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ABSTRACT

Retention among academically at-risk students is becoming an increasing issue for universities across the nation. Although there are many studies on interventions that serve college students, there is a lack of empirical studies on academically at-risk students and the impact of academic coaching for this population. The purpose of this research is to explore approaches implemented by American universities in academic coaching, their effectiveness in serving first-year at-risk students, and common characteristics among academically at-risk students. This exploratory quantitative study surveyed a convenience sample of 13 university employees that oversee academic coaching. Descriptive analyses show that various approaches were used in academic coaching, leading to overall increased student academic performance. The findings show self-regulation and strength-based perspective are the most impactful in increasing academic performance resulting in higher GPA scores and retaining at the institution. However, characteristics among academically at-risk students continue to vary among different universities. Further investigation is needed to validate these findings using an experimental study with a representative sample.

The Effectiveness of Academic Coaching in Improving Academic Performance of First-
Year At-Risk Students in American Universities

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of The School of Social Work

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

By

Anna Kleen

May 2021

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate Anna Kleen, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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This thesis is dedicated to my family, friends, and professors. Thank you for your endless support and reassurance. Thank you for the positive encouragement that you have given me along this journey. I am incredibly grateful for the support I had. This journey would not have been the same without all of you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank those who have greatly assisted me throughout this journey. To Kaitlynd Satterfield, Melinda Isbell, my committee members, the Department of University Access Programs, the School of Social Work, my parents, my sisters, and my friends, thank you. All of you have made an impact on me this year. Thank you for believing in me, I will never forget it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	LIST OF TABLES	iv
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
II.	LITERATURE REVIEW	4
	Literature Search Strategies	4
	Definition of “At-Risk Students”	4
	Common Constituents in Academically At-Risk Students	5
	Low Retention Rate	5
	Initiative to Seek Help	6
	Engagement on Campus	6
	Interventions for Academically At-Risk College Students	7
	College Readiness Programs and Summer Programs	7
	Study Skills and Tutoring Programs	8
	Academic Coaching as an Intervention	9
	Inquiry Model	9
	Special Interventions for Special Populations	10
	Self-Regulation	11
	Improved Academic Performance Outcomes	12
	Conclusion of the Literature Review	13

III.	METHODOLOGY	14
	Research Design.....	14
	Sample.....	14
	Instruments.....	15
	Ethical Considerations	16
	Data Collection	16
	Data Analysis	17
IV.	FINDINGS.....	18
	Characteristics of the Sample Institutions.....	18
	Descriptive Statistics of Academic Coaching.....	19
	Academically At-Risk Students.....	23
	Recommendations by the People Who Oversee Academic Coaching.....	25
	Professional Development	25
	Best Practices	26
V.	DISCUSSION	28
	Discussion of Major Findings.....	28
	Information about Academic Coaching.....	28
	Best Practices.....	29
	Outcome Methods.....	29
	Evaluation and Effectiveness.....	30
	Defining Academically At-Risk Students.....	30
	Respondents' Recommendations for the Improvement of Academic Coaching..	32
	Implications of Findings	32

Implications for Practice	33
Use Evidence-Based Practice Interventions	33
Need for Annual Assessments	34
Implications for Policy.....	34
Limitations of the Study and Implications for Further Research.....	35
Conclusions.....	38
REFERENCES	39
APPENDIX: IRB Approval Letter	44

LIST OF TABLES

1. Characteristics of the Sample Institutions and Programs ($N = 13$).....	19
2. Information about Academic Coaching ($N = 13$)	22
3. Defining Academically At-Risk College Students ($N = 13$).....	24

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For many years, retention has been a focus to which universities are continuing to pay close attention. In higher education settings, there is always room for improvement. Shapirio et al. (2016) found that only 10% of students who were attaining their bachelor's degree were able to complete it during the standard four years. Roughly 50% of these students completed their bachelor's in six years (Shapirio et al., 2016). One of the main factors that contributes to students being at risk for dropping out of college is their ability to afford to pay their tuition. Lekena and Bayaga (2018) found that 50% of students in a study dropped out of college due to their families struggling with finances and not having the money to pay for their education. It is evident that retention is an issue that many universities see in students who are academically at risk.

Students who struggle with managing their academics and adjusting to higher-level education need additional guidance. In order to assess and intervene with students who may be less prepared for college, it is essential that the universities observe students during their college experience (Gray, 2013). Lizzio and Wilson (2013) have identified multiple factors that can identify a student to be at risk. Some of those factors include the challenge of transition among first-year students. To address the factors that increase the likelihood of a student being at risk, Lizzio and Wilson have also agreed that universities should help during students' first semester in a higher education setting to better prepare

them for success (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). For example, academic coaching is an intervention that can assist students with their academic challenges. Unfortunately, there has been little research discovered on the effectiveness of this intervention and how it has benefited this population of students.

As mentioned previously, there has been little research done on academic coaching, which could be due to the variety in titles for academic resources that universities offer. Titles such as “academic intervention,” “coaching,” and “academic assistance” have been discovered. Though there may be commonalities between these interventions, little research has been found that focuses specifically on academic coaching as an intervention for academically at-risk students. Additionally, the research gaps include not knowing what methods are being used and/or how have they served students that are academically at risk. There can be a variety in approaches used based on the type of university (e.g., private, public, mid-size, small size, etc.). It is essential to be aware of and study how the intervention is designed due to the variety in content and approaches that can be taken (McCabe et al., 2020).

