

# *Consortium for Healthcare Education Online*

## *Career Coach Report*

**Renée Edwards  
Heather McKay**

Released January 2016



# **RUTGERS**

Education and Employment  
Research Center

School of Management and Labor Relations  
Janice H. Levin Building  
94 Rockefeller Road  
Piscataway, New Jersey 08854

[smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc](http://smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc)

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Renée Edwards  
Heather McKay

Education and Employment Research Center  
School of Management and Labor Relations  
Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey  
Janice H. Levin Building  
94 Rockafeller Road  
Piscataway, NJ 08854

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Rutgers' School of Management and Labor Relations (SMLR) is the leading source of expertise on the world of work, building effective and sustainable organizations, and the changing employment relationship. The school is comprised of two departments—one focused on all aspects of strategic human resource management and the other dedicated to the social science specialties related to labor studies and employment relations. In addition, SMLR provides many continuing education and certificate programs taught by world-class researchers and expert practitioners.

SMLR was originally established by an act of the New Jersey legislature in 1947 as the Institute of Management and Labor Relations (IMLR). Like its counterparts that were created in the other large industrial states at the same time, the Institute was chartered to promote new forms of labor-management cooperation following the industrial unrest at the end of World War II. It officially became a school at the flagship campus of the State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick/Piscataway in 1994. For more information, visit [smlr.rutgers.edu](http://smlr.rutgers.edu).

## **ABOUT THE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH CENTER**

Rutgers' Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) is housed within the School of Management and Labor Relations. EERC conducts research and evaluations on education and workforce development programs and policies. EERC research expertise includes community colleges, state and federal workforce developmental systems, skills development, college completion, and innovative and technology-based programs.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Consortium for Healthcare Education Online (CHEO) is a United States Department of Labor (USDOL) Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) funded grant project, intended to develop new or redesigned online and hybrid courses leading to credentials in health care fields in high demand throughout the western states. CHEO is an interstate consortium consisting of eight colleges in Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, Montana, and Alaska. Partner colleges include: Pueblo Community College (PCC), Otero Junior College (OJC), Red Rocks Community College (RRCC), Laramie County Community College (LCCC), Lake Area Technical College (LATI), Great Falls College Montana State University (GFC MSU), Flathead Valley Community College (FVCC), and Kodiak College (KoC).

This report explores the development and implementation of the grant mandated career coach position. It examines the role of each coach at their respective institution, the variety of coach functions across the consortium, and discusses coach success relative to grant goals. This report includes observations of coach activities through spring of 2015, the third and final year of grant funding for the coach position.

Some grant deliverables which overlap with career coach roles and responsibilities will not, however, be discussed here. For example, an examination of the PlanYourHealthCareer.org career hub portal will not be included in this report. The portal was conceived and designed as a coach case management tool, a method of engaging employers and local workforce centers, and an interactive career management tool for students in CHEO programs across all eight consortium colleges. While the coaches were involved in the development of the hub, implementation had only begun in the third year of the grant; not enough data existed to longitudinally assess the integration and use of the hub in this report. The hub will therefore be discussed in a future Education and Employment Research Center report.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Rutgers University Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) was hired as the CHEO's project third party evaluator- charged with an analysis of project implementation and outcomes. This report by EERC uses qualitative data and analysis. Qualitative methodology includes content analysis of consortium goals relative to career coaches and coach activities, institution specific job descriptions used by consortium colleges to hire the coach, and case management notes. In addition, over the past three years, EERC team members have conducted phone and in-person interviews with CHEO grant management, college administrators, project leads, career coaches and students. EERC team members have also been participant-observers at many project workshops, including those for faculty, project leads, and career coaches, and have "observed" conference calls and webinars with project leads and career coaches. Most interviews with project staff and students were taped and transcribed; non-taped interviews involved extensive note taking. Transcriptions and notes, as well as the documents cited above,

have been coded through the use of NVivo 10 qualitative data management software and analyzed by EERC team members to identify themes and patterns.

## **CHEO CAREER COACH MANDATE**

One of the primary TAACCCT CHEO goals was the provision of “support services for students provided by professionally trained career coaches.” As such, each of the consortium colleges was mandated to employ a career coach. Career coaches were intended to work with CHEO program students, local employers, and community workforce centers to help ensure the engagement and success of students throughout their education and into employment. The grant statement of work identified the primary activities of coaches at their respective colleges:

Each institution will benefit from the placement of a qualified career coach/academic advisor available to support students...Coaches with consultation from area employers will work with students in selecting the appropriate allied health program based on interest and aptitude, and provide retention and placement services, including internships, in conjunction with workforce centers.

Coaches were also explicitly tasked with improving student retention by assisting students with both academic and non-academic issues that might lead to their withdrawing from their studies. Retention strategies were to include “academic and non-academic strategies, such as early warning systems, student success courses, logistical support for enrollment and financial aid, recruitment and screening, career guidance and intrusive advising.”

The utilization and integration of career coaches into grant funded projects is not new to this round of TAACCCT grants. Career coaches and navigators (serving a similar function) have been included in several other rounds of TAACCCT grants. The addition of career coaches is derived from a theory of ‘intensive’ advising in which career coaches help students navigate their educational path from beginning to end. The intensive advising model is meant to increase student retention at community colleges through early identification of and attention to student risks and barriers so that students are able to succeed despite the challenges they may face.

## **INTENSIVE ADVISING**

There are different forms of advising including ‘ad hoc’ advising that often takes place during student registration. In situations of ad hoc advising, the student and the advisor do not get to know one another. The focus is the student’s schedule and little else (Cuseo, 2003; 2005). At the opposite side of the continuum is intensive advising—proactive, action-oriented interactions with students (Drake, Jordan, & Miller, 2013; Varney, 2007). During this type of advising the student is aided in identifying and setting academic and career goals and developing strategies to reach these goals (Earl, 1987). This model of advising is based on research which has found that integrating a career focus in academic advising increases student academic motivation (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Research has also found that intensive advising significantly impacts student retention. This is especially true for community college students, many of whom are first-generation college students, many of whom are balancing work, family, and school responsibilities, and many of whom are academically unprepared for college-level work (Upcraft & Kramer 1995; Cuseo 2003; 2005; Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Varney, 2007). Advising facilitates the engagement of students in the college experience and provides a sense that the college cares about the student's progress and success (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004).

Intensive advising blends prescriptive and developmental advising and is systematic and directive. It offers assistance to students while helping them identify psycho-social issues or developmental needs and while focusing on educational goals (Upcraft & Kramer, 1995). It involves addressing nonacademic issues and facilitating referrals for needed services or resources. And it frequently involves connecting with students "before a situation occurs that cannot be fixed" (Varney, 2007).

## **CAREER COACH RECRUITMENT**

Subsequent to receipt of grant funds and building upon this general model of intensive advising, each of the CHEO colleges identified from within or externally recruited a career coach. To facilitate this process, CHEO's lead college, PCC, used elements of the TAACCCT solicitation for grant application (SGA) and the CHEO statement of work to create a general job description that could be adapted to meet each of the eight college's specific needs. The description stressed workforce system and employer engagement and relationship-building with employers and the community – a critical component of the CHEO grant and the SGA. For example, the SGA stressed "strategic alignment" of programs with "at least three types of key stakeholders: (i) employers and industry; (ii) the public workforce system; and (iii) educational institutions and other organizations" (p. 6). The SGA framed student success within the existence and development of these systems:

Community colleges work with business, labor, and government in their communities to create tailored education and training programs to meet employers' needs and give students the skills required to obtain good jobs, earn family-sustaining wages, and advance along a career pathway. (p. 3)

While all CHEO staff members were expected to work collectively toward building these relationships, the career coach role was seen as central to constructing and maintaining these important collaborative partnerships. Workforce system and employer relationships were as integral to student's career readiness, a primary goal of the grant. CHEO grant management built upon these key elements in formulating the suggested job description for consortium colleges. The PCC job description specified the coach position:

...Specifically exists to coordinate with workforce center and employers on referrals, internships and job placement; provide career guidance, recruit and screen students; coordinate assistance for academic support, internship opportunities, and allied health program options, collect data and submit reports to the CHEO Program Director or designee.

