

EXTERNAL LEVERS TO MAXIMIZE CAREER COACHES' IMPACT ON NORTH CAROLINA HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Overview

The North Carolina (NC) Career Coach Program, a partnership with the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) and NC public high schools, works to support students' career and academic goals and builds partnerships with industry to meet regional industrial needs. An evaluation team gathered context on how career coaches conceptualize their roles and impact students' career and college objectives, and this brief aims to inform how NCCCS can streamline existing resources to maximize career coaches' impact on students. For example, if decision makers leveraged existing college capacity to remove administrative tasks from the coach's workload, coaches would be able to spend more time directly serving students.

Introduction

The North Carolina (NC) Career Coach Program, a partnership with the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) and NC public high schools, works to support students' career and academic goals and build partnerships with industry to meet regional industrial needs. Following a General Assembly provision granted in 2015, NCCCS established the NC Career Coach Program. Since its launch in 2017-2018, the Career Coach Program has grown in the number of coaches financially supported (from 55 in the 2017-18 academic year to 85 in the 2021-22 academic year) and has obtained increased funding from both the state and matched funds. Career coaches, as community college liaisons, have a wide reach in NC where in the 2020-2021 academic year, they engaged in 27,103 high school student coaching sessions and 292 workforce engagement activities.¹

Career coaches also supplement and complement the work of other college and career service providers, particularly high school counselors who serve large caseloads and have less available time to intensely focus on college and career decisions with students (Schnorenberg et al., 2021). Little is known about career coach-student interactions, the responsibilities coaches hold, and how they collaborate with local workforce partners. These areas of inquiry are important, as existing research has indicated that coaches can help students identify barriers to and build aspirations toward postsecondary education, guide students toward academic and career goals, and connect students to postsecondary resources and personnel.² The purpose of this brief is to explore how career coaches conceptualize their roles and impact students' postsecondary and professional trajectories.

[1] NCCCS, 2020

[2] Curtis & Valentine, 2020

Key Points

- The Career coach position focuses on three core elements: (a) student engagement, (b) professional pathways enrollment,³ and (c) employer and industry engagement.
- As compared to job descriptions and data from career coach focus groups and interviews, coaches are being asked to engage in other responsibilities that overlap with functional areas of the college, such as enrollment services, recruitment, marketing, and institutional research. They are also reaching groups of students beyond high school, monitoring student progress and providing interventions, giving external presentations, and reporting data. These responsibilities are complementary to the career coach position but limit their ability to accomplish core elements of their role.
- The ambiguity behind the career coach role, and variability of responsibilities depending on the school(s) or district(s) they occupied, has led to career coaches feeling overwhelmed in serving students.

The Project

To understand the experiences of NCCCS career coaches, we employed an explanatory case study approach as part of an evaluation project.⁴ We answered the following interrelated research questions:

- 1. How do career coaches make sense of their roles and responsibilities in supporting high school students' postsecondary and professional pathways?**
- 2. In what ways do career coaches leverage their roles and capital to serve students' career and college objectives?**

Our evaluation entailed several strategies. First, we observed a virtual orientation session of new coaches. Second, as a means of gathering demographic information and gauging interest for focus group participation, a NCCCS student support administrator distributed a survey to all 85 career coaches. Twenty-eight percent of career coaches (n=24) completed the surveys (see Appendix A). Third, we conducted five focus groups in Fall 2021, which involved 20 career coaches. Fourth, we interviewed eight career coaches who also participated in focus groups.

Finally, we drew on documents, including job postings, annual reports, and legislation, to attain additional context regarding the NC Career Coach Program.

Data analysis consisted of deductively developing a codebook of codes reflective of topics that emerged during preliminary conversations with NCCCS representatives and researching the program's history, as well as inductively coding while reviewing the transcripts. In particular, we employed emotion coding (i.e., how participants processed their experiences) and descriptive coding (which was useful in noting general topics that surfaced during the conversations) to identify themes.⁵ Pseudonyms are used with quotations in the findings section.

[3] In this context, professional pathways means educational course plans that lead to a community college credential, which can assist in the workforce.

[4] Yin, 2014

[5] Saldaña, 2016

Findings

We identified three themes in the data: (a) core elements of the career coach position described by NCCCS; (b) misalignment between NCCCS' Career Coach Program vision and position descriptions; and (c) career coach insights related to their ability to serve high school students.