The purpose of this research is to explore what approaches American universities have been implemented in academic coaching and how effective are they in serving first year at risk students. Students’ overall academic performance (i.e., GPA and retention rate) will be measured as well. This study aims to take a holistic approach in discovering what specific strategies are used to help those students. The empirical data to achieve this purpose include sending a survey to employees who oversee the program. Although the respondents are asked to answer the questions based on data they have collected if possible, there is a possibility that the answers could be based on their subjective

opinions (i.e., professional judgment). Therefore, there are some limitations in presenting objective data to understand the phenomenon regarding this program. However, this study will contribute to creating the opportunity for other universities to improve academic coaching on their campus. If there is a common method to be proven beneficial, then it can be suggested for more universities across America to begin implementing this approach to better serve their students.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Search Strategies

The purpose of this literature review is to discover the relationship between academically at-risk students and the effectiveness of academic interventions they participate in at a university setting. Additionally, it aims to discover how American universities classify a student to be at-risk. Each university can have their own qualifications that will classify a student to be at-risk. The literature review attempted to find studies focusing solely on first-year students; however, a variety of classifications were discovered. To achieve the purpose of this literature review, the researcher performed literature searches in the Abilene Christian University Brown Library One Search Database. The search terms included: “academic coaching,” “academic advising” “academic intervention” “at-risk,” “first-year,” “13th year,” “freshman,” “college students” “higher education,” “university,” “retention,” academic performance.” The articles selected were peer-reviewed and were written between the years 2008-2020.

Definition of “At-Risk Students”

It is important to be aware that, while there are common factors amongst students who are identified as “at risk” across higher education settings, there is no universal definition of an “at-risk student.” The university at which this study is being conducted has their own qualifications to consider a student to be at risk. It can include a 2.0 or

lower GPA and/or below standard SAT score prior to entering college. In McCabe's study, researchers identified students to be at-risk by seeing if the student was a first-generation student and/or evaluating their GPA in high school (McCabe et al., 2020). Additionally, Gray (2013) discovered universities that frame at-risk students by associating them with the student's socio-economic status and overall considers the implications the family can have on the student's academics. Based on the literature discovered, it is evident that there is a research gap in defining a student to be characterized as academically at risk.

Common Constituents in Academically At-Risk Students

While there is no universal definition of "at-risk students," there are common characteristics to be considered. Understanding the multiple factors at play can assist in identifying what challenges the student is experiencing and what intervention(s) may be needed for them to overcome it.

Low Retention Rate

Students who are at-risk have a higher chance of not returning the next semester. The U.S Department of Education stated that in the last fifty years, nearly half of all students who entered a university withdrew from the school and did not complete their degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). When students continue to learn in a higher education setting without a strong academic skill set, their education is jeopardized. This includes at-risk students leaving the university and not completing their degree (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). In addition to this, Capstick et al. (2019) defined *retention* as a student returning after receiving intervention and completing the following semester. Low retention rate is an issue that has been known for a long period of time.

This is oftentimes due to students either not being prepared for higher level education or they did not develop the necessary academic skill set to complete their degree. However, another aspect to consider is if the student took advantage of any resources on campus to adapt to the college environment and overcome their academic challenges.

Initiative to Seek Help

Another issue that should be taken into consideration is the student taking the initiative to search for help. Rheinheimer et al. (2010) discovered that at-risk students are less likely to find assistance, even though they are aware that they need it. They suggest that a strategy must be implemented in order to encourage students to find assistance when they are at risk (Rheinheimer et al., 2010). Kot (2014) suggested that universities should have a policy that requires students to participate in an intervention that assists with their academic challenges at least one time during each semester of their first year in college. They suggest this is due to the great impacts the academic intervention had on their students' increases in GPA after participating in the intervention. The policy should also include incentives for the students to participate (Kot, 2014). The initiative for students to seek help is important for them to consider while they are already in college. However, it is also important to consider a more holistic factor, which is the students' overall experiences on campus.

Engagement on Campus

There are more implications to a student's academic success than their academic performance. Studies have shown that if a student's overall college experience is majority negative, they may lose their ability to be motivated to be successful. In Keshock and Adkin's (2014) study, it was found that the institution's persistence rate was 64% for

students who did not participate in a learning community. Similarly, Kuh et al. (2008) discovered that first-year students who were engaged in communities benefited them academically and were more likely to continue to their second year of college. (Kuh et al., 2008). Likewise, Robinson and Gahgan (2010) discusses the importance of creating an academic plan and an engagement plan. They also discovered that students who created a planned process to know how they will be engaged on campus resulted in higher overall satisfaction in college, greater retention, and higher likelihood completing their degree (Robinson & Gahagan, 2010). Multiple authors have discussed that engagement and having positive experiences on campus plays a major role in students' retention. This enables the students to have the capability to achieve academic success and complete their degree.

Interventions for Academically At-Risk College Students

Now that the factors of at-risk students have been discovered, the literature shows that there are multiple programs that offer academic assistance to improve students' readiness for college, study skills, and knowledge in specific subjects. The following section discusses interventions that universities offer to prepare students for higher education.

College Readiness Programs and Summer Programs

Research has proven that summer bridge intervention programs help students transition from high school to college. Grace-Odeleye and Santiago (2019) created a bridge program for students who come from lower-income families and who were considered not to be ready for college. They helped these students not only increase their academic skill set, but also help them prepare socially for this huge transition. These

summer programs can provide early intervention and ultimately prevent students from needing academic coaching once they are in their fall and spring semesters. Herndon and Nemelka (2016) found that when students participate in an intervention such as this before entering college, they develop a positive relationship with the college and are more likely to hold onto that positive relationship even after graduation. Overall, these two studies have shown that summer programs are noted to increase the student's interest in the university, which subsequently increases the student's motivation to do well and work hard when they arrive on campus. This demonstrates that the experiences students have with the college environment impact their retention.