Colleges were given the latitude to create their own job description or to use the one PCC created. Not surprisingly, this led to variations in job descriptions and career coach responsibilities across the consortium. Four of the eight CHEO colleges hired a coach whose main focus was students, while another three leaned more toward a focus on employer and workforce engagement. The eighth college hired a career coach to help with other duties at their school, since a retention specialist and other staff at the college were already engaged in many of the above defined functional elements. As a result, the coach's job description at this college reflected more of the institution's needs and significantly differed from the rest of the CHEO consortium colleges.

At most colleges, academic qualifications for the coach position included a college degree, although several colleges specified experience in related job duties would suffice. All colleges specified prospective coaches had to have strong relationship-building and communication skills. They also needed skills and/or job experience to enable them to work with students and prepare them for employment in health care positions. The job description at GFC MSU additionally stated that their coach must be able to "recognize different types of crises" and be prepared to refer students to appropriate services on campus.

As early as April 2013, a number of colleges had initiated their employment process, and several had identified prospects. By October of 2013, seven of the eight colleges had hired a coach and KoC had assigned a faculty member to be an informal interim coach while their hiring process continued. KoC used two informal interim coaches prior to completing the hiring process in April of 2014.

Three of the CHEO coaches were hired from within their respective institution (FVCC, LATI and OJC); five were external hires. Of the three coaches who were hired from within, two had previously worked as retention specialists at their college and the coach at FVCC had previously worked as a student case manager under a different grant. Thus, from the beginning these three coaches were familiar with their colleges, their student service resources and activities. Since LATI already had several existing coach-type positions at the school they did not hire a coach exclusively for CHEO duties. In fact, at LATI the career coach function was at times fulfilled simultaneously by three different people with various functional foci. Two of the individuals who provided coach functions had been hired from outside the school, but not strictly for CHEO purposes. A third individual who provided coach functions was a retention specialist at the college. Over the course of the CHEO grant, each of these three staff members was interviewed by EERC about their work on the CHEO project.



CHEO career coaches came from diverse backgrounds, but most had previous experience in an academic setting. LATI's retention specialist was previously a director of enrollment, assisting students from registration to graduation. FVCC's coach was previously an academic advisor for the school's nursing and paramedic programs, engaging students in a similar coaching role. OJC's coach was previously a retention specialist and a school counselor. GFC MSU's coach previously taught soft skills and other courses for high school students returning to finish their diploma. PCC's first coach previously worked for University of Phoenix in a coach-type role, and their second coach was, among other things, previously a high school counselor. Both of KoC's interim coaches were faculty members. Other CHEO coaches had prior experience in workforce centers (KoC and RRCC). KoC's coach also had experience as a vocational counselor. Both RRCC's and LCCC's coaches had previous experience in social work.

## COACH ORIENTATION

Once the career coaches were hired at each of their respective institutions, their CHEO orientation and their orientation to their coach roles were quite similar. Most of the coaches had little or no background in health sciences and so many started by learning about their CHEO programs allied health field and the variety of career paths students might pursue after graduation. Three of the coaches stated they read the grant statement of work to better understand their role relative to the grant in general. One coach in particular found this extremely helpful: "Having an idea of the overall grant needs has helped; [it gave me] a greater sense of purpose and mission behind the grant." Two coaches participated in job shadowing. For KoC's coach, this was done completely remotely via webinar sessions and screen-sharing to learn the school's systems and processes. LCCC's coach was able to take advantage of the college's existing culture of integrated career coaching and job shadowed other coaches at the school. This coach was also the only one to go through a formal, professional state credentialed career coach training external to the CHEO grant.

The coaches' integration at their respective college has been varied. A big challenge coaches experienced across all TAA-funded career coach positions is the perception that their jobs are temporary. As such it has been difficult at times for the coaches' respective institution to integrate them into institutional life and student services. One coach said: "You're a temp. So it's a challenge." However, a coach who was teaching as an adjunct instructor early in the grant process commented that her integration with faculty was seamless. In her coach function it was easy for her to talk to faculty and understand them, because she was "one of them." A couple of coaches struggled with faculty engagement because they felt faculty didn't understand their role with the students. Faculty members at one school were advising and coaching students when the coach came on. And, while they were over-taxed with this responsibility in addition to their regular teaching duties, they were at first reluctant to give it up. Another coach felt faculty initially perceived her role as advocating for the students instead of helping the students succeed. This created an 'us vs. them' mentality where they saw her as 'siding' with the students. As time went on, however, faculty began to realize she was simply there to help students stay on track, and eventually they opened up and worked with her.

Most of the coaches had no difficulty integrating with faculty, but felt getting ‘face time’ with students in classrooms could be difficult; Faculty often did not understand the benefit of coach presentations. Already feeling pressured to teach a multitude of concepts in a limited amount of time, some faculty members were initially reluctant to give up precious classroom time. Over time, however, several coaches have gradually been able to change this dynamic, helping faculty to see the benefit of the soft skills training they provided. As a result more faculty set aside class time for the coaches. As the grant sunsets concurrent to the loss at most colleges of a dedicated career coach, faculty at many of the colleges are beginning to integrate soft skills training into their classes.

## **VARIANCE IN COACH ROLE ACROSS THE CONSORTIUM**

The coach position did not exist prior to the CHEO grant at any of the colleges’ health care programs with the exception of one. Therefore, the schools lacked a real “blueprint” for what the position would be and relied on the newly hired coaches to create a role that responded to the grant, the needs of students, and the needs of their institution. Beyond the job description given to them upon hire, seven of the eight coaches described a process of figuring their role out as they went along. One coach stated: “I had some basic ideas about what needed to be done; how to proceed was largely up to me.” Another said “I’m not sure anyone had a crystal clear idea of what the career coach was supposed to be doing.” Another commented that no one could give her a clear description of the position before she was hired: “When I was interviewed for the position...I [said] ‘tell me what a typical day of a career coach looks like.’ And everybody kind of looked at each other... [and said] ‘there’s not a typical day.’” Another coach had a similar story: “Nobody knew what I was supposed to do.” Throughout the course of the CHEO grant professional development activities have focused on addressing this role ambiguity and helping coaches to define and to develop their specific grant and institutional roles. The sharing between coaches, meetings for coaches held by both the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) and the grant management team, and grant management’s provisions of materials and tools including “coach the coach” training sessions may have helped this process.

Given the multiple activities within the grant definition of the coach role, and the challenge the coaches have had in defining a role that best serves the needs of their institution, most coaches have simply stuck to what they know and do best. A coach’s background or previous work experience has thus often shaped his or her primary focus. For example, one coach had a background in workforce development. Not surprisingly, this coach successfully built a strong relationship with local workforce center personnel, creating college-workforce engagement where it was previously absent. Another coach’s background as a professional résumé writer led her to focus on building résumé writing skills with her students. Teaching and professional skills training led two coaches to focus on teaching students how to prepare for—and get—a job. One coach with social work experience focused on helping high-risk students find necessary resources—financial, child care, transportation, etc.—to continue their education. In

sum, the coaches' tendency to 'do what they know best' has contributed somewhat to role diversity across the consortium.

Of interest is that the majority of the CHEO coaches did not come from backgrounds in health care. This has caused some difficulty in meeting the needs of some students and has meant a steep learning curve as the coaches became familiar with their specific program field(s) and the health care sector. In some cases, coaches have circumvented their lack of a health care industry background by helping students find tutors, or by reaching out to the instructor(s) to alert them of the student's need. But several coaches mentioned they occasionally find themselves in situations where they wish they knew the industry better.