Core Elements of the Career Coach Position

In the description of the Career Coach Program [on the NCCCS website](#) and the program's [annual report](#), NCCCS described three core elements that illustrated how coaches support high school students in exploring and achieving their college and career goals. These core elements included student engagement, professional pathways enrollment, and employer and industry engagement.

In our analyses of program documents, student engagement was described as one-on-one sessions between career coaches and students in which they discuss students' career interests, identify opportunities for deeper exploration and immersion, and develop guided pathways toward appropriate course selection related to the students' career interests.⁶ Career coaches engaged in discussions around challenges and opportunities they face in their roles. Professional pathways enrollment was the second core element, described as advising and counseling high school students about career and technical pathway options available through the high school and community college, assisting students in enrolling in or registering for these pathways, and advising students along their pathways.⁷

The third core element was employer and industry engagement, where career coaches served the community by engaging with the local workforce via meetings with workforce leaders, chambers of commerce, and other organizational leaders.⁸ Career coaches also remained knowledgeable about career pathway creation and/or pathway changes based on local workforce demands and the long term impact of the program in meeting career pipeline needs.⁹

Career Coach Vision Compared to Position Descriptions

Through our document review of career coach position descriptions from 18 NC community colleges or high schools posted between September 2021 and February 2022, we identified areas of misalignment between what NCCCS envisioned of the position and what local colleges and high schools ask of their coaches.¹⁰ The first area of misalignment is that career coaches are asked to take primary responsibility for the recruitment and retention of students (e.g., enrollment management) into programs, and in some cases, this recruitment extends to students in middle school, high school, or students who have dropped out of high school.



Additionally, misalignment exists in the blurred lines between career coach and [Career and College Promise \(CCP\)](#) work. Career coaches stayed apprised of CCP, a program in which high school students pursue 2-year degrees and certificates tuition-free while they are in high school; however, some career coaches spent a large percentage of their time managing CCP efforts. Claire shared, "CCP . . . does take a lot of my time away from the time I'm able to spend with students talking about career options." Consistently, coaches are asked to serve in multiple roles, essentially replicating a college's full set of student support services, yet in the body of a single individual.

[6] NCCCS. (2020). State Board of Community Colleges: Annual Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee: Career Coach Program.

[7] NCCCS. (n.d.). Career Coach Program.

[8] NCCCS. (2020). State Board of Community Colleges: Annual Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee: Career Coach Program.

[9] NCCCS. (n.d.). Career Coach Program.

[10] Important reminder that the Career Coach Program is a partnership between NCCCS, the community colleges, and the high schools where NCCCS contributes funds and the community colleges match these funds giving them reasonable input into how career coaches are deployed. It is the authors' intent in pointing out misalignment only to illustrate how the partnership can further improve their impact for students.

Career coaches were also tasked with handling administrative duties in tracking students' progress and providing interventions to ensure they persisted in their pathways, yet they carried this load with limited (or no) formal software, technologies commonly available to other student-facing professionals. The absence of a common system across NC to input and track student data impacted career coaches' efficiency in addressing their voluminous set of responsibilities. At Danielle's school, their PowerSchool platform access was held by the CCP liaison, requiring coaches to request information from that person for transcripts or other information: "Depending on how busy she is, depends on how long it takes us to get it," she said. "We don't have immediate access." Paula expressed how she and many others lack a platform for looking up students' background information, including transcripts, creating a "big stumbling block." Each coach's approaches differed depending on what technology they possessed, had access to, or had to create for themselves in cataloging student information and interactions. The absence of such infrastructure took coaches' time and responsibilities away from their intentional work in cultivating relationships.

Despite fewer technological resources, career coaches remained knowledgeable about students' professional options and monitored students' pathways. Other areas of misalignment related to employer and industry engagement; coaches were continually asked to participate in external presentations and relationships across numerous audiences. These included advisory boards, local industry professionals, teachers, counselors, and workforce boards about local and regional workforce needs. While all important forms of engagement, these duties compromised coaches' time in directly working with students. Further, despite being the third core element of the original vision of the career coach position, four of the reviewed position descriptions did not mention employer or industry engagement.



Career Coaches' Insights on Their Ability to Serve Students

Career coaches provided insights on their ability to serve students in the core elements of the job (e.g., student engagement, professional pathways enrollment, and employer and industry engagement). We approach insights with the understanding that career coaches may not have communicated all of the tasks they engage in during evaluation interviews and focus groups.