Study Skills and Tutoring Programs

Sikhwari and Pillay (2012) conducted a study that focuses on first-year at-risk students. The study researched a study skills program. Their study discovered the value in individualizing the student's needs and taking their abilities and strengths into consideration while incorporating the student's sense of self-responsibility for their success (Sikhwari & Pillay, 2012). Similarly, Olson-McBride, Hassemer, and Hoepner's (2016) study included researching the effects the Colligate Bridge Research Experience (CBRE) program had on at-risk freshman students. Students partake in this program during the first two semesters in undergraduate programs. The program teaches students the study skills they need to succeed in a higher education setting. Based on their findings, it was concluded that programs like the CBRE are successful in seeing higher retention rates. Tutoring is another service that is commonly offered in higher education settings. Rheinheimer and colleagues (2010) created a study that focused specifically on at-risk students and found that the tutoring program significantly improved student

retention rate and students' overall academic performance. They concluded that tutoring is an effective intervention for assisting students to be successful in college and ultimately graduate on time.

Academic Coaching as an Intervention

Though there is much research on the effectiveness of other interventions that serve at-risk students, there has been little research done on academic coaching. However, the literature found that universities use different methods in their program. The following include the approaches that have been commonly used in most academic coaching programs.

Inquiry Model

One common method that has been suggested to be implemented in universities is the inquiry model (Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016). According to Mitchell and Gansemer-Topf's (2016) study, this model allows the student to be the one that reflects on their behaviors and actions. Instead of the academic coach telling the student what to do, the coach asks questions that are open-ended and assists the student in creating a plan to overcome their academic challenges. In this format, students are required to participate. In doing so, they gain the ability to self-regulate their strengths and weaknesses and can seek resources when necessary. This creates an environment that allows the student to self-determine their goals, such as retention, and ensure they are empowered to succeed independently. Additionally, Parker discovered that students defined *coaching* as "a personalized, self-directed service that promoted their self-determination" (Parker & Boutelle, 2009, p. 209). Though this article presented students'

perceptions and definitions of academic coaching, it does give an accurate description of what academic coaching has to offer.

Special Interventions for Special Populations

There has been an increased need for higher education institutes to focus on retention and completing their degree (Capstick et al., 2019). The need for academic coaching is increasing at multiple universities. Walker's (2016) research focuses on students with disabilities; she stated in her section discussing academic support centers that there are not enough universities that offer students, with and without learning disabilities, access to academic assistance (Walker, 2016). Additionally, this research discovered the reasons for starting academic coaching. Parker and Boutelle (2009) stated that one of the initial reasons many students were interested in seeking coaching included that "coaching could help them develop greater academic proficiency, they had positive views of coaching from past experience on other campuses or from positive word-of-mouth, and/or it was included in the cost of their tuition" (p. 208). More research is needed to determine the factors that are resulting in this. It is unknown if universities have similar strategies that they use in academic coaching. There may be academic coaching programs that only help students who are at severe academic risk. However, Frischmann and Moor (2017) claim that academic coaching has been beneficial for students who have high academic concerns, but this program should reach out to all other students as well.

Depending on the university, academic coaching assists students who are at high academic risk and/or those who do not present a severe need for assistance. There are some approaches that are used for specific populations that have special needs. The

article by Rando et al. (2016) discusses an academic coaching model that targeted students on the autism spectrum. In this article, it states the Raiders on the Autism Spectrum Excelling (RASE) program was created with the intention for students to participate frequently during their first year. If the student improved, then they would participate less frequently in the years to follow. This allowed the program to ensure the student becomes independent (Rando et al., 2016). However, another important aspect to consider includes the relationship between the coach and the student which this article did not discuss.

Jones and Andrews (2019) noted a call for action should take place concerning the relationship between the student and the coach. The student and the coach should have a strong relationship because this will likely make coaching more effective (Jones & Andrews, 2019). Additionally, in order to evaluate whether the program is effective, annual assessments should be conducted (Bearman & Lewis, 2017). In Bearman and Lewis' (2017) study, an assessment was created that was intended to improve the retention rate for first-year students by ensuring that the university was following the necessary accommodations and procedures that were aligned with the student learning outcomes. Ultimately, their research suggests that all institutions must make sure that they are accompanying their students. This annual assessment has helped the university to see how they can improve the retention among their students.

Self-Regulation

Mitchell et al. (2016) discuss the importance of allowing the student to have the ability to self-determine their needs, discover their strengths, and learn how to implement the strategies they learn independently. They believe that for the student to engage in the

learning process, they need to take the initiative in putting forth the effort for their success, especially for students with disabilities (Mitchell, 2016). Although this article focused on students specifically with a disability, this can be transferable to students who are academically at risk. For example, Lizzio and Wilson (2013) stated interventions that are “self-regulation based” can contribute to a student’s academic performance (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013). Additionally, self-regulation is similar self-reflection. According to Laverick (2018), self-reflection is also an important skill for students to have. In Laverick’s study, students were required to self-reflect in a journal after they met with their mentor. Self-reflection allows students to have the capability to gain retention in the strategies they are learning.

Improved Academic Performance Outcomes

Lehan et al. (2020) created a study that focused on online graduate students who participated in academic coaching. During this study they looked at how academic coaching impacted the student’s perceived academic performances. Their study discovered that those students who engaged in academic coaching more frequently benefited from the program more compared to students who participated less frequently, specifically only one to two times. Unfortunately, it was not proven to be statistically significant (Lehan et al., 2020). However, Osborne et al. (2019) conducted a study that discovered that how students perceived academic success was impacted by participating in one or more of the following academic interventions: academic coaching, supplemental instruction, or tutoring. The results indicated that there was a significant impact seen on the students who decided to engage in the three interventions. Overall,

their results indicated that students who had more frequent participations had a higher probability of achieving self-perceived academic success (Osborne et al., 2019).