The coaches with prior background experience in the industry reported to the EERC interview team that their background has been beneficial in many situations. Both of KoC's interim coaches, for example, were concurrently working in the healthcare industry and serving as faculty members. As such they felt comfortable tutoring students, helping students to prepare for specific questions on the national certification exam, and assisting students in connecting with potential employers.

## **COACH TASKS**

The CHEO coach role as detailed in the statement of work includes student recruitment, academic advising, teaching soft skills, non-academic support, career counseling, job placement assistance, internship development, internship placement, workforce system engagement, employer engagement, development and integration of the PlanYourHealthCareer hub, data gathering, data reporting, and any other role as defined by the institution. Although the statement of work details each element of the coach role, in reality all of these elements are part of a single dynamic process intersecting with one end: student completion and employment. How coaches have integrated these tasks into their position has varied by college. The section below discusses each element of the coach role relative to the coaches who perform these tasks at their institution.

**Student recruitment/outreach.** Since recruitment activities are so important to the colleges and the sustainability of their programs, the coach involvement in student outreach has been extensive. Across the consortium, EERC found that recruiting and marketing activities among coaches have been fairly similar. Nearly all coaches have participated in creating brochures or flyers, calling and visiting employers and workforce centers, talking to students about the programs, distributing information at career fairs or similar events, and ensuring student services, advising staff, and faculty are aware of the CHEO program(s).

At the colleges with newly designed programs, coach outreach and marketing activities were especially important. As soon as the new health programs were ready to launch, these coaches joined with the schools' regular marketing and admissions staff to assist with program recruitment efforts. For example, the GFC MSU coach reached out to the local workforce

centers, which in turn began referring students almost immediately. GFC MSU's coach reflected on the positive response to her outreach:

They're very excited because they feel like it's something that the community needs and is looking for, something that is quick, that people can be employed immediately after and then choose if they would like to get more education, or if they're happy just doing phlebotomy and that's all they want to do. And that's great, and it's a better paying job than whatever they've been struggling with so – the job service felt – they felt like it was a really good thing.

The GFC MSU coach also visited other community offices, handing out flyers introducing the program and encouraging organizations to refer their students. In addition, she visited the veterans' center on campus to introduce the CHEO programs and recruit potential students. PCC's coach has done tabling events on campus to make sure students are aware of the CHEO programs. She also has visited local fire and rescue offices to market the college's EMS programs. KoC's coach has used a Facebook page specifically targeted to Coast Guard spouses to recruit students. She also recruits active military as well as prospective students who are simply looking for an online program. The coach has visited a nearby Alaskan Native village and handed out information about the program to local workforce and social service advocates, and has distributed information to local employers and the workforce center on Kodiak Island as well. In addition the KoC coach works closely with student services to distribute information about the program and makes sure students are informed about the program.

Over the course of the CHEO grant coaches have also recruited students from other programs at their institutions, encouraging students to stack certificates. One coach works with another staff member at her college staff to encourage students in the phlebotomy program to continue into the MLT program. Together they show a PowerPoint presentation about the benefits of becoming a medical lab technician. Other coaches have visited pre-requisite science or general education courses to talk to students about available CHEO program(s) at their colleges. These examples all showcase how coaches have collaborated with their institutional colleagues to expand recruitment activities and marketing.

**Academic advising.** Many community colleges require students to see an advisor at some point early in their academic career, often during orientation or registration (O'Banion, 2012). However, much of this mandated advising is focused on academic issues and often does not address or anticipate other issues, e.g. balancing school work and family demands that may affect the student's ability to be successful with his or her studies. Many times academic advisors are helping students during the "hurried and harried period of course registration" thus tend to focus "narrowly, myopically and episodically on the imminent, deadline-driven task of class scheduling" (Cuseo, 2005, p.9). Early and preventive advisement—intensive advising—however, has been found to be important for retention and academic success (Cuseo, 2005). As such the career coach position was specifically designed and instituted to complement academic advising and to provide a more in-depth version of advising in which students are

asked about goals as well as barriers, or 'risk factors.' This type of advising model and the CHEO coaches must also work hand-in-hand with admissions personnel, financial aid staff, department chairs, and faculty to provide comprehensive and integrated student support. A secondary but critical goal of intensive advising is to provide students with a sense that they have been 'embraced by the college;' and that faculty and staff are there to help them to be successful. The more a student experiences a sense of belonging at the college or identifies as a member of the college community, the more he or she will make use of available services as part of his or her college experience, and the greater his or her potential for academic success (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012). In reality this might mean figuratively and literally taking an extra step. For example, one coach reported that she often walks with students to the student services department and introduces them to a specific individual who can help them register—something the coaches call a "warm handoff." She says students are often afraid of the registration process and showing them where to go and what to do can make a big difference. The coach walking students to the registration office can help students connect with the right person, sometimes a real challenge in larger schools. And, the time taken and the "intimacy" of walking with a student may increase the student's sense that someone cares about them, helping them feel more comfortable and secure. It may also contribute to the student's sense that he or she is part of the college community even during the student's first on-campus experience. This sense of welcome and community may be especially important to first generation college students.

Coaches frequently spoke about the critical importance of providing potential students with application information, assisting them with completing scholarship application forms and helping them secure financial aid. One coach has even written letters for students who needed to prove they have appropriate grades in order for financial aid to be released. The coaches reported to EERC that they spend a significant amount of time with registration and advising activities, especially at the beginning of the semester. Some students require extra time, and occasionally coaches must help students problem-solve and make decisions in order to successfully register, e.g. scheduling classes and childcare. Not surprisingly, students balancing school, family and work and "underprepared students appear to benefit more from advising than do their college-ready counterparts" (Bahr, 2004 p. 725). For some students, being "underprepared" is related to a lack of funding. For instance, some health and science textbooks are quite expensive, especially those for programs leading to a national certificate. Students may lack the funds for these textbooks, so coaches have stepped in to help these students locate books they can borrow, or help the student to find a funding source to help them purchase the books. Some students simply need a 'reality check' regarding how many credit hours they should take at a time or the best order to take them in. In most cases, coaches are acting as academic advisors and student mentors from the moment the student first hears about the program.

Structurally many colleges have separated academic and career advising. However, research on retention indicates a positive correlation between a student's explicit commitment to an educational and/or career goal and his or her successful completion of a certificate or degree

(Wyckoff, 1999). Research also suggests that advising that combines academic and career issues is preferred by students. The provision of information and resources that simultaneously focuses on careers and academic pathways help students to make informed decisions and has been found to yield better outcomes than standard standalone academic advising (Van Wie, 2011).

Light (2001) found that academic advising was one of the most “underestimated characteristics of a successful college experience,” (p.4). Hunter and White (2004) write that academic advising is “perhaps the only structured campus endeavor that can guarantee students sustained interaction with a caring and concerned adult who can help them shape a meaningful learning experience for themselves” (in Campbell and Nutt, 2008, p. 5). Coaches report that students are often more likely to seek them out for help in the future because of the time spent with them at registration or during academic advising. In addition, some coaches observed that their involvement in the application process helped them get to know students better. One coach said:

I was with them at that beginning application process, I know them, because they have spent time sending me their information, talking about the program, going through the application process, I know their background as they're entering in.

**Early alert system involvement.** All eight colleges have an early alert system which alerts faculty or other school personnel if a student is falling behind academically. While some schools have a formal system that automatically informs the coach of students who are struggling with grades or attendance, others have an informal system worked out with faculty. Regardless of the college's format for early alert, the system works similarly. The names of students dropping below a C average or those who have been absent a number of times are sent to designated personnel at the school; they in turn reach out to the student. The goal is to learn what is causing the student to fall behind and how they can help the student get back on track.