Similarly, coaches who did not participate in the evaluation may very well engage in responsibilities not illustrated here. Thus, the absence of data does not imply career coaches do not engage in such responsibilities.

Student Engagement

Several approaches factored into how career coaches built relationships with students. First, they often learned about students' career interests through providing tools like career inventories as well as inquiring about students' coursework then tailoring career ideas based on those areas of interest. Ultimately, making themselves available and reliable individuals to students enabled them to cultivate strong rapport. Inconsistencies in expectations compromised coaches' capacities to serve students at their assigned school(s). For example, although job postings called for coaches to reach out to younger students, including middle schoolers, to orient them about their possible professional pursuits, this took time away from the coaches being at their main school(s).

Because many coaches managed their work day across multiple settings – the community college, high school(s), and homeschooling settings, among others – their capacity to engage with students was sometimes limited by the resources and support available at these different institutions (e.g., meeting space, community involvement). Another factor impacting coaches' time to engage with students was their travel commutes to the multiple institutions they served.

Mandy referred to the challenges of constant travel and how it affected her engagement: "By the time you get settled you've lost an hour." In addition to travel, coaches' caseload also limited their available time to engage with individual students. Whereas some coaches like Melissa felt she possessed a manageable caseload (of approximately 100 students), she indicated that was by virtue of working at one high school: "It's enough to keep you busy, but it's not too much that you can't handle it." On the other hand, some career coaches like Karen were serving more than 500 students across multiple high schools.

Professional Pathways Enrollment

Core to career coaches' responsibilities was building postsecondary career and employment pathways for students. Career coaches often collaborated and built alliances with various school stakeholders, including CCP liaisons, career development coordinators, school counselors, and teachers to ensure students possessed viable pathways (see Appendix B for position definitions).

As Marcus described, what differentiates career coaches from other school personnel (like counselors and career development coordinators) who similarly work to foster students' prospects beyond high school, is that they are embedded within community colleges. Career coaches' unique postsecondary institutional backgrounds and connections contribute to them possessing expertise on higher education matters like financial aid, college academic disciplines and standards, and navigating higher education enrollment and transfer pathways. Furthermore, career coaches work more intentionally on building students' professional opportunities through cultivating partnerships with industry and intentionally dialoguing with students about such avenues.

Career coaches worked to build students' pathways through several methods, including engaging them in CCP and collaborating with fellow school professionals. Initiating conversations with school personnel enabled career coaches to learn about the school culture while concurrently figuring out ways to support students' pathways.

Trina, for instance, saw value in speaking with each person in her school:

"I use my connections to say, 'Hey, this is what I'm here to do . . . ' I stop a janitor. 'If you see a student and know a student that needs some direction or some focus and it would help to talk about career and college, send them to me. I'm over here or just find me, somebody will know where I am.' So I started being creative and just talking to people."

Tammy pointed out:

"Career coaches probably have more insight . . . [about] local articulation agreements with our high schools. I think our career coaches are unique in that they understand them and they know them, whereas a regular advisor on campus who doesn't work in high schools wouldn't know those [agreements]. So I think that's something unique that the career coaches can offer."

Through becoming connected with school personnel, career coaches expanded their understanding of how they could serve high school students and increase students' knowledge of the community college and its academic and transfer pathways and opportunities in local industry.

Engaging With Employers and Industry

Career coaches employed a number of methods that paralleled aims mentioned in the job postings. For example, engaging with NCWorks¹¹ served career coaches well, as Jane collaborated with the organization to link students with opportunities. Through attending job fairs, career coaches obtained a better sense of the landscape of area employers and directly connected students to employers with potential jobs, which is especially important for students not seeking college pathways. Maya recognized these events' value: "Because you get to network a lot and pick other people's brains and see what they're doing, so that's how I forge those relationships." In addition to orienting students about professions through actively visiting job sites and job fairs, coaches afforded avenues for professionals to visit the schools. Although establishing partnerships was inherent in career coaches' roles, many found they had to invest further time and resources to gather initial context about industry.

For example, Joy mentioned that prior to taking her position as a career coach, she was unaware of many of the industries in her area, and she would need to learn more about these in order to advise her students:

"With all of the education that I had, I had absolutely no clue about manufacturing. Never been to a plant in all my life. And how do you promote something that you've never been? So . . . once I realized all the stuff the job entails, I actually had to go out and see what it is, what it looks like."