Conclusion of the Literature Review

Overall, the findings that have been discovered through the literature suggest that academic interventions have been proven to increase academic performance in students that are at risk. The literature shows that academic coaching varies according to the students that they assist, and there are multiple factors that play a role in classifying a student to be at risk. One of the research gaps includes discovering what practices are being implemented in academic coaching and how have they served students that are academically at risk. Additionally, each university can hold their own definition of classifying a student to be academically at risk. The results discovered within this research intend to further examine the research gap of this unclear definition.

Based on what the literature has presented, it is known that there are multiple interventions that can assist students in a higher education setting. There can be a variety of approaches used based on the type of university (e.g., private, public, mid-size, small size, etc.). To bridge this gap, the purpose of this study is to explore what approaches that have been implemented in academic coaching are beneficial to first-year at-risk students in American universities, especially on academic performance (i.e., GPA and retention rate). The intended research questions are the following:

- **RQ1:** What are the benefits of academic coaching?
- **RQ2:** What other interventions do universities offer that serve academically at-risk students?
- **RQ3:** What are the commonalities within academically at-risk students?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of academic coaching on first-year at-risk students in American universities and explore common characteristics among academically at-risk students. This section aims to present specific research methods to conduct an empirical study.

Research Design

This quantitative study conducted a survey that assesses how universities across America have implemented academic coaching and how effective it has been. The rationale for surveying faculty members from American universities instead of focusing on the academic coaching program at the university the researcher attends is that their university only recently implemented this program. This survey will provide enough data to understand the program implementation and its effectiveness. It is considered a cross-sectional survey because the respondent will be expected to answer the question at a single time point by using collected data or their best professional judgment.

Sample

The study population are employees that oversee various universities' academic coaching programs across America. Since academic coaching has recently been implemented at the university in which the researcher is, the universities that will be asked to participate are institutions that have implemented this program at least one year.

A desirable sampling frame would have been a list of employees from all universities that have implemented academic coaching in America. The researcher will identify universities that have an academic coaching program in America by navigating the Internet. The researcher will go to the website of each of the universities to identify an employee who oversees the program and will send an email to ensure if the person is the best fit to participate this survey. Having considered the process, the sampling method of this study is considered a convenience sampling because the researcher will not have the list of all employees who fit this criterion. According to Yegidis, Weinbach, and Myers (2018), “convenience sampling” refers to selecting participants that are quickly and easily accessible for the researcher. Although this sampling method has limitations in representing the study population, the researcher attempts to address this issue by inserting questions in the survey that the participants must answer first before they can move on to the next questions. This will eliminate the possibilities of analyzing data from a participant that has not met the criterion.

Instruments

Because there is no existing survey that can achieve the purpose of this study, the researcher has developed a survey. The validity of this measurement may have limitations due to the survey being created by the researcher. The survey includes thirteen questions in three sections.

The first section of this survey asks some general questions regarding the characteristics of the institution (e.g., the size, indicating if it is a public vs. private institute). The second section includes questions that are specifically related to the participant’s perceived outlook on the overall academic performance of the students that

participated in the program. The last section includes questions to discover the methods that are used in their program and what benefits have been observed based on student participation. This sections also focuses on asking questions tailored to academically at-risk students. These questions are asked in a manner that provide the participant an option to answer some questions either based on their professional judgment or based on data collected by their institution. As a result of the questions being tailored to discover specific aspects of their program, there are limitations in fully understanding the effectiveness of the program. Participants may be reluctant to share this information and provide answers that may not be accurate. Therefore, the measurement may have issues with validity and reliability because there is a possibility for the respondent to provide inaccurate answers.

Ethical Considerations

There were minimal risks for participating in this study. Due to each respondent being an employee providing information based on a professional estimate or collected data, no students will be placed at risk for breaching confidentiality. However, there is a risk for the respondent to answer questions inaccurately. Although they must indicate whether they answered based on professional judgment or collected data, if their answer is not honest the results will not be as accurate compared to answers that are based on collected data.

Data Collection

The surveys were emailed to the employee that oversees academic coaching and has access to data regarding this program. After the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study (see Appendix A), the researcher sent an invitation that included the

Google Form survey link to the person who oversees the program at each university. The respondents electronically signed the informed consent to represent their willingness to participate in the study and then participate in the survey. No information containing students' names or specific details about individual grades nor personal information about the respondent will be collected. All data will be kept on computers of the researcher and the faculty advisor that require a password to access it.

Data Analysis

The quantitative sections of the results were analyzed through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The frequency and descriptive analysis will be conducted to describe the sample characteristics and major answers to the questions. The responses to the qualitative questions will be analyzed with content analysis to categorize them into themes and discover the commonalities.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, study findings are presented that describe participant characteristics, states in which the participants worked, and types of universities. In addition, other descriptive characteristics are presented, such as years the program has been active, program size, as well as the nature and scope of the academic coaching programs across several universities.

Out of the 50 survey invitation emails that were sent out, 13 responses were collected (a response rate of 26%.) The surveys were sent to universities that were located in the following states/regions: Texas, Florida, D.C, New Jersey, California, Colorado, South Carolina, New York, Louisiana, Indiana, Oregon, Iowa, Philadelphia, and Oregon. In order to protect any identifiable information from the participants, it is unknown in which states the 13 respondents are located. Tables 1 through 3 present the survey results from the 13 respondents.