There is variation across the consortium in the level of coach involvement with their school's early alert system. At Kodiak, the coach has established a close relationship with CHEO program's instructors as a means to identify students who are not doing well. During mid-terms the coach reaches out to instructors to ask about students who struggled earlier on: “I'll contact those instructors and say ‘just following up on [the student], how's she doing?’” LCCC's coach also has developed a close relationship with CHEO program faculty and checks in on student progress throughout the term. “How is the student's attendance and are his or her grades slipping?” Depending on what she learns from her reviews of class information she will either reach out to the student or to his/her instructor(s). This practice is certainly easier for those coaches with small caseloads. Coaches with larger caseloads have to rely on a formal early alert system or course instructors to learn when a student is struggling. Students who struggle early on in the program generally stay on the coaches' ‘radar’ for the duration of the program. As OJC's coach says, sometimes students simply need help with time management, especially those with family and work responsibilities.

**Program fit.** Coaches try to counsel students regarding program fit before they enter the program. Occasionally students who have begun a program find the selected program is too challenging or otherwise not a good fit for them. Coaches are often instrumental in helping these students identify and select other programs. At the schools with multiple CHEO programs, this can be a transfer to a different allied health program. For example, students in programs such as nursing (or other non-CHEO programs) might find that the science for nursing is too difficult for them. In such cases the coach has helped the student to transfer into another CHEO program such as medical records technician. In many cases, credits can transfer and students can switch programs without having to re-take courses.

Occasionally students enter programs with preconceived ideas and find the program is not as good a fit for them as they thought. LATI's retention specialist spends time with students giving them an interest inventory to make sure a student's interests are aligned with their educational path. If they are not, he suggests other programs that may be a better fit. Research has identified that academic goals, motivation, time management skills, study skills and habits (taking notes, meeting deadlines, and using information resources), concentration, and general maturity are factors that contribute to student success (Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth, 2004). Coaches help students with these skills and help them make choices based on their interests and academic goals.

**Teaching.** Two CHEO coaches have spent time teaching as adjunct instructors at their colleges. While these are separate roles not paid for under the grant, their interaction with students directly impacts their coaching role. One coach has taught biology, while the other has been teaching a soft skills course—which does directly correlate with coaching activities. Both coaches have found the instructor-coach role beneficial in getting to know students and building trusting relationships with students, thus facilitating their ability to help the students with his/her individual needs. One coach stated:

Being the adjunct faculty is really great, because I am with them throughout these five, six, seven weeks as they're discussing aspects of professionalism every week. So I'm getting to know those students as they introduce themselves and share some of their past lives and how professionalism affects them... I think as they upload and comment, I'm learning a lot about them that helps me then be a better career coach to them individually.

**Non-academic support.** Student goals, motivation, time management, and study skills are generally considered nonacademic factors that can impact a student's academic success (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). These factors are especially important for students who are older, attend part time, or are commuters (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bickerstaff, Barragan, & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2012). Other non-academic factors affecting academic success include finances, childcare, balancing home, work, and school demands, medical issues, domestic violence, transportation, and inadequate housing or homelessness. Coaches reported that

nonacademic issues tend to emerge as crises, therefore coaching relative to these factors is often on an emergency basis. Two of the coaches spend time counseling students or 'emergency coaching.' Both have backgrounds in counseling or social work, and feel this is an important element of their role. One coach reports sometimes students "just need to talk" and will "pop in" a couple times per semester to discuss personal issues. While the college does have a counselor on staff, this coach finds these students prefer to come to her instead of the counselor. This highlights the importance of relationship-building in education, and reinforces the concept that the more a student feels 'embraced by the college' the greater the students' potential for utilizing help and achieving academic success.

The second coach with counseling background spends a good deal of time helping students-in-need find resources. She has helped students find daycare, transportation, food, housing, etc. using community organizations and her network of contacts. One student told her they would have to drop out of the program for lack of food:

They said "I'm going to have to drop out...because it's either work more hours so I can buy food, or starve to death and go through the program." So I contacted the local Catholic Charities and they donated food...and we worked on finding ways they could get groceries.

This coach often uses her Facebook page to reach out to people for help for her students:

One time I had a student who said "I moved down here just for your program and I am exhausted. I don't have a bed. I'm staying with some people. I'm sleeping on the couch and it's the most uncomfortable thing in the world." So I went to my Facebook page and I said I have a starving student who needs a bed. He got donated such a nice bed. Somebody else told me they were late for class all the time, and they said "I'm walking, but I live quite a ways away from the college, and by the time I walk there I am running out of time. And it's dark if I get up and go earlier." So I went on Facebook and I had a family come to my house that night that donated a brand new mountain bike.

While these coaches provided help with non-academic issues, many coaches refer students needing such services to counselors or other student support resources at their institution. For instance, LATI's retention specialist refers some students to the colleges' single mothers support group, where they can discuss issues with peers and find specific resources such as child care. Other times, he may refer a student to their instructor to discuss issues such as having to work extra hours on the family farm during fall harvest. GFC MSU has a counseling internship program in collaboration with a university nearby. CHEO students are referred to either their instructor or counseling interns if they need counseling services.

Problem-solving with students, however, can cover a wide range of activities. One coach said: "We have students here who party too much and we have students who have cancer. So it's that wide range of trying to figure out why they're missing [class] and what we can do to help



each individual student.” Another coach said: “I help with scholarship applications, letters of recommendation, finding transportation, furniture, daycare, keeping utilities turned on, etc. Whatever it takes to keep the student in school.”

LCCC’s coach finds that some students fall behind because they don’t have the computer skills necessary for the online program, so she helps them work on computer skills or refers them to someone else who can help. Sometimes students are working too many hours and overextending themselves. Sometimes, she says, students need recognition for their successes: “they just need someone to say “you got this.””

**Career readiness.** All of the coaches spend a significant amount of time preparing students for their future careers. Several coaches work with students to prepare them for national certification exams. This includes helping students to register for test preparation courses, to identify proctored locations and to apply for the certification exam. Coaches also have clarified what students can and cannot take to the proctoring site, and what they should do after they pass—or fail—the exam.

Nearly all of the coaches are very involved in teaching résumé-building skills, cover letter writing, interview skills, and other ‘soft skills’ such as what to wear to an interview. RRCC’s coach states résumé writing help is one of the most common reasons students seek her out. Several of the coaches actually teach students how to prepare a résumé as part of their coursework; instructors work in conjunction with the coaches and either bring the coach into the classroom or require students to meet with the coach at other times. One coach puts together packets for students that include sample résumés, résumé tips, sample interview questions specifically geared toward their career field, as well as information on how to apply for nursing school. Coaches with remote programs have embedded résumé writing webinars and tips into course platforms such as Blackboard or D2L. PCC’s first career coach coordinated efforts with the college’s internship coordinator and a local hospital manager to create a soft skills webinar for students. This coach was also instrumental in creating online tutoring modules for students.

FVCC’s coach feels job preparedness is an extremely important part of what she and the other coaches do: “There’s a real need for career readiness training”—everything from résumé writing skills to proper attire for an interview. She finds that most of the students “aren’t from academic backgrounds, that level of professionalism is pretty foreign to most of them; résumé and writing and cover letter writing, interview, all of those skills are scary, intimidating.” She is able to team up with another staff member at the school who does ‘résumé café’s’ in which students are able to meet with actual employers for 15 minute mock interviews and present their résumés. Students are able to get immediate feedback from ‘real’ employers.

At some of the colleges, aside from the coach, professionalism/job readiness generally falls to faculty to teach within their regular classroom time. For example, at GFC MSU, it falls to faculty to teach these skills, but frequently faculty members simply do not have enough time.

As a result, the coaches have tried to fill the gap. For example, the GFC MSU's coach visits students in the classroom to discuss professional skills. She dresses in clothing inappropriate for a job interview and asks students to tell her all the things wrong with her outfit. After such presentations, she has found students requesting additional assistance from her outside of class time, which she then schedules with them.

PCC and OJC's coaches also meet with students in the classroom and discuss résumé writing. Some students ask the coaches to review resumes they already prepared, and others start from scratch within the class. PCC's coach holds résumé writing workshops throughout the semester. She states students go from "nothing, blank page, to [a] professional resume" during the workshop. A number of the coaches also develop mock interviews to help students become more comfortable with job interviews.