Workforce development boards, apprenticeship partners, and local employers were some of the frequently-mentioned workforce partners. Paula spoke about a unique partnership with the chamber of commerce, county schools, and a local community college: "We actually spend . . . five days visiting local industry . . . it's also a good time for instructors to meet employers and talk to them not only about their needs but about visits to the classrooms or setting up shadowing experiences."

Ultimately, coaches used multiple strategies to engage with employers, and their industry knowledge, time availability, and personal initiative all contributed to the sustainability of these relationships and the information that they shared with students.

[11] [NCWorks](#), offered by the North Carolina Department of Commerce, is a statewide workforce system that enables North Carolinians to draw on career-related services, as well as state employers to post jobs and create talent pipelines.



For Decision Makers: Impact on Practice & Policy

As Career Coach Program stakeholders look to further strengthen the impact of career coaches on the college and career pipeline in NC, these findings have important implications. Decision makers should consider:

- **Examining job description roles and responsibilities** to determine overlapping services provided by career coaches and other professionals to meet the core elements. We encourage decision makers to explore why some job descriptions did not mention employer or industry engagement, a core element of the job. Additionally, facilitating opportunities for career coaches and high school and college staff to become familiar with each other's roles could be valuable for creating a sustained network of support for students, enhancing collaboration for shared resources, and reducing student caseloads.
- **Minimizing administrative burden.** This may be accomplished by developing or granting access to an existing uniformed tracking system to reduce administrative data entry that limits career coaches' availability to directly engage with students and local industry.
- **Facilitating greater understanding of career coach role descriptions and expectations.** Career coaches are meant to serve the unique needs of the communities where they are located. However, challenges and inconsistencies emerge with inequitable resources, demands, and labor associated with this work. As such, college and career readiness partners should work together to establish, understand, and assess career coach position descriptions and expectations. Doing so would enable more shared understanding of the career coach role in relation to local needs and context. Individuals within the NCCCS have and continue to work with coaches across the state in order to communicate the division of labor within coaching positions, including through webinars and other trainings. Shared knowledge of the career coach role could facilitate more robust evaluations in order to determine the effectiveness of these positions.

Further, greater understanding can highlight the pivotal role that coaches play in the college and career readiness landscape and also how career coaches are distinct from and supplement the work of school counselors, career development coordinators, and career and college promise liaisons at school settings. Lastly, data related to local needs and how career coaches respond to these could help legislators assess the intent and function of legislative action associated with career coaching, specifically how state-wide policies and actions support these positions and, in turn, communities. Long-term grant funding from legislative action could be one way to ensure that communities can address the following strategies: retain career coaches; enhance and sustain their outreach and the relationships that they build with students, families, institutions, and workforce partners in their communities; and assess the effectiveness of these positions in meeting local and state needs (Valentine & Price, 2021).

- **Bolstering collaborations and professional development opportunities across career coaches.**

During our focus groups, career coaches expressed the value of engaging with their peer career coaches to exchange ideas on how to address challenges in their schools. Although regional meetings that coaches attended served to bridge connections, only a few existed in person and none were available online during the Fall 2021 semester. We encourage system leaders to develop more virtual sessions that promote opportunities for coaches to pass along resources and ideas, and deliver recorded trainings that may guide them in building collaborations. Additionally, coaches should be afforded dedicated time in their schedule to pursue professional development opportunities related to workforce and industry engagement. Attending Chamber of Commerce meetings will allow coaches to learn about local employers and networking opportunities, which may allow them to arrange student visits with local industries and employers. There might be opportunities for regional employers to host career coaches and career development coordinators at the same time for a one-day road trip event. Additionally, existing career pathway webinars offered by NCCCS were noted as valuable to coaches. Assuring all coaches are aware of these opportunities, encouraged to attend, and offered time to attend webinars ensures coaches can take advantage of this resource.

- **Allocating additional resources.** As the findings illustrate, coaches are strained for time and resources, often working in multiple schools and serving hundreds of students, thus compromising their capacity to engage in one-on-one conversations with students, professional development opportunities, or networking. Coaches are essential figures in the high schools they occupy, and several participants expressed their necessity. Trina, for one, felt the program requires “an increase in personnel,” so that coaches can serve students at more schools, yet not feel strained. As Mandy shared, “we did a survey last year just to see how the coaches were doing in the schools... and everybody was like, ‘we will not go back to not having one.’” Meanwhile, Bailey feared the possibility of funding cuts that would “make it even more challenging” for coaches “already tasked with impossible jobs.”