Characteristics of the Sample Institutions

Table 1 presents characteristics of the universities where academic coaching is offered. The results indicated that 9 out of the 13 universities were public (69.20%), and 4 were private (30.80%). There was a variety in the size of university as well with 4 small-sized universities (30.20%), 4 medium-sized universities (30.80%), and 5 large-sized universities (38.50%). Diversification was also noted in how many years the

program has been implemented at the university. Additionally, four respondents answered that their university implemented the program for 1 to 3 years (30.80%), 4 answered 3 to 5 years (30.80%), and 5 answered 5 or more years (38.50%). Less diversification was seen when discovering how many individuals oversee academic coaching. Two responded that they only have 1 person that oversees the program (15.40%), and 1 responded that they have 2 people (7.70%). However, 10 of the respondents (76.90%) stated that they have 3 or more employees that oversee the program.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Sample Institutions and Programs (N = 13)

Variable	Category or Range	<i>n</i>	%
University Type	Public	9	69.20
	Private	4	30.80
University Size	Small (fewer than 5,000 students enrolled)	4	30.80
	Medium (5,000-15,000 students enrolled)	4	30.80
	Large (more than 15,000 students)	5	38.50
Years of Program Existence	1-3 years	4	30.80
	3-5 years	4	30.80
	5 or more years	5	38.50
Number of People in Charge	1 person	2	15.40
	2 people	1	7.70
	3 or more people	10	76.90

Descriptive Statistics of Academic Coaching

Table 2 presents what practices and methods universities are implementing within academic coaching as well as which ones are effective in improving their student academic performance. The top three methods that universities implement include one-on-one sessions (100%), self-regulation (46.15%), and group sessions (38.46%). The methods that are put into practice less frequently include accountability partners

(15.38%) and motivational interviewing (7.69%). The top four methods that are effective in increasing student academic performance include one-on-one sessions (100%), strength-based perspective (46.15%), group sessions (38.46%), and self-regulation (38.46%). Accountability partners (15.38%) and motivational interviewing (15.38%) were seen as less effective compared to other methods.

Table 2 also presents what outcomes universities assess when evaluating the effectiveness of their program. Ten respondents (76.92%) assess student retention, 9 respondents (69.23%) assess student GPA, 8 respondents (61.54%) assess student feedback. Only 2 respondents (15.38%) assess students' class attendance. Three respondents provided their own written answer. One respondent stated that their university uses "Growth mindset & understanding & use of research-based study strategies." The second respondent stated they assess "skill mastery based on a rubric we created with the help of our university's assessment department, other descriptive stats such as classification, academic status, gender." The third respondent stated that they assess the "need for remediation, professionalism evaluation" of the academic coaches.

In addition to assessing student academic performance, the respondents were asked how they overall evaluate the program. Nine respondents (69.23%) stated that they conduct annual assessments, 6 respondents (46.15%) stated they use student interviews to evaluate the effectiveness of their program, and 2 respondents (15.38%) compare outcomes by utilizing pre-tests and post-tests. Four respondents provided their own description of how they evaluate the effectiveness of their program. The responses include, "Regression analysis of grades & retention," "each visit is ranked according to the skills mastery rubric we created, persistence rates, student engagement,

student testimonials, etc.,” and “student surveys.” Based on the program evaluation, the respondents were asked how effective academic coaching is in serving academically at-risk students on a Likert scale from 1 through 5, with 1 being strongly ineffective and 5 being strongly effective. Five respondents (38.50%) answered a 4 out of 5.

Table 2*Information about Academic Coaching (N = 13)*

Variable	Category	n	%
Academic	One on One sessions with students	13	100.00
Coaching Method (All that apply)	Group Sessions	5	38.46
	Accountability Partners	2	15.38
	Motivational Interviewing	1	7.69
	Strength-Based Perspective	4	30.77
	Self-Regulation	6	46.15
Effective method (All that apply)	One on One sessions with students	13	100.00
	Group Sessions	5	38.46
	Accountability Partners	2	15.38
	Motivational Interviewing	2	15.38
	Strength-Based Perspective	6	46.15
Outcomes used (All that apply)	Self-Regulation	5	38.46
	Student GPA	9	69.23
	Student Class Attendance	2	15.38
	Student Retention	10	76.92
	Student feedback	8	61.54
	Other: Growth mindset & understanding & use of research-based study strategies	1	7.69
	Other: skill mastery based on a rubric, other descriptive stats such as academic status.	1	7.69
	Other: need for remediation, professionalism evaluation	1	7.69
Evaluation method (All that apply)	Professionalism evaluation	1	7.69
	No Evaluation Is Done	1	7.69
	Pretests and Post tests	2	15.38
	Interview Students	6	46.15
	Annual assessments	9	69.23
	Other: Regression analysis of grades & retention	1	7.69
	each visit is ranked according to the skills mastery rubric we created, persistence rates, student engagement, student testimonials	1	7.69
	Other: student surveys	1	7.69
Effectiveness based on the program evaluation ^a	Other: end of semester assessments, GPA increase from one semester to the next.	1	7.69
	Somewhat Effective	4	30.80
	Effective	5	38.50
	Strongly Effective	4	30.80

^a Likert scale: 1: Strongly Ineffective, 2: Ineffective, 3: Somewhat effective, 4: Effective,

5: Strongly Effective

Academically At-Risk Students

Table 3 presents a variety of definitions that universities use to define a student to be academically at-risk. Five respondents (38.50%) stated that their university does have an explicit definition for academically at-risk students. However, 7 respondents (53.80%) answered that there is no explicit definition. The table also presents data on how effective academic coaching is in serving academically at-risk students. Common definitions include incoming freshmen with a 2.0 or lower GPA (38.50%). One responded defined academically at-risk students as “second semester freshman on academic probation, First Gen, low SAT/ACT scores, potential financial issues, non-traditional students.” There was a wide variety in answers to what percentage of their students are academically at-risk. Two respondents (15.40%) said that 100% of their students are academically at-risk. The rest of the answered varied between 30-85%. The average was 71%.

Two respondents (15.40%) state that 73% of first-year academically at-risk students increased their GPA after participating in academic coaching. All apart from one provided a percentage higher than 50%. The average was 63.5%. Similar percentages were given when asking what percentage of first year academically at-risk students retained after participating in academic coaching. The average for students retaining after participating in academic coaching was 57%.