**Graduation preparation/job placement.** Thus, all eight coaches spend a significant amount of time getting students prepared for graduation. KoC's coach checks that each student has finished all of his or her requirements and has applied for graduation. She says she is sure some of KoC students would not graduate without her "gentle reminders." Her students echo this—one student told an EERC team member "without [the coach] telling me to apply [for graduation], I would not have graduated." Two other students agreed they likely would have forgotten something required for graduation if it weren't for the coach.

Student job preparation and job placement is another area where virtually all of the coaches spend a significant amount of time. RRCC's coach operates a type of 'job board' where she encourages employers to post open positions. She also puts together a packet that explains the entire job search process. She spends time with students individually, as well, discussing their goals and suggesting other pathways to job identification. For example, many students focus on nursing homes for employment, but she encourages them to also look for available jobs at hospitals and physical therapy clinics. She also contacts employers directly, asking them if they have job openings and passes this information on to students. At the time of this reporting, the career hub was being designed to include some elements of this to take pressure off the coaches. Coaches who work with online students also spend significant time preparing their students for the job search process. One coach pointed out the importance of teaching students how to do their online job searches in the community as well as the state. She feels its best that students engage in a variety of strategies for their job searches, especially as the market changes as do their interests. Another coach says she teaches students how to look for temporary positions that are not necessarily relevant to their training, but will help them earn "a little income while they're in school." It's also beneficial because for some students they have not been employed previously and this temp job provides them with the employment process prior to graduation and seeking a job in their chosen career field.

**Internship development/clinical site acquisition.** In most cases instructors or program directors arrange for clinical sites for their respective allied health programs. However, three coaches have been instrumental in setting up internships or clinicals for their respective CHEO

programs. PCC's coach found two labor and delivery sites that are now used for internships. OJC's coach was able to secure several new clinical sites in a market that is taxed for clinical sites. RRCC's coach spent a considerable amount of time early in the grant period recruiting clinical sites. The area was fairly saturated with other community colleges also needing clinical sites, so many area agencies were simply at capacity. The coach was able to team up with a faculty member who had industry connections, as well with as the local workforce center, and was able to secure sites through these relationships.

**Employer engagement.** One of the CHEO grant's primary goals was to develop and institutionalize collaborative partnerships between the college, local employers and regional workforce centers. The first step of engagement with employers was during the proposal process. Each of the eight colleges in the consortium solicited "letters of intent" from area employers to be included in the consortium's proposal submission. The letters indicated the willingness of employers to work with the college—providing assistance with program design and course curricula, identifying industry trends and ultimately employing graduates. After the grant was awarded, the colleges established a CHEO program-specific advisory board or enhanced existent advisory boards affiliated with health sciences. Over the course of the grant board meetings have provided a regular forum for employers to inform faculty and college staff about industry needs and the elements that made graduates most competitive. For example, employers identified the need for soft skills training and thus were instrumental in the expansion of soft skills training at several of the colleges.

The grant statement of work both explicitly and implicitly named the coaches as instrumental in the engagement of area employers. Thus, during the early stages of the grant, coaches reached out to employers to tell them about their college's newly designed or redesigned allied health programs. They identified these programs as a potential source for future hires as well as spoke about the benefits of incumbent workers receiving additional training and certifications. A number of coaches told EERC that their outreach had been rewarding as some employers were unaware of all that the college had to offer to them and their employees. One coach stated: "It was really good because it also highlighted what majors we have available at the college; because I think some of the employers didn't even realize what programs we had."

As time progressed, many coaches participated in or helped to develop career fairs and other employment-focused activities. For instance, assuming not all students would necessarily stay in the Great Falls area after graduation, the GFC MSU's coach invited employers from all over the state. The first GFC MSU career fair was small, but effective and set the groundwork for future fairs and events. The college's coach commented "the employers [gave] really good feedback and really liked it, they thought it was great that they could actually meet students who are ready to come and work for them."

She also observed that employers seem to enjoy meeting faculty members. Further, the networking that began at the career fairs between employers and program faculty members fostered an ongoing discussion about different strategies to help incumbent workers gain

additional credentials and skills. RRCC's and FVCC's coaches have similarly been involved in career fairs, bringing students and employers together, as well as staff from the workforce center. For example, RRCC's coach has worked closely with a liaison from the local workforce center to organize multiple hiring events. The events have provided her with a forum to talk about RRCC's programs and the opportunities they afford for CNA's and personal care workers to receive additional certifications or continuing education while still working. Feedback has been positive. The RRCC's hiring event enables employers to meet prospective employees—current and future program graduates—and thus meets a real need in a market where employers are always looking to hire new CNAs.

Some coaches have observed that their engagement with employers has increased over the course of the grant. One coach said when she first arrived at her institution:

We didn't have anybody [employers]. I opened up the phonebook and just started cold calling people...and now I don't have to call anymore...We have a lot of agencies now that will call [us]. They want to partner...they know our program is good.

Another strategy used to increase employer participation was having an external facilitator run program advisory committee meetings which helped employers and members of the college community to more effectively hear and understand one another. The result has been "better turnout and better feedback in terms of employability [skills for students]."

In board meetings and other forums, employers have identified the skills they seek in new hires—communication, problem solving and leadership skills—what are often referred to as "soft skills." And the colleges have responded, engaging the employers to help them redesign curriculum that better integrates soft skills into program courses. As a result the CHEO consortium colleges are now better able to prepare students to meet the needs of employers. As the CHEO grant manager observed, this is what CHEO is about, these partnerships are a measure of CHEO's success.

**Workforce center engagement.** Many of the CHEO coaches have also participated in hiring events, career fairs and similar events in conjunction with their local workforce center. For example, RRCC's coach partnered with a representative from the workforce center and set up a table at the workforce center inviting employers to come by. The event turned out to be a great way to disseminate information to employers about RRCC's programs and a good opportunity to network with and build relationships with area employers. Given the benefits of community partnerships, RRCC's coach has also been working to engage other college staff with the local workforce center. She encourages faculty and staff to "come with me! Let's get out there and show what programs are here, and that the workforce center will work with us!"

Coaches refer students to their local workforce center for a variety of reasons. In some instances the workforce center is the community's central source of social services, such as food stamps or emergency funding. Coaches have worked closely with workforce center staff to assist students

in applying for various government programs as well as to secure health insurance through the Affordable Care Act. For example, OJC's coach has found that the demands of OJC's required clinicals make it difficult for some students to continue to work either part or full time jobs. The coach helps these students to secure alternative financial sources through the workforce center. When students quit their jobs at times they also lose insurance benefits. For students with children this can be a major problem. Again, the coach assists these students working with them and the workforce center to apply for health insurance. The coach observed that some students would not have been able to complete the necessary application forms without her guidance and support.

Most RRCC students intend to move on from the CNA certificate program to a nursing program. The RRCC coach has thus worked extensively with the local workforce center to help them understand that the CHEO certificates often acts as a 'prerequisite' for nursing. The result is the 'bundling' of the CNA program which allows the workforce center to use WIA funds for financing enrolled students. The RRCC coach noted that the CHEO program includes "several students .... funded by the workforce center; when I first came, [it] didn't." Student funding support and workforce initiated referrals to RRCC's program reflect the growth of a more collaborative partnership between the coach, the college, the workforce center's employer liaison, and other workforce staff.

**Data gathering/reporting.** All coaches are responsible for collecting specific student data for the CHEO grant. In addition, at a number of the smaller colleges, coaches are also responsible for pulling program data for grant management and for the EERC team. Data collection and management can be time consuming, especially when specific data is needed by grant management or the EERC team for quarterly and annual reports. Given that program data pulls for reporting periods are extensive and require familiarity with grant requirements and student outcome data, during the initial year of the grant coaches were mentored by grant management and EERC to do data collection.

