. The interviews necessitated an interview protocol which can be found in the accompanying handout. Document analysis was performed on two types of written records: the application form submitted by the coach to the First Year Experience Office, and the remarks that the coaches made about themselves to be placed on the First Year Experience webpage. Member checking was performed and all requested amendments were made to the original interview transcripts. Member checking was performed in an effort to improve validity and reliability of the data collection process.

## Results

In keeping with the case study qualitative research approach, the interview transcripts were combed repeatedly in search of what turned out to be significant codes. The researcher then identified categories to contain these codes. These codes included words such as ask, new, friend, personal, afraid and help. The categories that emerged were helping and the personal nature of coaching interaction. Another category that emerged was the discomfort that the coaches felt in maintaining a professional or institutional role while delving into potentially personal matters, which in their normal discourse would make them a friend. This fuzzy line between coach and friend engendered discussion and recommendations for future training and discussion of this topic with the other coaches. The findings are revealed by a discussion of these categories.

Helping

Other categories found in the data analysis included Helping Others (Coachees), Motivation for Helping, Helping Oneself (the Coach), Personal, and Discomfort. These latter two categories were interesting in that the developmental challenge to the coaches was emphasized. One finding that emerged was that the subjects were motivated to help themselves in an effort at self-advancement, and to help others, due to an intrinsic motivation to perform altruistic acts for others. Their excitement about the project was evidenced by their recommendations for future training and expansion of the *s2s Coaching* program.

Interview transcript data reflected a true concern on the part of the coaches to help coachees avoid some of the difficulties endured by the coaches as they came to college. What was not clear was whether such concern was already a hallmark of the coach's personality, experiences or overall makeup, or whether inclusion in the coaching training may have instilled in coaches a higher level of concern for coachees than might otherwise have existed. This question could be useful for future study.



## Conclusions

It was this intrinsic propensity for altruistic acts that lent itself to much speculation about human nature and what kinds of people would be drawn to become a peer coach. It also leads to areas for future research in the many potential effects of providing an institutional framework within which students can help each other and flourish academically, cognitively, through the acquisition of leadership skills such as emotional intelligence, advanced communication skills, critical thinking, and social networking.

Coaching is a leadership skill and a leadership activity that cannot help but add to the emotional and intellectual development of students involved in this activity. Psychosocial and career development should be considered within this theme and are rich sources for future study as well. This developmental realm makes the study of the effects of coaching on students of interest to proponents of student development theory and practice.

That the coaching model, according to this tiny sample, would be helpful in easing the transition to college is clear. Whether it would assist in retention would take a longer study, over the course of two or even three semesters. This would require follow up surveys, interviews, and observations to deduce what effect the coaching intervention had on students' success in any measurable way, including returning to college. This would require a study of a much vaster scale. The influence of expectations of the coaches on outcomes of the coaching sessions and any outcomes for the coachee may be a fruitful area for future research. Another idea for future research was related to how to match coaches and coachees in a deliberative manner.

## Further information

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## Quote from Participant

*Well as far as being a peer coach, I tell them, you know what it was like when you first came here, you didn't know much and you didn't have anybody to guide you, why not have the personal satisfaction of helping someone avoid that first part, where you are just lost and just help them to not waste . . . and just hit the ground running.*

## Literature cited

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