Table 3*Defining Academically At-Risk Students (N = 13)*

Variable	Category	n	%
Explicit definition of risk students	Yes	5	38.50
	No	7	53.80
Definition	Incoming freshmen with a 2.0 or lower GPA	5	38.50
	“both GPA and by the students' backgrounds.”	1	7.70
	“second semester freshman on academic probation, First Gen, low SAT/ACT scores, potential financial issues, non-traditional students”	1	7.70
	“student in the third graduating quartile of HS class with a certain GPA	1	7.70
	“We do not have a common definition.”	1	7.70
	Did not answer	4	30.80
% of academically at-risk among clients	30%	1	7.7
	35%	1	7.7
	80%	1	7.7
	85%	1	7.7
	100%	2	15.4
	Did not answer	7	53.8
			Mean=71.67%
% of GPA improvement after the program	30%	1	7.7
	50%	1	7.7
	73%	2	15.4
	75%	1	7.7
	80%	1	7.7
	Did not answer	7	53.8
			Mean=63.5%
% of retention after the program	15%	1	7.7
	50%	1	7.7
	75%	1	7.7
	90%	1	7.7
	Did not answer	9	69.2
			Mean=57.5%

Note: Six people (46.2%) responded the answers based on the data collected by the institution.

Recommendations by the People Who Oversee Academic Coaching

The survey includes one open-ended question. The question asked, “Do you have any recommendations for those who are wanting to implement academic coaching at their university?” The answers to this question was divided into the following categories: professional development and best practices. Within each category there are two subcategories. There were 15 answers given to this question. Two people provided an answer on one survey.

Professional Development

Multiple respondents provided an answer that was related to improving professional development. These responses focus on the coaches in the program. One respondent stated, “Consider a peer-based model with strong professional development, supervision and support embedded in the program for peer coaches. . . . I supervise, train and mentor 35 peer coaches who meet 1x1 with students and support the freshman transition course.” Similarly, one respondent answered, “robust professional development for coaches, ensure that coaches have legitimacy in the eyes of the students (high achievers in fields that students are studying).”

Two respondents also believe in the importance of cultivating relationships with other staff members. One respondent stated, “One of our most effective methods has been to cultivate relationships with specific departments on campus. The partnerships we’ve created lead to more referrals from faculty members, and that often results in more student appointments.” Similarly, another respondent stated, “People are often unaware of what academic coaching is in my experience, confusing it with subject tutoring. If you can have informational sessions, especially with faculty and staff, about what academic

coaching is and how it can help, then more students might utilize it both by their own volition and at professors' recommendations.” Common themes that can be collected from their responses include the importance of working in disciplinary teams and ensuring that all staff members across the campus are aware of what academic coaching is.

Best Practices

The second category includes recommendations of what best practices universities utilize. Two respondents discussed the importance of evidence-based practice. Additionally, a theme is seen in the importance of taking an interdisciplinary approach and consulting with other campus resources so that there is an increase of awareness of academic coaching. One respondent recommended that universities should “Focus on study strategies backed by cognitive science research on human learning.” Similarly, a second respondent recommended:

Research best practices in the field, do site visits either in-person or virtually but talk to programs who have been established to learn from them, get faculty buy-in, however you can- do brief presentations at their departmental meetings, faculty senate meetings, do in-class workshops as one of your services so faculty and students see how professional and knowledgeable your team is. Don't reinvent the wheel. If you find something that works at another institution and you think it would be good for your program, then ask to use it . . . whatever it may be (forms, methods, handouts, etc.).

One respondent stated, “Use a clear framework and model that helps coaches use effective approaches and co-construct strategies for academic success together.”

A common recommendation seen in the responses included being intentional while working with the students and taking a more holistic approach. One respondent stated:

Center all of your students with more critical lenses. Not just those who are 'high-achieving' or 'at-risk.' Think about what opportunity or cultural gaps may be making the difference in your students' academic (and personal) experiences. The academic is personal and the personal - past and present - strongly impacts the academic. Additionally, be proactive and supportive. Remember, words matter AND so do actions.

A second respondent recommended to "Interview other schools as you are doing now, seek buy-in from faculty and administration across campus. The more intentional you are, the more impactful your services will be." The two respondents recommend fostering an approach that is client-centered and that is genuine and holistic. These recommendations show the importance of valuing students' success and embracing the desire students have to make a difference in their academics which overall allows them to feel empowered and driven to graduate college.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The present study sought to examine what approaches American universities have implemented in academic coaching and how effective they are in serving first-year at-risk students. The study also sought to examine the research gap in that there is a no universal definition used to define students to be academically at-risk. This study also discovered how American universities define students to be academically at risk. This study revealed practices that were consistent with the contemporary literature in improving students' academic performance (i.e., GPA and retention rate). In addition to this, this study has also revealed approaches being used to evaluate the effectiveness of their program. Overall, the results suggest that academic coaching does increase academic performance of students that are academically at risk.

Discussion of Major Findings

The following section discusses what the findings entail and how the results relate to the literature that was discovered. This section will review what best practices, outcome methods, and evaluation methods are common as seen in the literature. Common characteristics of academically at-risk students were noted as well.

Information about Academic Coaching

The following sections discusses different dimensions in academic coaching such as “best practices,” “outcome methods,” and “evaluation & effectiveness.” The findings

often support the literature discovered. Based on the results, recommendations for academic coaching can be given to its program administrators.