All of the coaches are required to keep student information about their interactions with students, e.g., when and how often a student meets with a coach, what was discussed, and what the course of action was (for example, a referral to a tutor). During the course of the grant there have been two approved case management systems: the stitched-in report and a case management system integrated with the PlanYourHealthCareer hub. The stitched-in report was designed by PCC's first career coach and the CHEO data analyst to be a data collection tool for the coaches. The tool was an Excel-based spreadsheet meant to give basic data about coaches' student caseload, including coach-student interactions. Many coaches, especially those who were previously unfamiliar with Excel, found the tool cumbersome and time consuming. Some coaches kept notes through other means and periodically updated their stitched-in report, instead of using it as a daily tool.

The coaches asked grant management for a different data management system to keep track of student interactions. In the third year of the grant, the PlanYourHealthCareerhub roll-out

included a data management system for coaches to record student interactions, replacing the stitched-in report. At the time data was collected for this report the system was still new to coaches and the transition was not yet complete. Nonetheless, coaches were initially positive about the potential for the new management system.

**Post-graduation data.** EERC and the CHEO grant management team collects wage data from each school for grant reporting to the USDOL. For the schools without wage data contracts with their respective states, collecting student data post-graduation has largely fallen to the coach. To make this easier for the coaches, a survey was designed with input from grant management to be integrated into the PlanYourHealthCareer hub; the survey included questions about wages. Coaches could choose to use the hub survey or design their own. KoC's coach chose to design a survey to send out to students six months after their graduation. This survey was meant to collect information regarding wages as well as other questions pertinent to the school, such as whether or not a student has taken the exam for national certification.

Other coaches keep in touch with students post-graduation just to find out whether or not they have been employed, or if they are interested in continuing their education. RRCC's coach employed a unique practice when she first started to reach out to graduates of her school's CNA program. She asked a work-study student employed at the school for help, and together they called every student who had graduated from the CNA program to inform them of the new stackable certificates that were now available. GFC MSU's coach did something similar, reaching out to past students who had taken all the program's courses. She called and informed them they could now receive a certificate for that work, since the CHEO program transformed redesigned pre-existing courses into a new certificate.

**Other roles.** Beyond the roles listed above, some coaches have taken on additional functions, including using pre-existing community relationships to recruit students or engage employers. For these activities, many coaches have made use of their pre-CHEO experiences and networks. For example, PCC's coach is considering involving community members in setting up free tax workshops for students.

## PHYSICAL LOCATION

The proximity to students makes a difference relative to how often students meet with the career coach, and how likely they are to drop in. Most of the coaches have offices in or near their institution's learning center or student services' center. Several coaches reported this has facilitated their ability to connect with students, as students are coming and going or congregating nearby, and will "pop in" to visit. For several coaches, their physical office space is also in or near their college's health sciences department where their students are enrolled and taking classes. The proximity to classes enables students to stop by before or after class. For example, one coach noted she was better acquainted with the students in the EMS program because her office was near their classes than she was to students in the phlebotomy program which was located in a different part of the school. Another coach, however, said she saw the

benefit of having her office a distance from the health sciences department. She stated that students can come to her for help without feeling self-conscious about their instructor(s) seeing them. Her belief is that students do not want to appear to faculty or their peers that they need extra help.

Two coaches had their offices relocated during the course of the grant. One of these coaches was first located on a different campus than her students. This was problematic, because she was regularly commuting back and forth in order to connect with students. The PCC coach also commuted between the college's three branch campuses. At another college, a program moved to the same campus where the coach's office was located, better integrating the health sciences department. However, this coach felt her location remained a barrier as her office was located up the hill from the main health sciences building. Not physically in the same building as her students, she found that students were not readily dropping in.

While all eight colleges have integrated online or hybrid courses (or both) into their CHEO programs, two colleges have fully online programs as the only program the coach serves (KoC and LCCC). Students in these programs are taking courses remotely and are not required to come to campus. This means remote coaching for both of these institutions' coaches. For the coach at KoC most of her students are not even located in the same geographic area. The coach at LCCC also serves a fully online program, but some of her students reside near the campus and occasionally do come in. She does, however, have students who never come to campus. Operating at a distance means students are not able to "pop in" to see the coach. However, for the most part these coaches report that they feel connected to their students. They interact with their students through email, phone, and web-based interfacing such as the Blackboard course platform for the program's distance courses. KoC's coach also set up a Blackboard shell to post reminders for students about upcoming deadlines such as application for graduation.

A third coach who serves students in hybrid programs as well as a fully remote program, however, has found that she is less connected to the students in the remote program. These students rarely interact with her, in contrast to the students in programs based—at least to some degree—on campus.

## **COACH SUPERVISION**

Some of the coaches are directly supervised by their institution's CHEO project lead. At other schools, coaches are supervised by their department's chair or other department supervisor. At least one coach has multiple department heads who are involved in supervising her various functions. This sometimes makes communication and decision making difficult. Some coaches have experienced changes in supervisors which can be challenging especially during the time of transition. But overall, coaches have reported very few challenges related to supervision and the ability to perform their roles.

## **COACH TURNOVER**

At the time of this report, two colleges experienced coach turnover. PCC's career coach was replaced mid-grant. To facilitate her learning this coach reached out a department head who in turn provided her with helpful information about the CHEO programs and needs of the college. Additionally, the first week of the new coach's employment coincided with the second career coach workshop in Boulder, Colorado. This gave the new coach an opportunity to immediately meet and interact with other CHEO coaches.

At FVCC, coach turnover occurred during the third year of the grant. A staff member at the college, who was involved with employer engagement for the CHEO program, has taken over the coach role until the grant ends. Because this individual was already familiar with CHEO and some of the grant's functions, the transition at FVCC was fairly smooth.

## **METHODS OF CONTACT**

Email has been identified by all the coaches as an important tool to connect with students; and all report that at some point they have used email to connect with students. However, the majority of coaches cite having in-person meetings with students, especially for the first contact as their preferred strategy (of course this is not possible with remote programs). In many cases the first meeting is to inform the student about the program, to help him/her complete a program intake form or to assist with registration/academic advising. For ongoing communication (after the initial contact), half of the coaches rely on email as their primary method of communication. Of the eight coaches, only two said office visits were their main means for ongoing communication with students. Two other coaches stated that classroom visits and career-building activities, such as résumé writing and mock interviews, were the most common ways they continued their engagement of students.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Various professional development opportunities were provided to coaches throughout the grant. These sessions were primarily led by WICHE and grant management but other opportunities were also provided in partnership with other subcontractors. Coaches participated in webinars, conference calls, face-to-face workshops, wikis, and one-on-one sessions for a variety of professional development and program trainings, e.g., techniques to engage students, employers, and workforce center personnel. Coaches have also "met" once a month for "coffee talks" arranged by grant management. These phone meetings provide an opportunity for the coaches to share ideas and promising practices as well as work through any challenges. Additionally, this increased coaches' access to the grant management team. Coaches have appreciated the huge amount of information provided to them and overall have felt the information has been helpful.



When asked, coaches reported that the most relevant and beneficial professional development sessions were those that included speakers from other TAACCCT grants. For example, they found a discussion on best practices and lessons learned by a career coach from the Round One TAA Colorado Online Energy Technology (COETC) grant to be very helpful. In turn, some CHEO coaches have participated in online meetings to assist new coaches for rounds three and four of the TAACCCT grants. The coaches, even those who usually see students on campus, also found discussions about online coaching very interesting. As one coach observed, one of the primary goals of the CHEO grant was to make everything more accessible for rural students, and to move things online and hybrid. It therefore makes sense to teach coaches to do the same.

Another activity coaches have found beneficial was the development of a Strategic Work Plan created at one of the face-to-face workshops in Denver. The work plan outlined specific tasks for each coach to complete over the coming year and throughout the remainder of the grant. After leaving the workshop, coaches reported progress relative to their chosen activities during the monthly “coffee talk” sessions. Coaches found this “goal-setting” activity useful and encouraging, and felt it fostered collaboration and a sense of comradery. A similar activity coaches participated in during a WICHE workshop—where each coach described her role and daily activities—helped them see that they weren’t the only coach with multiple duties at their respective institution.