These perspectives issue a call to action for the NC legislature to allot additional funding for college and career coaches and advisors, so that each public high school in the state hosts one, thus saving coaches’ time in commuting and providing more appointment options for students to interface with them. Developing more of these resources could also connect more students with a career plan, which improves students’ academic engagement and moves the state toward its goal of ensuring more North Carolinians obtain a high-quality credential by 2030 (myFutureNC, n.d.). Having more dedicated career coaches providing intensive support for students in meeting their college and career goals will also help to fill the state’s skills gap by exposing more students to relevant information, connections, and resources to successfully navigate postsecondary education and careers.

Career coaches can potentially play a pivotal role in students' support networks, as Bailey shared:

"If a student has that relationship with a coach, they're more than likely going to go to that coach for that direction than they are to anyone else in that building... it really does come down to the relationships that they're building with those students, which we can't put a price tag on that."



Conclusion

Career coaches serve important roles in supporting students' career and academic goals and building partnerships with industry to meet regional employment needs. NCCCS envisioned career coaches focusing on student engagement, pathways enrollment, and employer and industry engagement. However, career coaches are being asked to engage in responsibilities that overlap with other areas of the school, such as enrollment management and CCP work.

Although these responsibilities are complementary to the career coach position, they limit coaches' abilities to accomplish core elements of their role. The ambiguity and variability in the career coach role within and across school(s) or district(s) led to confusion about how to best serve students. Policies or practices should examine job description roles and responsibilities, minimize administrative burdens, create uniform career coach role descriptions and expectations, bolster professional development opportunities, and allocate additional human resources.

Career coaches are knowledgeable in the career and college landscape and equipped to advise students through obtaining high-value credentials relevant to the local labor market, as well as enhancing students' preparation for attending college. Supporting career coaches' capacities in accomplishing their work without navigating the hurdles that compromise their time and effort will behoove not only the coaches directly, but also the stakeholders with whom they work on a daily basis.

Interventions by career coaches for students in North Carolina and the potential positive impact on student outcomes could serve as a model as other states look to increase postsecondary attainment and fill anticipated workforce gaps.

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Appendix B

Position Definitions

Career Coach

Community college career coaches are placed in high schools to assist students with determining career goals and identifying community college programs that would enable students to achieve these goals. The board of trustees of a community college and a local board of education of a local school administrative unit within the service area of the community college jointly may apply for funds from the State Board of Community Colleges.¹³

Career and College Promise (CCP) Liaison

CCP staff are hired by community colleges to provide information about three pathways to help advance students' post high-school success. College transfer pathways provide tuition-free course credits toward a variety of associate degrees that will transfer to any University of North Carolina System or participating private college or university. Career and Technical Education pathways provide course credits toward a certificate, diploma, or state or industry recognized workforce credential. Cooperative innovative high schools allow students to earn college credits as a high school student. Qualified high school students in North Carolina have the opportunity to pursue these options, tuition free, while they attend high school.¹⁴

Career Development Coordinator (CDC)

Staff, supported by Career and Technical Education funds, coordinate career development services for all students. The CDC works collaboratively with administrators, student services personnel, and teachers to ensure the delivery of career development services. CDCs facilitate linkages with parents, business/industry, postsecondary institutions, and community organizations to support students' transition to postsecondary education and employment. CDCs are hired by local principals and career and technical administrators.¹⁵

School Counselor

School counselors design, deliver and access data-driven school counseling programs that are comprehensive in scope, preventative in design and developmental in nature to improve a range of student learning and behavioral outcomes. School counselors help all students apply academic and achievement strategies, manage emotions and apply interpersonal skills, strengthen mental wellness, and explore and plan for postsecondary options. School counselors work within public K-12 schools and are hired by local education agencies.¹⁶

[13] <https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/student-services/career-coach-program>

[14] <https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/academic-programs/career-college-promise>

[15] <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/classroom-resources/career-and-technical-education/career-planning-and-placement#career-development-coordination>

[16] <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/educators/specialized-instructional-support/school-counseling#:~:text=School%20counselors%20design%2C%20deliver%20and,apply%20academic%20achievement%20strategies>