Best Practices

The survey asked the respondents what practices are implemented within academic coaching and which of those practices improve the academic performance of academically at-risk students. All 13 respondents stated that they use one-on-one sessions and believe this to be an approach that does increase students' academic performance. Self-regulation is also seen as an approach that is implemented within their program and has also been supported in the literature. As discussed in the literature, this specific model is known as the "inquiry model" (Laverick, 2018; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; Parker & Boutelle, 2009). As seen in the results, strength-based perspective was seen as one of the top methods used that is effective in increasing student academic performance. The literature discusses that self-regulation often entails the student self-regulating their own strengths. These are two approaches that can be implemented simultaneously (Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016). Although less than half of the respondents choose self-regulation and strength-based perspective as an effective approach, it was seen as overall as more effective than other approaches.

Outcome Methods

The outcomes that are measured in order to test program effectiveness were not discussed in the literature. The survey discovers what outcomes universities are measuring to evaluate the effectiveness of their program. The results indicate that student retention is the most common outcome that is measured. This seems to support the idea that low retention rate is a risk factor that is becoming an alarmingly bigger issue in

higher education (Capstick et al., 2019; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In addition to measuring student retention, student GPA and student feedback were also commonly utilized as seen in the results. These results suggest that universities do measure outcomes that specifically effect student that are academically at-risk.

Evaluation and Effectiveness

As seen in the results, the most common method used to evaluate the effectiveness of academic coaching are annual assessments. This supports the literature in that annual assessments allow room for evaluation so that the program can continue to improve retention rate and academic performance (Bearman & Lewis, 2017). Student feedback was seen as a common method as well. Though effective evaluation methods were not discussed in the literature, the results of the survey suggest that these methods are commonly implemented and are effective. All respondents believe that they are at minimum “somewhat effective” in assisting students that are academically at-risk. These results indicate that academic coaching does increase students’ academic performance. More information regarding statistical significance is mentioned in the section below.

Defining Academically At-Risk Students

In attempt to discover common defining factors for academically at-risk students, the survey results show that this is a term that varies within each institution. Interestingly, more than half of the respondent stated that their university does not have an explicit definition (Gray, 2013). The majority of the respondents do utilize student GPA in order to define students as “at risk.”

With less than half of the institutions having a definition, they were unable to provide statistical information on how effective academic coaching is in serving this population. More than half of the respondents did not provide a percentage for the following: students served in the program are considered to be academically at risk and percentage of first year academically at-risk students increased their GPA after participating in academic coaching. One respondent stated that all of the students they serve are academically at risk. Other responses vary between 30 to 85 %. These results indicate that academic coaching programs across the United States do serve a high number of students who are academically at-risk.

Although the majority of the respondents did not provide an answer for this question, there is a positive correlation seen between academic coaching and an increase in student GPA. Five respondents provided a percentage that was higher than 50%. The survey results to this question support the literature in that academic coaching does improve student academic performance (Capstick et al., 2019; Lehan et al., 2020; Osborne et al., 2019; Rando et al., 2016). Considering the survey question about discovering the percentage of first-year academically at-risk students retained after participating in academic coaching, a majority of the respondents did not answer this question. The average was statistically significant with an average of 57%. Though little literature was discovered that supports academic coaching increasing student retention, low retention rate was seen as a common negative characteristic in students that are academically at risk (Bearman & Lewis, 2017; Capstick et al., 2019; Gary, 2013; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; McCabe et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). These

survey results suggest that academic coaching does assist students to retain in college and ultimately graduate meeting all their degree requirements.

Respondents' Recommendations for the Improvement of Academic Coaching

The open-ended question gathered recommendations to other universities that wish to implement academic coaching within their institution. Though little information was provided in the literature about what practices are implemented, the strong recommendations of focusing on the coaches' ability to effectively assist their students through support, supervision, and professional development is supported by the literature where it discusses the importance of the student believing the coaches have the ability to assist them. Overall, these are important aspects to have that would benefit the relationship between the coach and the student as well, ultimately allowing the student to benefit from academic coaching (Bearman & Lewis, 2017; Jones & Andrews, 2019). Additionally, the implication of evidence-based practices supports the findings of self-regulation and the strength-based perspective seen as some of the most effective practices in improving the academic performance of academically at-risk students (Laverick, 2018; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; Parker & Boutelle, 2009).

Implications of Findings

This study explored what practices and evaluation methods are implemented within academic coaching and discovered the effectiveness this program has on students that are academically at-risk. The study also explored common characteristics that are seen within academically at-risk students. Following the analysis of the results, there are implications for practice, policy, and research to still be considered.

Implications for Practice

The following section discusses the implications for practice such as the use of evidence-based practice interventions and the need for annual assessments. The results of the research create the opportunity for program administrators to evaluate how their university can improve their practices. Implementing the following practices are recommended for universities to implement to better improve academic coaching.

Use Evidence-Based Practice Interventions

The quantitative and qualitative results imply that the practice methods coaches are utilizing to assist their students should be evidence-based. As the quantitative results and literature suggests, program administrators of academic coaching should consider implementing self-regulation and strength-based perspective in their programs. The findings and literature suggest that these approaches are effective in improving academic performance of academically at-risk college students (Laverick, 2018; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; Parker & Boutelle, 2009). Based on these findings, universities are encouraged to use these practices to improve student GPA and increase student retention. In addition to incorporating these two practices, another recommendation is to adapt the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) as part of assessing students. Abulela and Davenport (2020) conducted a study on the LASSI assessment. This assessment utilizes a holistic approach in discovering what area a student is struggling academically. The assessment will focus on areas such as time management, study skills, and information processing. However, it will also focus on motivation, attitude, behaviors, and anxiety (Abulela & Davenport, 2020). Utilizing an assessment that is research based and holistic supports two of the respondents'

recommendations to utilize evidence-based approaches and one respondent's recommendation to apply holistic-based approaches. The literature also discussed the importance of applying holistic approaches in working with students that are academically at risk and acknowledged that there are many factors in students' lives that impact their academics (Gary, 2013).