## **CROSS-COLLEGE COACH CONNECTIONS**

Coaches have had to define their roles within their respective schools and discover how they can best fit within—and for—their institution. Because each institution and its needs are different, each coach has developed a somewhat different job relative to the others. As noted above, while some functions are found across the consortium, especially for colleges with similar programs, some coaches have developed roles vastly different from their counterparts. This has made connections between coaches somewhat difficult. In fact, early in the grant some coaches reported feeling a sense of isolation; largely due to feeling they didn’t know each other—or each other’s roles—well enough yet. To address this, the project grant manager set up multiple ways for coaches to interact, communicate, and discuss role similarities and differences above and beyond the above-cited professional development activities. These have included a Basecamp site, wikis, and the above mentioned ‘coffee talks.’ Strategic trainings tailored for each coach were also initiated by grant management and conducted by a hired consultant. The two-hour individual sessions were meant to assist individual coaches with specific challenges and help coaches develop specific goals. After meeting during face-to-face workshops, and using the various communication channels, coaches began to build relationships and by the third year of the grant were regularly communicating with each other. Additionally, in the third year of the grant as consortium-wide grant targets became more of a focus than individual programs, coaches have participated in more joint activities with grant management. In these meetings, as coaches share their successes relative to shared CHEO project goals, communication and collaboration has grown even more.

Coaches geographically near one another and coaches with similar programs have also teamed up to take part in activities together. For example, both of PCC's coaches (the first coach and his subsequent replacement) have engaged with the (relatively) nearby RRCC coach to jointly participate in several job fair/career-oriented activities. The coaches from KoC and OJC have also shared information about their respective (similar) programs. These shared activities have facilitated and fostered the sharing of ideas and promising practices, and has helped the coaches to work through challenges together. The result has been stronger relationships and coach communication across the colleges.

## **WITHIN-COLLEGE COACH CONNECTIONS**

RRCC, PCC, OJC, and LCCC have multiple coaches employed within their respective institutions across programs and grants. RRCC, OJC and PCC have multiple rounds of TAACCCT grants, with several coaches participating. The sharing of TAACCCT experience within a college has been very helpful in informing new CHEO coaches about the general TAACCCT process. The coaches at each of these schools collaborate with each other and occasionally fill in duties for one another. CHEO coaches have found this especially helpful early in the grant process. At LCCC, coaching has been institutionalized with several coaches assigned to be career specialists. As such, in respect to their intensive advising function, LCCC's coaches generally serve the college, not individual programs.

## **MEASURING COACH SUCCESS**

Each institution created performance benchmarks, approved by DOL, which coaches used as their targets and measure of success for the grant. While measures for coach success relative to the grant were specific, stakeholders also discussed a variety of other measures when asked what made the coach position successful. Since the roles of CHEO coaches span such a wide range of activities, it is not surprising that 'success' can be measured many different ways. EERC team members asked CHEO stakeholders during interviews throughout the grant period what coach success meant to them, and how they gauged whether or not the coach position was successful. College administrators, grant management, project leads, faculty, students, and coaches defined coach success in terms of student retention, graduation, job placement, and enabling students to be successful overall.

When students were asked about career coach success, they defined it relative to their own success; most of them simply replied: "I wouldn't have graduated without her help." Other students discussed the importance of having the coach as a communication conduit. One student who was in the college's CHEO program before the coach was hired said communication was difficult prior to the coach's arrival; there was no one to coordinate paperwork or disseminate important due dates such as graduation application dates or certification exams. This student said the coach has improved communication between faculty and students and the coach has made student success much easier:

It was nice that she would send out emails when things were coming up, things were due, and then if we had questions also for an instructor – something specific, she would get back to us, and it was quick. So, that was nice.

A second student in the same program echoed how important communication is: “You’ve got to have communication with your students – because we’re depending on you.” Several students have told EERC staff that it is often easier to talk to the coach than an instructor. Sometimes this is because instructors don’t seem to have time, but in other cases it is just easier for students to open up to the coach. One student said:

I had to contact her a few times because I felt it easier to contact her if there was a problem with a task or if something wasn’t there [on the course website]. For some reason, it was easier for me to tell this to her than to the instructor. So, yeah, she was helpful in that way, and when she sends out the reminders for tasks and exams, that’s helpful too.

A student at another school also talked about the importance of having someone to with whom to talk and having someone make sure she knew when things were due. This student felt that without the coach’s guidance she likely would not have finished the program: “I probably wouldn’t have my certificate, honestly.” A second student at this school said having the coach has made it easier to succeed:

I have a lot of classes and some of them you just go in, do what you’re supposed to do, you’re done. But this was one of the first classes that more than one person was involved making sure you understood what was going on, it wasn’t just, you come to class, do your homework. But this, they really want to make sure you succeed. They want to help you get where you want to go.

Students have repeatedly told EERC staff members that coaches have made a difference in their educational careers and their lives.

Aside from grant benchmarks and targets, coaches defined their own success in a variety of ways. Some mentioned recruitment and retention, some mentioned internship and clinical sites and student placement in them, and others mentioned career guidance and helping students prepare for jobs. However, all of the coaches mentioned students graduating and getting jobs as a benchmark for their success. Further, each coach framed success in the context of touching the lives of individual students and helping them make positive decisions about their lives, their education, and their career paths. One coach summed this up succinctly: “The greatest success is knowing that we’re impacting lives.”

Some coaches also observed that even if a student has not graduated or finished a program, their work with the student can still be considered a success. One coach gave an example of a

student who experienced a terrible loss in the family and needed to take a break for a semester. While this student would be considered a dropout on paper, the coach knew that her influence helped the student make critical decisions, and helped the student feel like someone cared – instead of feeling like a failure. These positive feelings were likely to influence the student to come back to school and finish when she could.

## **COACH-STUDENT INTERACTION**

Good examples of how beneficial coaches have been to students can be seen by considering individual stories. This section highlights student success stories that coaches have told EERC staff members.

LCCC's coach spoke about a recently divorced student in her 50s who had dealt with spousal abuse issues. She was determined to get through the Health Information Technology and Management program, but struggled due to so many personal problems and barriers to success, including having nowhere to live. The coach described her role in helping the student –being there for her to talk to, and helping her find resources. She said,

It's just being there for that person, talking them through other resources that they can access in the community, which is where I would say is the difference between a counselor and a coach. I'm not going to counsel her, but I'm going to refer her to services as she needs them.

The coach also helped the student when she encountered trouble at her part-time job. The student's work environment had become volatile for reasons outside of the students' control. The coach helped the student write a 2-weeks' notice letter and helped the student to prepare a résumé and cover letter as part of the process to find other employment. The coach and a program instructor also worked together to help this student finish classes. This included the instructor granting the student an extension to finish up some course material so she could graduate on time without retaking classes. Reflecting on this student's situation, the coach noted that non-traditional students sometimes need extra help because of their additional responsibilities:

That's where you need the coach or you need the understanding faculty to go look, these are non-traditional [students]...It's abusive relationships and divorces and custody battles over their kids. And some of those types of things. So that's really the person that we're working with and they bring so much more into their life than someone younger does.

Although this particular student was local and able to come to campus to meet with the coach and instructor, LCCC's program is 100 percent online. LCCC's coach has therefore helped students work through student difficulties in a fully remote capacity. One student mentioned by this coach was a 46-year old Australian woman with an active duty military spouse who

later took a civilian job in Ohio. The family uprooted from Cheyenne, Wyoming and moved to Ohio, transitioning not only to another state, but also to a new way of life outside of the military. The student's children had trouble acclimating to the move as well, and the student struggled with frustration and depression. The coach and the student's instructor spent time talking to her, through email, phone, and Google Hangout, mostly just encouraging her and helping her get through the semester. As the coach states, in some cases students need to hear that getting a slightly lower grade is sometimes okay:

A lot of these non-traditional [students], they're ready for school and they want to do really, really well. And so anything less than an 'A' for a lot of these students is frustrating. [The instructor] and I would talk to her, saying, "It's okay. You can get the 'B'. You're struggling with sleep apnea. You are unhealthy. You're adjusting. Your kids are struggling. It's okay to get a 'B'. Let's just get you through the semester."

One of the student's concerns was finding a job in her new community. LCCC's coach helped the student work on a plan for employment; giving her résumé assistance, job search tips, encouraging her to consider her goals, and to start networking.

RRCC's coach spoke about a physically disabled student who had been trying to find a RN refresher program for years, but could not find one willing to take her. She wanted to get back into nursing, however, and other refresher programs were not willing to accommodate her. The coach went to college's dean, who agreed the student should apply. The refresher program at RRCC is so popular there are more applicants than spaces in the program. The application committee accepted the student, but there was concern about her ability to complete the clinical component. The dean connected with the hospital that hosts the clinicals, and made sure the site was able to accommodate her. The student finished the program and clinicals, and the coach said the hospital's patients and nurses were very impressed with her:

The nurses there were just so excited about the response patients had with her. And, actually, patients were asking for her over other nurses. I think part of it, too, is they knew she understands what they were going through. But she is something else. And I'm so proud of what she's done, and it had to be pretty scary. But she's got her license now, and we're going to start working on job search. So that was – that's one of the best stories this year.

Sometimes coaches are able to help students turn their difficult situations into positives. RRCC's coach discussed a student that had taken care of his parents for years as a caregiver: "They had both been sick, and in and out of the hospital. [From that experience] he decided that [being a nurse's aide was] what he wants to do and he's just a very bright, wonderful person." The coach helped this student prepare his résumé by highlighting his skills and experience from his home situation. She said he was hired immediately: "He finished his CNA, got his certification, and he's a full-fledged CNA now, seems very happy."

LATI's retention specialist says in many cases students just need help thinking things through. Students will often tell him they don't have time to study because they have kids to take care of and other responsibilities. He works with students to come up with a realistic plan, such as leaving the children with the babysitter for an extra hour, to go "to the library and use that hour very effectively without distractions, so that instead of studying for four hours you only have to study for an hour, but that's a quality one hour of study." Helping students come up with a plan is something all the coaches feel lead to success. One coach said:

"Everybody has crazy lives, especially if you're a single mother, so they try to just come up with plans that will work. And I don't really try to steer them one way or the other, but I try to listen, and then a lot of times they come up with their own plan."

Coaching is really just "trying to help students really with whatever they might be having an issue with." OJC's coach says her mantra is "come in, let's talk, let's find you a tutor, or let's find out what it is you need." As indicated above, she often coordinates with the workforce center to get students the help they need.

PCC's coach told of a student who was having difficulty working while attending school. His wife lost her job, their car broke down, and they were unable to qualify for assistance because his wife had not been out of work long enough; the past income was still considered when they applied. They were told "they made \$20 too much to get assistance; to come back and apply like in two months' time." The student was unsure if he would be able to finish the program because he needed to work to provide for his family. The coach connected him to the workforce center and secured funding for his tuition, and food through the local food bank. In addition, she helped him apply for emergency funding through the college, as well as a scholarship for the following semester.

PCC's coach also told a heartwarming story about a young EMT student who grew up locally and wanted to build a career in some healthcare occupation. At first she thought nursing would be the way to go, but "she felt [in order] to be really competitive as a nursing program applicant, she would do her EMT certification first." Once she was in the program, "she just fell in love with it. And she didn't realize – she never thought about becoming a medic, but she actually went on and started working towards her AAS degree in the EMS program." She was able to work with a local company while attending school, and because she was such an excellent worker the company funded her tuition. The student felt the opportunity gave her new direction in life:

I can't even imagine what else I would be doing. I was very lost and no idea what I wanted to do with healthcare. This gave me a focus. It honed me on direction. AMR [American Medical Response] and the college supporting my getting work done and not just getting by, but doing it right. Between a joint effort between PCC and AMR, they gave me the chance to succeed...When I show up on a call I'm seeing someone at what may be their worst moment. The first responder can make all the difference, and that's a

special opportunity, because I may have the opportunity to make that whole situation less terrible. Even if it is to give the dog food and water before we leave the house or just call their daughter, she said you never know how you're going to affect someone's life.

The student is now facilitating CPR workshops, and has trained hundreds of people in the community. These are only a few of the heartwarming stories coaches have told to illustrate how their role as coaches has translated to student success. As these stories suggest, coach success relative to intensive advising involves a variety of skills, resources, and the ability to listen to students and encourage them to pursue their own success.

## **COACH SUSTAINABILITY**

Sustaining the career coach position after the grant period ends will be decided by each institution. However, there is a distinct difference between sustaining the coach at the institution, versus sustaining the coach functions or role—or parts of the role—at the institution. Early in the grant, when asked about sustainability of the coach role, most project leads and administrators were focused on whether or not the institution could hire the coach after the grant period. Although most of the institutions would like to keep a designated coach and the position, the reality is that most of the schools are facing hiring freezes, budget cuts, and significant state pressure to keep spending low. As a result, most of the coaches will continue their CHEO duties until March 2016, but will not be employed in that role after that date.

Thus, at the end of the third grant year, most institutions have started to assign elements of the coach role to other members of the college community. To facilitate this effort, coaches are trying to identify the strategies that have been most successful, passing the baton to others to carry on these elements of the coach role. For example, RRCC's coach developed a system for reminding students about upcoming deadlines for required elements of their program, such as background checks and paperwork. College administrators praised her work, stating the retention of students in the program had increased considerably because of it. As a result, the school intends to retain this critical function, although it remains unclear if the function will be given to faculty or someone else at the college. In addition, RRCC's coach is meeting with employers and letting them know that after she leaves they should contact the program's director. To facilitate the process, she has been taking the program director with her to meet employers, introducing her and making sure a connection has been established.

OJC's coach has prepared a packet of information for students which they receive upon entering the program. The packet contains workforce center contacts and information, résumé-building information, interview tips, and resource information such as community centers, financial aid assistance, and student services. She is helping the school's advisors to become familiar with the packet and to continue delivering it to students in classrooms after she leaves. GFC MSU's coach is preparing her school's advisors by making sure they know the basics about the programs (for outreach and marketing purposes). She is also talking to instructors about

continuing the soft skills classroom training workshops she has been doing with students. PCC's coach feels there is a pressing need for students to learn how to interview properly:

So many of the students just do not know how to interview well, and they're terrified of it. And it's not—they can be brilliant students. They can really be technically trained. But as far as getting there and interviewing, they're a wreck.

She has developed interview skills materials that she hopes the school will continue to provide after she departs.

## **SUMMARY**

As the coaches reflect on the work they have done under CHEO and wrap up the third year of the CHEO grant, they speak of the many challenges they have overcome, the promising practices they have established, and the many students they have served. CHEO coaches have worked hard to help their students succeed. Their success has impacted not only the individual students with whom they have worked, but also their institution and the community. As one coach pointed out, CHEO coaches have been “very impactful [sic] in terms of helping the economy by helping individuals get to work or become better employed instead of under-employed.”

EERC staff members have also listened to many students champion their career coach and state that they likely would not have graduated without the help of their coach. Students in CHEO programs have therefore definitely benefitted from the integration of intensive advising, and coaches have been instrumental in helping many students to secure better jobs—a major goal of the CHEO grant. Although grant funding for the coach position was temporary, CHEO colleges have realized the benefits of the intensive advising role and are integrating elements of it into the services provided by their respective institutions. One coach succinctly summed up the contribution of coaches and the impact of the CHEO project: “When you see large numbers of students become successful, that's awesome. And I just feel like it's a wonderful thing to know you've helped.”



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