Need for Annual Assessments

The most common evaluation method implemented as discovered in the findings is annual assessments. It is recommended that universities conduct annual and semi-annual evaluation assessments to ensure that the program is assisting students in overcoming their academic challenges. The annual assessments have also been noticed to be an efficient process to evaluate program effectiveness (Bearman & Lewis, 2017). These assessments will allow the opportunity for program administrators to measure student GPA and retention. They will also create an increasing awareness about students that are academically at risk. This will assist the academic coaches and program administrators in ensuring the student is receiving the assistance they need.

Implications for Policy

The results of this study imply some changes in the policies at an agency level. One recommendation for policy is for the university at which this research was conducted to develop their own definition of academically at-risk students for evaluation purposes. The department under which academic coaching falls does not determine what defines a student to be academically at risk, and there is no current definition that they follow. If a definition is in place, it will create the ability for academic coaches, program administrators, and departments across campus to better assess how to serve this

population of students. In addition to creating a definition, it is recommended that policies and procedures are in place for coaches to abide by when working with this population of students. As discovered in the recommendations, it is encouraged that all universities also consider the importance of interdisciplinary teams and work alongside other campus resources such as the student disability office and counseling centers. One possible suggestion would be requiring students to participate in a course that assists them with their academic challenges before they begin to impact their GPA. Implementing early intervention and creating incentives for students to participate have been supported in the literature (Kot, 2014). Implementation of these policies and procedures will ensure the coaches are providing the best care possible and that the student will receive the interventions that potentially results in improving their GPA and retaining at the university.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

There are several limitations to this research should be noted. First, because the survey was created by the researcher, some of the measurements (i.e., effectiveness of the program) have an issue regarding the validity and reliability. Second, the responses may include inaccurate answers because of the nature of the survey. For example, Section 2 includes a set of questions that offered the respondents the option to answer based on their personal estimate or on agency data. Though the respondent stated whether or not their answers were based on agency data, the responses based on personal estimate are potentially susceptible to inaccuracy. For future research, it is recommended that participants not have the option to answer the question based on personal estimate. However, with the limited time that the researcher had to collect data, it was decided to

allow this type of question in order to encourage completion of the survey. The time constraint serves as another limitation.

Third, the sample may not represent the population because the sampling method (i.e., convenience sampling and a change in the sampling plan). During the month of February 2021, the entire state of Texas shut down due to a snowstorm that affected every county in Texas. This resulted in campuses shutting down state-wide for an entire week. The researcher gathered her participants' information but had to put a halt in emailing the participants until campuses in Texas were open again. The original intended focus for the present research was to research academic coaching within Texan universities. However, due to the limited number of participants, the researcher expanded the university to be nationally located. This placed an additional time constraint on collecting data and ensuring enough time was left to analyze the results. The time constraint had an impact on the response rate; 50 surveys were sent with only 13 responses collected, resulting in a 26% response rate.

Fourth, the data include several missing values. In addition to a low response rate, there were questions within the survey that were not answered as well. Table 3 presents information for "Defining Academically At-Risk Students." Over 50% of the respondents did not answer three questions within this section. The lack of responses to this question is likely because the employee did not know the information, or they do not assist students that are academically at risk. For future research, it is recommended to allow more time to gather information about the university and the program administrators of academic coaching. Fifth, the list of evaluation methods did not provide a wide variety of options. Additionally, though it was discovered that annual assessments are commonly

utilized, it is unclear what outcomes are measured. For future research, it is recommended to further expand on what outcomes are measured on the annual assessments and discover what methods are used.

Despite the limitations, the present study did discover effective practices that are effective in improving academic performance in students that are academically at risk. As seen in the literature and the findings, self-regulation and strength-based perspectives are noted as an efficient strategy to assist students in increasing their GPA and retaining at the given university (Laverick, 2018; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; Parker & Boutelle, 2009). The findings from this study could potentially improve academic coaching among universities across the nation. It is recommended that universities continue to communicate with one another and continue to learn what practices are most efficient in assisting student's academic challenges.

Overall, the results show that academic coaching does improve academic performance, but there is room for improvement. Though students that were academically at risk did increase their GPA by 63% and retained by 57% after attending academic coaching, these numbers are not substantial. It is recommended that continued research is done on students that are academically at risk and study the holistic factors that place them at risk, such as their socioeconomic status, if they are a first-generation college student, if they are a non-traditional student, if they have learning disabilities, about their family background, etc. In discovering what systems are affecting a student's academics, program administrators from academic coaching, tutoring, study skills programs, summer programs, etc., will increase their awareness on what factors are impacting the student's academics and then create client-centered intervention plans.

Conclusions

This research sought to discover what approaches within academic coaching are effective in improving the academic performance of first-year academically at-risk college students. By surveying employees across America that oversee the university's academic coaching, the researcher was able to further examine the research gap of there being common practices that are implemented within academic coaching. The research also identified common characteristics among academically at-risk students. The results reveal that self-regulation and strength-based perspective greatly benefit the student's ability to increase their GPA and retain in college, which ultimately results in the ability for the student to graduate, meeting all degree requirements. Despite the limitations of the study, this study suggests some implications for practice and policy although universities should continue to research best interventions. Then the university will see a rise in the importance to advocate for students that are academically at risk and pay closer attention to the importance of ensuring that they retain. It is recommended that further research be done in order to continue serving this population of students.

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APPENDIX

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

Anna Kleen
Department of Social Work
ACU P.O. Box 27866
Abilene Christian University



Dear Anna,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "The Effectiveness of Academic Coaching in Improving Academic Performance of First-Year Academically At-Risk Students in Texan Universities",

(IRB# 21-011) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs