Coaching College Students to Thrive: Exploring Coaching Practices in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT


The purpose of this study was to explore how trained, four-year success coaches perceive their coaching practice with students in higher education, particularly in the context of their meetings. While coaching programs have proliferated, little is known about coaching as a practice in higher education and it is difficult to generalize findings because professionals are ‘coaching’ in different ways. Some academic coaches in the field have stated they were given a title, but they are not ‘coaching’ (Sepulveda, 2017). Little is known about coaching as a practice, and this study will help to fill this gap.

Taking a narrative approach, I used self-determination theory as a lens to explore the perceptions of trained, four-year success coaches to understand what they perceived they strategically do in their meetings with students. I interviewed 18 coaches in higher education across the United States and asked for stories in how they have helped students in each meeting, and throughout their meetings. In this narrative study, I explored how coaches approach their meetings and what skills they incorporate. Through semi-structured interviews I elicited stories of growth, development, and intentionality in their practices. Beliefs, skills, conversational framework, the progression over time, the training, growth, and development and the role make up coaching practices in higher education. It is the *consistent combination* of these that make the coaching practice a
unique student support service. This study builds upon self-determination theory and I draw conclusions about what findings mean for coaching practices in higher education.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

- Coaching for Success ............................................................... 3
- Coaching in Higher Education: An Emergent Profession .......... 4
- Coaching Practices in Higher Education ................................ 5
- Coaching and Student Success .................................................. 7
- Overview: Coaching Literature in Higher Education ................. 8
- Statement of the Problem ....................................................... 10
- Purpose of the Study .............................................................. 11
- Research Questions ............................................................... 12
- Research Design ..................................................................... 17
- Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination .......................... 18
- Methodology ......................................................................... 18
- Significance of the Study ....................................................... 20
- Outline of Proposal .............................................................. 24

## CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

- History and Purpose of Coaching ............................................ 25
  - History and Purpose in the Broader Coaching Field ............ 25
  - History and Purpose of Coaching in Higher Education ........ 27
- Student Success in College .................................................... 28
  - Institutional Measures of Student Success .......................... 29
    - Retention and higher education ....................................... 29
      - Costs of attrition .......................................................... 31
      - Accountability in higher education ............................... 32
    - Academic performance .................................................. 32
    - Engagement ................................................................. 33
    - Student development and personal development ............. 35
      - Student well-being ..................................................... 37
      - Self-efficacy and mindset .......................................... 38
II. Benefits of Coaching

Benefits of Coaching ........................................................................... 42

Coaching Benefits in the Broader Field ............................................. 42
Benefits of Coaching in Higher Education ........................................ 45

Coaching for retention and academic performance ...................... 46
Coaching students to thrive .............................................................. 52
Coaching students for self-determination ...................................... 55

CHAPER

Mixed Findings .................................................................................. 61
The Coaching Process ........................................................................ 62

The Coaching Relationship ............................................................... 63
The Art and Science of Coaching: Meetings in the Broader Field 64
Governing Bodies of Coaching .......................................................... 70
Coaching Meetings in Higher Education ........................................ 72
Training in Higher Education ............................................................ 79

Conclusion of Literature Review ....................................................... 83

III. METHODOLOGY ........................................................................ 85

Researcher Epistemology ................................................................. 86
Theoretical Framework ..................................................................... 87
Narrative .......................................................................................... 89

Participant Selection ....................................................................... 91
Participant Criteria .......................................................................... 92
Participant Recruitment and Consent ............................................. 96
Participants ...................................................................................... 97
Data Collection ............................................................................... 100

Demographic survey ........................................................................ 100
Interviews ........................................................................................ 101
Documents as visual narrative approach ...................................... 104
Researcher journal ......................................................................... 106

Data Analysis .................................................................................. 106
Rigor and Trustworthiness ................................................................. 111

Credibility ....................................................................................... 111
Confirmability .................................................................................. 112
Transferability ............................................................................... 113
CHAPTER III. continued

Ethics ...................................................... 113
Limitations ............................................... 114
Researcher Positionality ............................... 115

CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS .......................................... 120

Participant Description ................................ 121
Coaching Beliefs ........................................ 125

Human-Centered ........................................ 126
Students’ Agenda, Students’ Goal, Not the Coach ........ 127
Meet the Student Where They Are .................. 129
The Student is Capable ................................ 130
Student is the Expert .................................. 132
Learning as a Process .................................. 133
Learning as a Process for Coaches .................... 135
Summary of Theme One: Coaching Beliefs .......... 135

Coaching Skills ......................................... 136

Coaching Presence ...................................... 137

Active listening ........................................ 137
Authenticity ............................................ 138
Being comfortable with the uncomfortable .......... 139
Non-judgmental ....................................... 140

Skills Used in Every Meeting .......................... 141

Powerful questions to elicit insight and reflection ... 141
Underlying concerns .................................. 144
Skilled intuition ........................................ 146

Knowing your student ................................ 147
Readiness to move forward ......................... 148
Student needs more support ....................... 150
Knowing your toolbox ................................ 151
Exploring possibilities ............................... 153
Diving deeper ......................................... 154

Macro and Micro Level Thinking ..................... 155
Building Students Up ................................ 156
CHAPER IV. continued

Relationship and Rapport Building.............................................158

How coaches build relationships .............................................159
Why coaches prioritize relationships .......................................160

Summary of Theme Two: Coaching Skills.................................162

Coaching Meetings in Higher Education.......................................163

Facilitating the Process ..........................................................163
Students’ Agenda .......................................................................165
Preparing for Meetings .............................................................166
Summary of Theme Three: Coaching Meetings in Higher Education...............................................167

Coaching Progression Over Time................................................167

First Meetings are Crucial..........................................................167

Prioritize the relationship ..........................................................168
Goals for semester, life .............................................................169
Coaching role and expectations ................................................169
Coaching buy in ......................................................................171

The Threading of Meetings ........................................................172
Continued Relationship and Rapport Building ..........................175
Growth and Insight Take Time ....................................................176
Revisit, Revise, and Changing Goals .........................................179
Progression from Directive and Non-Directive .........................179
Summary of Theme Four: Coaching Practice Over Time ..........183

Training, Growth, and Development as a Coach .......................183

Reflections on Training and Coaching Practice .........................185
Growth ....................................................................................189
Summary of Theme Five: Training .............................................190
Growth, and Development as a Coach ......................................190

The Coaching Role in Higher Education .....................................191

Identity Confusion ....................................................................191
Interplay Between Coach, Student, and Institution ....................196
Coaching Outcomes .................................................................198
### Chapter IV. continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student is not alone</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student is capable, confidence, competent</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make it your own</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Summary of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Chapter V. DISCUSSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coaching for Self-Determination in Higher Education</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Coaches Help Students Identify and Reach Goals</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Compelling Coach: Getting Students to Buy In</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Conversational Framework for Coaches in Higher Education</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six phases of a coaching meeting in higher education</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic or agenda</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agenda before or after exploration?</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth and insight</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled intuition</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should I use my toolbox?</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next steps</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluidity in the Conversational Framework</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacing of Meeting</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Meetings--Coaching Takes Time</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Relationship with Coaching, Student Support and Retention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role Confusion</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is Coaching Redundant?</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating Relationships with Institution and Student</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Awareness and Access</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
V. CHAPER

continued

The Parallel Process of Development ................................................................. 239

Coach Awareness and Socialization ................................................................. 240
Coaches Do Not Know What They Do Not Know .......................................... 241
The Progression of Coach Development .......................................................... 243
The Evolution of a Coach--A Narrative ............................................................... 243
Diversity and Meeting Students Where They Are ............................................ 246

Implications ........................................................................................................ 246

The Art and Science of Coaching Practices in Higher Education ........................ 246
Training and Perception of Coaching Practices ................................................. 254
Need for Further Professionalization ................................................................. 255

Future Research ................................................................................................ 256
Summary of Chapter IV ...................................................................................... 258

VI. CONCLUSION ............................................................................................... 259

REFERENCES .................................................................................................... 261

APPENDICES

A. Recruitment Email ......................................................................................... 282
B. Initial Participant Demographic Survey ......................................................... 284
C. Institutional Review Board Approval ............................................................. 287
D. Informed Consent ............................................................................................ 289
E. Interview Protocol ........................................................................................... 292
F. Mind Map Directions ....................................................................................... 294
G. Sample Concept Maps .................................................................................... 296
H. Open Coding .................................................................................................. 300
LIST OF TABLES

Table
1. Characteristics of Sample .................................................................98
2. Themes and Categories ........................................................................109
3. Participant Overview ...........................................................................122
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure
1. Conversational Framework for Coaches in Higher Education ...............211
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Coaching is above all about human growth and change”
(Stober, 2006, p. 17)

The retention, persistence, and graduate rates of college students is a major concern for institutions of higher education (Mayhew et al., 2016; Tandberg & Hillman, 2014; Veenstra, 2009). While most institutions invest already scarce financial resources to increase retention rates, progress has remained stagnant. One recent approach developed to increase retention is the implementation of academic and success coaching programs. These programs provide additional support to various student populations. C. E. Robinson (2015), in her dissertation and in one of the few studies using empirical data conducted on coaching in higher education, found the top two reasons coaching programs were created was to improve retention and academic performance. According to this descriptive study, at the time, 70% of all programs were created between 2010 and 2014 (C. E. Robinson, 2015). While several studies have found coaching to be effective in increasing retention or academic performance (I. H. Allen & Lester, 2012; Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013; Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Capstick, Harrell-Williams, Cockrum, & West, 2019; Sepulveda, Birnbaum, Finley, & Frye, 2020; Wilson, Oostergo, Idewa-Gede, & Lizzio, 2015), questions remain about the generalizability to other institutions and coaching programs because outcomes likely depend on how coaches are ”coaching.”
Existing studies on coaching were problematic because institutions implemented programs in a variety of ways, making comparisons difficult. Even when positive outcomes were found, limited information was offered as to what coaches did during their coaching meetings to support these outcomes. For example, some coaching programs focused solely on improving academics, such as study skills, learning strategies, and time management, while others focused on the personal growth and development of a student, which may or may not have included academics. Additionally, variety existed among how coaches were (or were not) trained.

Coaches typically meet with students over several meetings. However, what coaches perceive they strategically do in their coaching practice, particularly in meetings, remains a mystery. As a result, confusion exists as to what a coaches’ role is on a college campus, especially when compared to advising, counseling, or tutoring (C. E. Robinson, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017). In this narrative study, I explored what coaches perceive they do in their meetings using self-determination theory as a guiding theoretical framework. For example, what techniques, strategies, or theories help students achieve their goals? What role do coaches perceive they have in increasing student success and retention? How might coaches develop autonomy, competence, and relatedness during meetings? I am particularly interested in understanding what trained coaches’ do from their perspective. Meeting several coaches from across the country, I have learned that while every coach describes their practice uniquely, similar concepts have emerged when coaches talk about their meetings and interactions with students. Coaches’ perceptions and how they make meaning of their experiences can help to better understand how coaches perceive their practice, what coaches perceive they do in their meetings with students, and why they do
what they do. My primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews to explore, analyze, and interpret what coaches perceive they do in their meetings to support student success within the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002).

In the first chapter of this study, I provided background to the larger body of coaching and an overview of coaching in higher education. The problem statement was described along with a brief overview of the literature. I then shared the purpose of the study with research questions that guided my study. I concluded this chapter with an outline of the rest of the study.

Coaching for Success

Success coaching emerged from the broader profession of life coaching. Coaches have permeated a variety of fields such as business, life, health, wellness, among several others. The following definitions arose from the broader field of coaching. Goldsmith, Lyons, and Freas (2000) defined coaching from a leadership perspective:

A coach helps a person move up a level, by expanding a skill, by boosting performances, or even by changing the way a person thinks. Coaches help people grow. They help people see beyond what they are today to what they can become tomorrow. A great coach helps ordinary folks do extraordinary things. In short, a great coach provides a sturdy shoulder to stand on so one can see further than they might see on their own. (p. 12)

In this definition, coaches help people improve performance, develop skills, help people to see beyond themselves in skill, possibility, and mindset, and guide a person to make their own decisions. Several authors have underscored the importance in the role of a coach to guide and facilitate the person to make their own decisions (Salter, 2015; Thomson, 2012; van Nieuwerburgh, & Tong, 2013). Each of these elements align with self-determination, the theoretical framework for this study.
Coaching programs have become increasingly prevalent at colleges across the country as a way to support students in retention and academic performance (C. E. Robinson, 2015). Though several terms were used throughout the literature and in practice to refer to a similar type of intervention including, but not limited to academic success coaching, college life coaching, and academic coaching, I used “coach” to describe this intervention throughout this study. C. E. Robinson (2015) found coaches typically focused on supporting first-year students or other student populations because of the pressure to increase retention rates and ultimately improve student outcomes. C. E. Robinson (2015) also developed an aspirational definition of coaching based on her survey results:

Academic/Success Coaching is the individualized practice of asking reflective, motivation-based questions, providing opportunities for formal self-assessment, sharing effective strategies, and co-creating a tangible plan. The coaching process offers students an opportunity to identify their strengths, actively practice new skills, and effectively navigate appropriate resources that ultimately result in skill development, performance improvement, and increased persistence. (p. 126)

Above was the only definition to describe coaching that is specific to higher education in the literature. The definition focused on describing the coaching process and the outcomes from this process. However, what coaches perceived they did in their meetings to facilitate this process was missing. For example, how do coaches “co-create a tangible plan?” How do coaches pick what is most important to discuss in their meetings or what skills to develop? Coaches may solely focus on the professional, or the academic aspect of students’ lives, or they might include personal aspects. The definition alone misses the mark when understanding the coaching process and practice underlying this support
service. The definition is confusing as to how this role is different than other roles on a college campus or how coaching in higher education relates to the broader field. In the current narrative study, I sought to understand what success coaches perceive they do in their meetings with students and how they understand their coaching practice.

Moreover, Brzycki, and Brzycki (2016) argued the organization of higher education did not function optimally for students because personal and career goals were often separated by departmental or programmatic goals. Coaching may fill this gap, by combining the personal and career goals of the student and provide holistic support. Additionally, the ways coaching might differentiate from other support services was still blurred. Understanding what coaches perceived they did in their meetings and as a practice would help bring clarity to this support service as the role becomes more prevalent across the United States (C. E. Robinson, 2015). While coaching in higher education has become increasingly popular, research about its effectiveness and best practices has remained inadequate.

**Coaching Practices in Higher Education**

Coaching programs have been implemented in a variety of ways and have used diverse theories and trainings to inform their coaching practice. Most coaching programs have no theory or framework guiding their work (C. E. Robinson, 2015). By first understanding what coaches perceive they do in meetings and their coaching practices that might contribute to positive outcomes, I aim to fill a gap toward improving the practice and understanding the role. It remains unknown if coaching improves retention or academic performance because students are being ‘coached’, because of the frequency of meetings, because of the improvement of skills, or some other component. For
example, how might coaching improve retention and academic performance based on the coaching practices? What coaches do behind closed doors to support student success is missing from the literature and is crucial given the vast number of programs across the U.S.

Considerable differences also included the number of times coaches meet with students, if programs are mandatory or voluntary for students, and if coaching was offered individually or in a group. In a review of studies on undergraduate mentorship, Gershenfeld (2014) concluded there is a need to identify specific program functions (goal-setting, psychosocial support, and role modeling) and program components (frequency of meetings, duration of meetings, training of mentors) when mentoring. I would argue there is a similar need to identify specific program functions and components when researching and understanding practices related to coaching in higher education. Cost has also been a challenge to support coaching programs because of the individualized nature and frequency of meetings associated with the intervention (Keen, 2014; Sepulveda, 2017). It is crucial to know more about coaching practices if the coaching strategy really does benefit students.

Current studies have missed the mark on describing program functions as described by Gershenfeld (2014) and how the coaches were trained. As a result, coaches have been left to improvise what they are doing, and then claim that it works, without describing what it is. Having such little knowledge about coaching practices becomes problematic as researchers and practitioners strive to evaluate and improve practice. Additionally, confusion about coaching exists on campuses across the country (C. E. Robinson, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017) and learning how coaches perceive their coaching
practices and what they do in their meetings will provide clarity for individual institutions and coaching as an emerging profession in higher education.

**Coaching and Student Success**

Coaching college students is often described as a service on campus which supports student success. Student success is often determined by a myriad of factors and is defined in a variety of ways throughout the literature in higher education. In a review of student success literature, Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) summarized, “student success is defined as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post college performance” (p. 7). For the purposes of this narrative study, I chose to use the following metrics to define student success:

1. Quantifiable outcomes such as retention, graduation rates, and academic performance (e.g., GPA) that have been traditional measures of student success. For the purposes of this study, retention is defined as “the outcome of how many students remained enrolled from fall to fall. This number is typically derived from first-time, full time traditional day students but can be applied to any defined cohort” (Noel-Levitz Retention Codifications, 2014, p. 4). Students who were retained from their first year, to their second year were much more likely to graduate from any college (Noel-Levitz Retention Codifications, 2014; Veenstra, 2009). When a student leaves one institution, they are less likely to re-enroll or transfer to another college and graduate. As a result, institutions have
increased support and services to improve the retention rate of first-year students, such as coaching;

2. Academic and social integration (Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005);

3. Student and personal development (e.g., cognitive and non-cognitive factors, skill development, self-awareness, purpose, personal goals, and overall well-being; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Blankenship, 2017; Gibbs & Larcus, 2015; Larcus, Gibbs, & Hackmann, 2016; Schreiner, 2010, 2013).

Each of the student success elements will be described further in the literature review in Chapter II. The three metrics of student success were combined with the Kuh et al. (2006) definition and Habley, Bloom, and Robbins (2012) definition to measure student success as defined by each individual student. Marks (2015) described “when coaching students, it is essential to assess what happiness, success, and achievement means to them as individuals, and to recognize that these individual meanings will vary by cultural background and other demographic variables” (p. 334). While student success was defined in a variety of ways by each institution and individual student, how coaches assess and determine what happiness and success looks like for each student is unknown.

Overview: Coaching Literature in Higher Education

With increased pressure to retain and support students, there is a strong need to find innovative solutions to the attrition problem. Studies and individual institutions have showed students who have been coached experience benefits such as increased academic performance (I. H. Allen & Lester, 2012; Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013; Bruner, 2017; College Life Coaching, 2020; C. Robinson & Gahagan, 2010), develop time management
skills (Prevatt & Yelland, 2015), improve study strategies (Field, Parker, Sawilowsky, & Rolands, 2010; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; Richman, Rademacher, & Maitland, 2014), are taking ownership of their decisions (LaRocca, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017; Thomson, 2012), are navigating and understanding the logistics of higher education (e.g., financial aid, how to talk to faculty, navigating resources; Bosworth, 2006), increase self-awareness (Lefdahl-Davis, Huffman, Stancil, & Alayan, 2018; Richman et al., 2014; Sepulveda, 2017), clarity in the students’ vision (Conner, Daugherty, & Gilmore, 2012; Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018), and progress towards identification and achieving goals (LaRocca, 2015; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; C. Robinson & Gahagan, 2010; Webberman & Carter, 2011). One study in particular found coached students demonstrated improved retention rates when compared to non-coached students (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). However, coaching was provided to students over the phone using an external company called InsideTrack, which used a specific methodology to “coach” students. Given the limited sample sizes, the unique implementation of each coaching program, and ambiguity with how the coaches “coach” their students, more research is needed to understand how coaches perceive their coaching practices in order to fully understand this emerging profession.

With increasing pressure from the state and federal government to increase graduation and retention rates (Middaugh, 2010), higher education institutions need to understand if, or when coaching college students is the best use of resources. Theories have suggested improving retention is a complex process involving many aspects of both the institution and individual student (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1993; Tinto, 1993). While some studies have examined coaching, little is known about
coaching as a practice, particularly in what coaches perceive they do in meetings to support student success. Additionally, confusion still exists regarding how coaching is different than other support services on campus such as mentoring, advising, and counseling (C. E. Robinson, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017). I hope findings bring clarity to coaching as a practice in the field of higher education.

**Statement of the Problem**

Coaching college students has been found to contribute to increased retention and graduation rates (I. H. Allen & Lester, 2012; Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013; Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Capstick et al., 2019; Sepulveda et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2015), improved GPAs (I. H. Allen & Lester, 2012; Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2018), and supported student and personal development in a variety of ways (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018; C. E. Robinson, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017). Yet, what topics, strategies, or techniques coaches used or discussed in meetings and in their coaching practice to develop students and support student success, have yet to be explored in-depth. As Bettinger and Baker (2014) suggested, research was needed to understand the services and actions of coaches and how this might help students be motivated to stay and graduate; stated directly, we do not know what coaches actually do in their coaching practice.

Although the existing literature offers some indication that coaching college students is an effective intervention, studies are limited to the often-unknown approach or model at the individual institution (i.e., specific student populations, using a specific coaching framework, frequency of meetings with students, training). Some coaches have used specific theories or frameworks to inform their coaching practice. Others have been
given the position of academic or success coach without any training to “coach” a student. Training has also varied drastically and has depended heavily on the funding and support from each institution.

Clarification and an understanding in the narratives of how coaches perceived their practices and what they do in their meetings with students will be crucial if this intervention is to be continued in higher education. Findings were limited to each institution and what coaches did in these meetings to support student success was missing from peer-reviewed publications. Studies that were cited often did not clarify what “coaching” means at the particular program or institution. Additionally, coaching services were provided in a variety of ways without much knowledge about what coach-specific strategies and techniques were most effective or what coaching elements helped contribute to student success.

**Purpose of the Study**

The number of coaches and coaching programs has increased dramatically over the past decade. However, little has been known about the actions coaches strategically take in their practice to support student success. The purpose of this study was to explore how trained, 4-year coaches perceive their coaching practice with students in higher education, particularly in the context of their meetings. I used findings from these stories to provide clarity in how coaching practices were used to coach college students to thrive in college and life.
Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide this narrative study:

Q1  How do trained college and university coaches perceive their coaching practices?

Q1a  What specific strategies do coaches perceive they use to help students define their goals in first meetings, and over several meetings?

Q1b  What do coaches perceive they do in first meetings, and over several meetings to help college students reach their goals?

Q1c  What role do coaches perceive they have in retention?

Q1d  How do coaches perceive they fit into the undergraduate student support system on their campus?

In the rest of this section, I share justification for why each research question needed to be addressed, what I anticipated I might find, and how I planned to answer each question in this narrative study.

Q1  How do trained college and university coaches perceive their coaching practices?

I anticipated coaches would describe similar strategies as the broader coaching field, which include building relationships, active listening, reflection and open-ended questions (D. T. Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999). Marks (2015) described building a relationship between the coach and student as “fundamental to facilitating positive change and development” (p. 324). Following up with the client about what was discussed in prior meetings appeared to be important in the broader field of coaching (D. T. Hall et al., 1999) as well as goal setting (Grant, 2003; Grant, Curtayne, & Burton, 2009). I expected to find coaches help students develop a plan of action toward their goals (Grant, 2003), and help students develop academic and life skills through trial,
error, and reflection (C. E. Robinson, 2015). Coaches may also help a student identify their strengths (C. E. Robinson, 2015), gain insight (Grant et al., 2009), and help them feel more confident and capable moving forward in their college journey (Moen & Allgood, 2009). Exactly how coaches go about doing any of this in their meetings was unclear and needs to be understood to clarify their role on a college campus. I developed several sub-research questions to elicit stories of actual coach meetings to address these research questions. For example, I asked participants “How do you build a relationship with a student?”; “What do you do to help a student identify their goals? Reach their goals?”; and “How do you use reflection in your meetings?” These questions will elicit stories, which is at the heart of any narrative study.

Q1a What specific strategies do coaches perceive they use to help students define their goals in first meetings, and over several meetings?

Goal setting appeared to be a large function of coaching in higher education as well as in the broader coaching field. Therefore, overall, I was interested in understanding how coaches helped students define their goals. For example, how do coaches determine what to focus on in a meeting? How do coaches navigate the complexities of a student’s life? I asked questions like: what strategies or techniques do you use to help students identify their goals? How do you help students articulate these goals?

To answer this research question, I asked coaches to provide narratives in how they have helped students define their goals. I asked participants to take me step-by-step through their coaching processes so I could understand how they help students define their goals. Are these solely academic goals, or are they much broader? By providing narratives of when coaches have helped students define goals, and identifying common
goals that students strive for, the research community can better understand what coaches do in their meetings to support students.

Q1b What do coaches perceive they do in first meetings, and over several meetings to help college students reach their goals?

Once a student has defined their goals, then it is imperative to understand how coaches help students achieve them. Grant (2003) described coaching as a systematic and intentional process. Therefore, this research question brought insight into what coaches strategically, or systematically doing in their meetings to help students reach their goals. Findings helped better understand what coaches were doing in their role with their students.

I anticipated coaches would use similar strategies as the broader field of coaching. Techniques and strategies may include building relationships, active listening, open-ended questions, reflections, identifying steps the student can take to reach their goal, and following up on progress (D. T. Hall et al., 1999). Groh (2016) described a model where coaches were “identifying an underlying problem, brainstorming solutions, and creating a timeline with action items, along with accountability” (p. 1). I also anticipated coaches referred students to the appropriate resources when needed, such as counseling, advising, or tutoring. To answer this question, I asked participants to share success stories from start to finish--from the identification of a goal, to the accomplishment of the goal. What do coaches strategically do at the beginning, middle, and end of the coaching process? For example, one interview prompt included having a coach describe a time when they had a student reach a goal. I asked, “What strategies or techniques did you use as a coach to help them achieve this goal?”
I anticipated coaches would have some intentionality in their meetings to actually coach students, as the broader field of coaching also does (Grant, 2003). I also anticipated coaches to use theory to inform their understanding and their beliefs about college students more broadly. As coaching has become more prevalent on college campuses, the need for standards or guidelines will soon follow and at the very least, best practices. As this profession grows, knowledge about evidence-based models and theories to inform coaching meetings and practice in higher education is crucial. Therefore, understanding how various models and theories influence coaching meetings will help move the field of coaching in higher education, and in the broader field forward.

Q1c What role do coaches perceive they have in retention?

I thought coaches would have strong opinions as to how they perceive their role in relation to retention. The field would benefit to understand whether their efforts are solely focused on academics, or if they are focused on broader benefits, including personal development. I hoped by gaining narratives coaches’ experiences would provide examples of how coaches have seen students grow that are similar to findings related to life coaching outcomes. Life coaching has improved goal-attainment and self-awareness among university students (Grant, 2003; Lefdahl-Davis, et al., 2018). However, results were likely dependent on how the program model was implemented or how the coaches were trained. I believe people “have a natural tendency toward gaining integrity and enhancing their human potentials” (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 5) and that individuals are inherently motivated to strive toward their best (Joseph & Bryant-Jefferies, 2007). As a result, coaches were included, whether they work with students who voluntarily participate or are mandated to do so. These beliefs aligned self-determination, which
guided this study. More details on self-determination theory are described in the next section.

I anticipated findings would highlight coaches focus on the whole student and strategically support students to stay at the institution and improve as a person and student. I anticipated coaches would use techniques to strategically support the retention of students and would be able to describe this process. If coaches do help students in developing self-awareness, and their potential, how are they doing this in their meetings and in their coaching practice?

Q1d How do coaches perceive they fit into the undergraduate student support system on their campus?

Coaches typically support the undergraduate student population on campus. Since coaching is an emerging role in the field of higher education, confusion exists on campuses about how their role actually fits. This research question provided clarity into the role of a coach and offered insight into what coaches perceived their role was when meeting with students. To answer this question, I asked coaches to describe how they articulated their coaching practices and what they did in their meetings to refer to other support services on campus. How do they share what they were doing in their meetings to counselors, advisors, or tutors on campus? Coaches were asked to describe a time (if applicable) when another professional on campus was confused about their role, along with how they responded to this confusion. How coaches described this role provided a better understanding of what they perceived they did in meetings and bring clarity to the confusion that currently exists on college campuses.
Research Design

Gathering qualitative data from a narrative methodological standpoint is an effective way to explore a topic when trying to understand “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). I approached this research from a social constructivist epistemology. Social constructivists believe “reality is socially constructed” and that “there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). I used social constructivism because I believe there are different interpretations and perceptions in how coaching is being implemented in higher education. More broadly, this underlines every part of the research design and the co-construction of the findings. In this narrative study, I explored how coaches perceive their coaching practices, particularly in the context of what they do in their meetings with students. As such, along with my participants, I co-constructed findings to answer the research questions related to coaching as a practice in higher education.

Merriam (1998) described qualitative research studies “can reveal how all the parts work together to form a whole” and is focused “on process, meaning, and understanding” through rich descriptions (pp. 6-8). Coaching has operated behind closed doors, leaving institutions and programs to figure out coaching on their own and guess what best practices really help students succeed and graduate. Understanding how coaches described and perceived what they do in their meetings will be crucial to move toward broad effectiveness.
**Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination**

I used self-determination theory to guide this narrative study. Self-determination theory can help understand coaching in higher education within the broader context of the coaching profession. I offer a brief description of the framework and more detailed descriptions in the methodology section.

Self-determination theory assumes individuals inherently “have a natural tendency toward gaining integrity and enhancing their human potentials” (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 5). Three components of self-determination included: (a) competence, (b) autonomy, and (c) relatedness, which were the three psychological needs considered as essential to optimal functioning, growth, integration, motivation, social development, and personal well-being (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000). Previous literature showed some promise that coaches developed competence, especially related to goals (Conner et al., 2012; C. Robinson & Gahagan, 2010; Webberman & Carter, 2011); autonomy (LaRocca, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017; Thomson, 2012); and relatedness among college students (Dalton & Crosby, 2014). Spence and Oades (2011) suggested using self-determination as a framework to understand coaching practices at both the micro and macro level--more specifically in each meeting, as well as over time in the coaching process with clients. I used self-determination theory to guide the creation of interview questions, analysis, and findings.

**Methodology**

I chose narrative methodology to answer the research questions presented above. Narrative methodology is an approach to research which involves storytelling from participants in a study, and the researcher has the decision to use storytelling in the
presentation of findings. For this study, I chose not to present findings in the form of story, but instead used the participants’ stories to make sense of the coaching process. A narrative approach was a good fit because it allowed participants to make meaning of their experiences by way of stories (Riessman, 2008). Narrative inquiry provided rich data by making sense of the world and human experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These stories are “situated and understood within larger cultural, social, and institutional narratives” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 541). As such, I anticipated the perceptions of coaches would be influenced by their training as well as their institutions’ coaching model, and the narratives shared will need to be situated in this context (Clandinin & Caine, 2008).

Coaches were selected from programs that meet criteria guided by prior research. Given the variety of ways this support service has been implemented, I anticipated I would need to interview at least fifteen full-time coaches to reach data saturation. To gain participants, I emailed coaches from the database of a prior study and narrowed the invitation to trained coaches who worked at a public or private four-year institution. Coaches were able to speak about how they perceived their coaching practices, what they perceived they did in meetings, and how they believed these interactions contributed to student success. To participate, coaches must also have had coach-specific training. I initially intended to focus solely on coaches with training approved through the two main governing bodies in the broader field of coaching, the International Coaching Federation or the Center for Credentialing and Education. However, I expanded the criteria to any coach-specific training to gain more participants. Instead of simply learning what coaches do in their meetings, I sought to understand the stories behind their intentionality for each
step in the coaching process. For example, to elicit these stories, I asked the following questions: “What happened next?” and “Why did you decide to introduce a new skill, instead of asking another question?” Having participants share strategies explicitly and share stories in how they used these strategies in a meeting uncovered what coaches perceive they do in their coaching practice.

Data analysis started as soon as data collection began. To analyze the data, I engaged in open coding and categorized the data into themes and then again, based on self-determination theory (Maxwell, 2012). After examining pieces from each of the participants’ stories, I made connections with the data by bringing in the whole picture of each of the stories shared (Riessman, 2008) with a focus on the coaching process. Analyzing the data from both the macro and micro level provided greater insight into the coaching practices shared by participants. Finally, memos were collected in the researcher journal to organize the data and make connections between the themes and stories. Each of these data analysis strategies were described in Chapter III, along with participant selection, and data collection.

**Significance of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how trained, 4-year coaches perceived their coaching practice with students in higher education. Findings clarified the role of coaches in higher education, brought greater understanding of what coaches perceived they did strategically during meetings, and offered common language to discuss perceived best practices in this emerging profession.

Studies have shown coaching improved study skills (Field et al., 2010; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; Prevatt, Lampropoulos, Bowles, & Garrett, 2011; Richman, et al.,
2014); self-esteem (Prevatt & Yelland, 2015); has resulted in higher GPAs (I. H. Allen & Lester, 2012; Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013); higher retention rates (I. H. Allen & Lester, 2012; Bettinger & Baker, 2014); and higher graduation rates (Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013; Bettinger & Baker, 2014). However, most of the research studies used small sample sizes, offered brief descriptions, at best, of these coaching practices, and no studies provided a robust analysis of the coaches’ perspectives as to the strategic interactions they had with students. Great studies about how to coach students for success are few and far between. While C. E. Robinson’s (2015) dissertation provided a helpful starting point for understanding the profession broadly, the lack of empirical work that aims to understand this emerging profession remains scant: future research is needed to fill this gaping hole.

Hundreds of coaching programs and individual coaching positions have been created, often without prior knowledge, experience, or training on what coaches do during their meetings to support their students’ success. While the number of coaching programs in higher education is not known, significant resources are invested in such programs given the time intensive support needed to coach students individually. As a result, individuals and programs have been left without an understanding about what coaching is and make unsubstantiated claims about the effectiveness of their individual coaching programs. Limited understanding about coaching practices has provided individuals and programs great flexibility and opportunity for innovation. However, this flexibility also made it extremely challenging to grasp what may (or may not be) an effective way to provide coaching services in higher education. The current study aimed
to fill this gap by understanding how coaches perceived their coaching practices, particularly in the context of their meetings.

On some campuses, coaching has a clear differentiation between academic advising, counseling, and mentoring. On other campuses, the coach title has replaced the advisor title without any additional training to support the coaching role. If coaching is to remain a viable role on college campuses, we must understand the intricacies of the role, how it relates to other roles on campus, and best practices to ensure quality coaching. Developing basic and common standards of coaching practices is necessary if coaching is to remain on college campuses in the United States. A common language and understanding of how coaches describe and perceive their coaching practice will not only bring clarity to the emerging profession, but also to students and institutions with the coach position. How coaches describe and perceive their coaching practices has been unexplored in the literature.

Coaching programs have been created with little oversight, training, or standards. As a result, some administrators question why their coaching program is not retaining students, or why it does not move the retention needle as much as they thought it might. At the same time, other administrators brag about the benefits and outcomes of their coaching program. Coaching programs can be costly due to the individualized support provided (Keen, 2014). As resources decrease, and the pressure to support students increase, administrators will need to fully understand coaching as a support service to determine if it is a worthy investment.

The stories, experiences, and perceptions from coaches who work in the role will help the research community make sense of how coaches describe and perceive what they
do in their coaching practice. Currently, the literature related to coaching leaves much to
be desired as coaching is ambiguous in definition and practice. A blanket statement used
to claim that coaching supports student success is problematic. Understanding common
language will not only shed light on what coaches perceive they do (and do not do) in
their coaching practice, but also bring clarity when researching coaching in higher
education. For example, when does coaching work best? Does it work best when coaches
talk about specific topics with students, when they teach students, when they develop
students, when they use theory to guide their practice, or when they use specific types of
theory? I do not believe we can answer these necessary questions until we grasp the depth
of what coaches perceive they do in their coaching practice.

Furthermore, understanding coaches’ perspectives in how they support students to
reach their goals will ultimately help the greater coaching community better serve
students. For example, life coaching, has been linked to “enhanced mental health, quality
of life, and goal attainment” (Grant, 2003, p. 254), students’ increased self-awareness,
and improved personal responsibility (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018; van Nieuwerburgh,
2012). If coaches are indeed helping students reach their goals, increasing self-awareness,
etc. in their coaching practice, how are they doing this? Knowing the how will help
coaches who have limited support or resources to improve their own coaching practice
with students.

In summary, we have had a general understanding about the goals of coaching
programs from C. E. Robinson’s (2015) dissertation survey. We also have had an
understanding of the benefits some research studies have shown. However, what is not
known about coaching in higher education remains vast. Findings from this study would
be influential in the development of the emerging profession of coaching in higher education. Findings have helped to address the following research question and de-mystify coaches’ perceptions of their coaching practices: *How do trained college and university coaches perceive their coaching practices?* The goal of this study was to provide an empirical analysis and description of these coaching practices gathered from the coaches themselves to provide the emergence of a common language for coaches to use when describing and making meaning of their work.

**Outline of Proposal**

In Chapter II, I provide an overview of the current literature related to coaching. A brief history of the broader field of coaching, and the emergence of coaching in higher education provided context into coaching as a support service. I provided student success literature to understand the importance of thriving in college. I then shared the body of research conducted about the benefits of the broader field of coaching and coaching in higher education. Finally, I concluded this chapter with what we know about coaching meetings in the broader field of coaching, as well as coaching meetings in higher education.

In Chapter III, I described the research design of this study. I shared my epistemological stance, which influenced every aspect of this study. I then described the narrative methodology and provided a rationale for each choice within the research design. Participant selection was described in detail, as well as my data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. I concluded chapter III by offering ethical considerations, limitations to the study, and my positionality as a researcher.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Flourish—“(of a person, animal, or other living organism) grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as the result of a particularly favorable environment” (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2019, para. 1).

History and Purpose of Coaching

History and Purpose in the Broader Coaching Field

Coaching in higher education emerged from the field of executive and life coaching; executive and life coaching emerged in the 1980s (Whitmore, 2017).

Goldsmith et al. (2000) described coaching in the following definition:

A coach helps a person move up a level, by expanding a skill, by boosting performances, or even by changing the way a person thinks. Coaches help people grow. They help people see beyond what they are today to what they can become tomorrow. A great coach helps ordinary folks do extraordinary things. In short, a great coach provides a sturdy shoulder to stand on so one can see further than they might see on their own. (p. 12)

Whitmore (2017) offered a more simplified definition: “Coaching is unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance” (pp. 12-13). In both definitions, authors underscore the importance of growth, development, improved performance, and possibility. As coaching became more popular, in 1995, Thomas Leonard created the International Coaching Federation (ICF, 2020a) for “coaches to support each other and grow the profession” (para. 1). The coaching profession has exploded, permeating a variety of contexts and professions including business, leadership, and organizations with
unique niches such as health and wellness coaching, business and executive coaching, general life coaching, leadership coaching, career coaching, and relationship coaching, among others.

Grant (2003) defined life coaching as “a collaborative solution-focused, result-oriented and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of life experience and goal attainment in the personal and/or professional life of normal, nonclinical clients” (p. 254). Three differentiations were made in this definition when compared to the previous definition. In Grant’s (2003) definition, coaches worked with non-clinical clients, which suggested coaching is different than traditional mental health services. Second, Grant (2003) suggested the coaching relationship is collaborative and focused on either or both professional or personal aspects of one’s life. Third, Grant explained that a systematic process happens to facilitate the coaching interaction. Grant (2003) insinuated that there was intentionality in the way someone was coached, which was the focus of the current study. This narrative study sought to understand how coaches perceived their practices and what they do systematically in a coaching meeting in the higher education setting.

The broader community of coaching has continued to develop as a profession. Coaching made its way into education in the early 2000s, in a variety of primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools across the globe (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). van Nieuwerburgh (2012) proposed the following definition to describe coaching in education:
A one-to-one conversation focused on the enhancement of learning and development through increasing self-awareness and a sense of personal responsibility, where the coach facilitates self-directed learning of the coachee through questioning, active listening, and appropriate challenge in a supportive and encouraging climate. (p. 17)

The definition provides a global perspective and broad understanding of coaching in education. van Nieuwerburgh’s (2012) definition provided similarities to previous definitions. The coach facilitated the process and encouraged self-directed learning from the coachee. He adds the enhancement of learning and development in his definition, which might be unique to the education setting. He also highlighted key elements that happen in a coaching meeting through questioning, active listening, challenge, support, and encouragement. In this study, I explored the tools and techniques coaches in higher education settings perceive they use to guide their meetings with students.

**History and Purpose of Coaching in Higher Education**

In the United States, coaching in higher education started as early as 1999, and has grown increasingly since its inception (C. E. Robinson, 2015). Coaching was created to address the national retention problem (C. E. Robinson, 2015). In her dissertation, C. E. Robinson (2015) conducted a survey with coaches across the U.S. C. E. Robinson (2015) explored the purpose of coaching, what types of students are typically coached, and what theories inform their work. She found coaching was also created to support students academically (C. E. Robinson, 2015). While academic performance is an important part of a students’ experience and coaching (I. H. Allen & Lester, 2012; Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013; Bruner, 2017; College Life Coaching, 2020; C. Robinson & Gahagan, 2010), many other factors have been found as influential in students’ decisions to stay or leave an institution and have a positive experience.
While academic performance alone was important to student success, other areas can arguably be beneficial to support students in graduating from college. Areas included barriers students experience on campus (Bosworth, 2006; Sepulveda, 2017), connecting students to resources (Bosworth, 2006), making students aware of opportunities, developing self-awareness (Richman et al., 2014; C. E. Robinson, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017), developing skills, and advocating for the student. Examples of skills included time management (Prevatt & Yelland, 2015) and study strategies (Field et al., 2010; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; Richman et al., 2014). Additionally, a study found when students are aware of resources and seek them out, when students feel like they belong, and when they have a relationship with someone on campus such as a faculty or staff member, they are more likely to stay and graduate (Schreiner et al., 2011). Elements of student success will be described further in the section on Student Success.

The role and definition of coaching in higher education is complicated because campus partners are often unaware of what coaches do that might be different from their own role, such as advising, counseling, or tutoring (C. E. Robinson, 2015). Dalton and Crosby (2014) described coaching as unique because they initiate meetings with the student and do not wait for a student to walk in their door. However, the specific type of proactive approach may differ depending on the individual coach, program, or institution (C. E. Robinson, 2015). In addition, understanding what coaches perceive happens during meetings can help differentiate coaching from other support services on campus.

**Student Success in College**

As stated in Chapter I, I aligned with three metrics of student success based on a combination of definitions offered by Kuh et al. (2006) and Habley et al. (2012): (a)
quantifiable outcomes such as retention rates, graduation rates, and academic performance (e.g., GPA) that have traditionally been institutional measures of student success; (b) academic and social integration; and (c) student and personal development (e.g., cognitive and non-cognitive factors, skill development, mindset, self-awareness, purpose, personal goals, etc.). Each of the student success elements are described in this section. In the sections that follow, I directly link how coaching in higher education contributes to student success, based on the literature.

Institutional Measures of Student Success

The institutions themselves defined two major components of student success. First, does a student stay at the institution, and ultimately graduate? And, in order to continue on at the institution, a student must perform well academically. In this section, I described retention in higher education and why it has been such an important component of student success, particularly for institutions. I also described the institutional measure of student success as academic performance by GPA. Each of these are easily quantifiable ways to measure student success (Schreiner, 2013) and important factors in coaching.

Retention and higher education. To understand the broader reason why coaching is a significant topic to research, the context of retention must first be addressed. Student retention is defined in a variety of ways throughout the literature; the definition also changes depending upon the institutional context. For the purposes of this study, retention is defined as “the outcome of how many students remained enrolled from fall to fall. This number is typically derived from first-time, full time traditional day students but can be applied to any defined cohort” (Noel-Levitz Retention Codifications,
The retention percentage becomes institutionally specific in that students must return to the same institution the following fall semester after they matriculate. When students return to the institution, they will in turn, be more likely to graduate from that same institution. Mayhew et al. (2016) found students who graduate from college tend to be happier, healthier, have better access to resources, are engaged in their communities, and have earned higher incomes. However, only one-third of all adults hold a bachelor’s degree or higher in the United States (C. L. Ryan & Bauman, 2016). The national six-year graduation rate for students who began college in the Fall of 2008 at a four-year college is 60% and the 3-year graduation rate for students who began college in the Fall 2011 at a 2-year institution is 28% (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). When a student graduates from college, multiple benefits manifest for the individual student, the institution, and the greater community.

Students leave college for a variety of reasons. Typically, students either drop out of higher education completely, stop attending their institution for a period of time, the student achieves their goal (e.g., taking a class or two for personal or professional interest), or they transfer to another institution (Noel-Levitz Retention Codifications, 2014; Veenstra, 2009). Much of the focus of the retention literature remains on first-year, full-time students, because when a student is retained from their first to their second year, they are more likely to graduate from the same college (Veenstra, 2009). Institutions have developed strategies and interventions to help students succeed, stay in college, and graduate. As a result, coaching has gained momentum as a student support service to help retain the general population of students and support students academically, who are at risk of leaving (C. E. Robinson, 2015).
According to the National Student Clearinghouse, postsecondary enrollment has decreased for the eighth year in a row (NSC Blog, 2019). High school graduates have flattened or declined because of low birth rates years ago decreasing the selection pool (Nadworny, 2019) and leaving colleges to compete amongst each other for academically strong students. Colleges often lower admission standards and accept less prepared students in order to meet enrollment targets. As a result, coaching will likely increase in scope to support underprepared students in their transition to academic and college life.

**Costs of attrition.** When a student would leave an institution, the tuition dollars associated with that student also leave the institution (Veenstra, 2009). The American Institute for Research developed a report to understand the cost to state and federal governments as a result of first-year student attrition (Schneider, 2010). In the years 2003-2008, student attrition costs included $6.8 billion in state subsidies, $1.4 billion in state grants, and $1.5 billion in federal grants (Schneider, 2010). The report argued “these numbers should alert taxpayers and their representatives to the high costs a state incurs when, as is unfortunately the case, large numbers of students fail to return to the college or university for a second year” (Schneider, 2010, p. 8). The combination of the costs associated with student attrition and increased accountability highlight the need for administrators to find creative solutions to better support students.

It is imperative for administrators to learn more about the coaching position for two reasons: (a) If coaching is fulfilling its’ intended purpose and improving retention rates and academic performance (C. E. Robinson, 2015), knowing what coaches perceive they do in their meetings is crucial; and (b) understanding these coaching interactions can lead to higher standards and best coaching practices to better support students, which can
lead to the higher retention of students. Additionally, there is a limited understanding in practice and research regarding what coaches perceive they do in their meetings and how they understand their coaching practices.

**Accountability in higher education.** The federal, state, and community have increased pressure to hold institutions accountable for outcomes especially related to retention and completion rates (Middaugh, 2010; Umbricht, Fernandez, & Ortagus, 2017), which are often used to determine funding, national rankings, and overall institutional prestige. According to the Pew Charitable Trusts (2015), state funding has dramatically decreased, leaving institutions to compete for operational resources at a financially challenging time. In addition, various types of policies, such as state performance funding are used to increase pressure and competition among institutions, even though limited effectiveness of such policies have been found (Hillman, Tandberg, & Fryar, 2015; Tandberg & Hillman, 2014). As a result, institutions have had to do more without additional, or even less resources. Administrators strive to figure out creative, innovative strategies to increase retention and graduation rates with limited resources and greater public pressure.

**Academic performance.** In addition to retention and persistence measures, academic performance has long been a measure of institutional and student success. For example, students who want to be a leader on campus, actively participate in an organization (e.g., greek life) or apply to an undergraduate research opportunity often have to meet a minimum grade point average. While academic performance, retention rates, and graduation rates are components of success to the institution, they have also been found crucial to students. In a study with first-year health science students, students
rated completing their degree and performing well academically as the most important factors to their success at the university (Naylor, 2017). Students ranked these concepts of success the highest out of the following: belonging, opportunity, identity, connection, discovery, achievement, completion, flexibility, and personalization (Naylor, 2017).

Academic performance is crucial to the success of both institutions and students.

**Engagement.** Academic and social engagement into the college community has been found to influence a students’ satisfaction, and ultimately if they stay or leave an institution. In one study, college students were surveyed about what matters most to them while they are in college. Vianden (2015) found interpersonal relationships with faculty, staff, and their peers were crucial and could influence how a student perceived their institution. These findings make the quality of the coaching role on college campuses important to consider. As front-line professionals, they have the opportunity to have a large impact, for better or worse, on the student experience and perhaps even retention.

Faculty and staff have also been found to positively impact student persistence. Schreiner et al. (2011) conducted an exploratory qualitative study and interviewed 62 successful high-risk students from nine institutions. Students were considered successful by having a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or higher and were asked to share who helped them persist or succeed (Schreiner et al., 2011). Faculty and staff who were identified by these students were also interviewed. Findings highlighted the importance of faculty and staff relationships on student success. Faculty and staff connected and engaged with students personally, and in meaningful and intentional ways (Schreiner et al., 2011).
Students described behaviors that really made the difference as:

(a) Encouraging, supporting, and believing in them; (b) motivating them and wanting to see them learn; (c) taking time for them, expressing an interest in them, and communicating to them that they are important; (d) relating to them on their level; and (e) pushing them to excel while at the same time helping them to understand difficult concept. (Schreiner et al., 2011, p. 328).

Intentional behaviors described by faculty and staff included listening more than talking to the student, asking several questions, helping students take small steps toward their goals, encouraging involvement, connecting what they are doing at the institution to who they are, and believing that the student can succeed (Schreiner et al., 2011). Many of these same intentional behaviors or strategies could be used when describing the broader field of coaching in the literature. However, there is still much to learn about how coaching manifests in higher education.

Faculty and staff described “rarely did they view themselves as impacting student retention” (Schreiner et al., 2011, p. 327). Coaches and professional advisors were considered “the staff who seemed to make the most difference” because of their regular contact with students and the quality of their interactions (Schreiner et al., 2011, p. 332). Student engagement with faculty and staff can influence student success. In this study, I seek to understand how staff, particularly coaches in higher education engage in these quality behaviors and how they perceive their coach practices to support student success.

Strayhorn (2012) argued sense of belonging is a crucial component to a students’ ability to succeed and thrive in college. He defined sense of belonging as “perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (Strayhorn,
In one study, Wilcox et al. (2005) interviewed 34 first-year students and how “social integration (or lack of it) influenced their decision as to whether or not to leave the university” (p. 707). Students who decided to withdraw from the institution were included in the study. Social support was crucial for first-year students in their decision to stay at the institution (Wilcox et al., 2005).

**Student development and personal development.** In addition to academic engagement, social engagement, grades, and graduation is the personal development of the individual student. For this study, I understand student development to include student development theories and skills associated with being a successful student. Examples of how I understand personal development include how one navigates conflict, bouncing back from failure, developing coping strategies to support overall well-being, getting clear on their goals as a human (outside of their student life), realizing when they need to ask for help and asking for help, and feeling confident in themselves and in their capabilities. Several psychosocial factors have been shown to predict the retention of college students and these will be shared later in this section (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Each student may define success differently and each student brings unique experiences to college that can help them succeed. In this section, I described the five elements of the thriving quotient and various psychosocial factors that contribute to the individual success and development of the student and person as a whole.

Schreiner (2010) described the concept of thriving in college as being “fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally in the college experience” (p. 4). The five elements of the thriving quotient were based on Seligman’s (2011) concept of flourishing in adulthood. The five elements included: (a) Engaged Learning: when ideas
and learning are exciting to students, when students can connect learning to their own lives, and where they are actually invested in their learning; (b) Academic Determination: when students create goals, invest time, effort and energy in their learning, and use their strengths; (c) Positive Perspective: when students view life from a positive perspective, they see circumstances from multiple viewpoints, and when students expect good things to happen; (d) Social Connectedness: when students feel they are connected to one another, they have good friends who support them, and they feel like they belong; and (e) Diverse Citizenship: when students want to contribute to their communities, are curious about their world, and work towards meaning and purpose in their lives (Schreiner, 2010, 2013). Each of these elements arguably support a student to flourish and thrive in the college environment.

While the concept of flourishing supports a student to thrive in college, “there is not one pathway to thriving for all college students” because of varying identities, experiences, backgrounds, and personalities (Schreiner, 2013, p. 44). Coaching is commonly an individualized approach to support students in a holistic way. Several benefits related to thriving have been reported in the broader field of coaching (Grant et al., 2009; R. J. Jones, Woods, & Guillaume, 2016; Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2014) and will be discussed in the next section. Coaching college students has also been linked to help students in goal setting and working towards those goals (Grant, 2003; LaRocca, 2015; Prevatt et al., 2017), helping students to understand and use their strengths (Gibbs & Larcus, 2015), mindset (Han, Farruggia, & Moss, 2017) and to increase overall wellness of the student to thrive (Gibbs & Larcus, 2015; Larcus et al., 2016). What do coaches perceive they do in their meetings to help students thrive and
flourish? What tools, techniques, or topics do they discuss to help students reach their goals?

**Student well-being.** Coaching students to thrive requires working with the student from a holistic perspective. Gibbs and Larcus (2015) described their wellness coaching program as holistic and explained how they coached students in their first and subsequent sessions. In their first session, coaches focused on strengths and helped students identify goals related to their overall wellness. After the first session, “coaches facilitate open-ended conversations with students to help them make progress toward their self-identified goals while simultaneously supporting students’ capacity to create the life they would prefer to be living” (Gibbs & Larcus, 2015, p. 28). While not a research study, Gibbs and Larcus (2015) presented assessment data which showed students were mostly focused on social, career and intellectual aspects of wellness (other areas included creative, emotional, environmental, financial, physical, and spiritual wellness) and described their experiences with wellness coaching as transformative. Data on GPA and retention were also presented. However, findings highlight how important the current study is, in understanding how coaches perceive their coaching practices, particularly in their meetings to support students. Coaches met with students, on average, for 3.66 coaching meetings, though it was unclear if student participation was mandatory or voluntary. Most of the full-time coaching staff were licensed mental health professionals and any additional training for these full-time coaches was not clearly stated. Self-determination theory, motivational interviewing, and positive psychology were theories used to inform their coaching practice (Gibbs & Larcus, 2015). Authors did describe the training for
volunteer undergraduate and graduate students, who completed 12 hours of training and shadowed coaches.

Larcus et al. (2016) presented a case study of one institution that implemented wellness into their coaching model. The data was presented not as a study, but as the outcomes of the program. The wellness paradigm was described, as well as positive psychology, character strengths, and student development through self-authorship (Larcus et al., 2016). Coaches in the program aligned with the ICF (2020b) competencies. Exit surveys were given to participants in the coaching program and the major themes included “self-discovery, navigating transitions in college, and self-acceptance” (Larcus et al., 2016, p. 55). Authors argued the need for better philosophical understanding of what coaches in higher education do and present how they do this in the article (Larcus et al., 2016). While coaching can benefit the overall wellness to students, missing from the literature is how coaches perceive they do this. Additionally, how often students met with their coach, or if student participation was mandatory was unclear.

**Self-efficacy and mindset.** Self-efficacy and mindset have been linked to coaching and student success. Bandura (1997) defined the concept of self-efficacy as “peoples’ beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions” (p. vii). In college, students have all type of beliefs about what they are (or are not) capable of. The self-efficacy of students could include their beliefs about whether they can perform academically, making friends, whether or not they believe they are ‘smart enough’ to graduate, or even their ability to get a job once they graduate (Han et al., 2017). The academic mindset was defined as “psychological and social attitudes or beliefs that an individual holds toward academic work” (Han et al., 2017, p. 1120).
However, non-cognitive factors such as academic mindset and self-efficacy are malleable (Acee & Weinstein, 2010; van Nieuwerburgh & Tong, 2013) and extremely influential in the success of college students, and in improving academic performance and retention (Han et al., 2017).

Han et al. (2017) examined the effects of academic mindset in college students. For this study, academic mindset included “perceived academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and academic motivation” (Han et al., 2017, p. 1119). Participants included 1400 college students who were ethnically diverse and from a large, public university. Students were surveyed to understand their perceptions of self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and motivation. Students who scored high in all measures, or solely the self-efficacy measures were more likely to earn higher GPAs that semester and earn more credits (Han et al., 2017). Students who scored high in all measures or had scores related to their sense of belonging were more likely to be retained (Han et al., 2017). Students with high scores in self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and academic motivation had higher GPAs and were more likely to be enrolled the following year. Findings highlighted the importance of these factors on individual student success, in addition to the institutional measure of student success. Each of these are also malleable through coaching interventions (Acee & Weinstein, 2010; van Nieuwerburgh & Tong, 2013).

The concept of a growth mindset has also gained popularity in the college setting. According to Dweck’s (2006) research,

Growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience (p. 7).
For coaching, growth mindset means that the client can improve, develop, and grow—the client does not have to remain the same. People are likely more motivated and willing to work towards challenging tasks when they believe intelligence and skills can be developed (Dweck, 2006). The power of a growth mindset in coaching cannot be understated.

Studies have shown the relationship between self-efficacy and student success. Breso, Schaufelt, and Salanova (2011) conducted a study to determine if an intervention based on self-efficacy could help improve well-being and performance. Students who self-selected to participate in the academic stress, an anxiety workshop, and individual follow up sessions were compared to students who did not attend either, or just attended the workshop (Breso et al., 2011). Students who engaged in the intervention increased their self-efficacy and engagement (Breso et al., 2011). The cognitive behavior intervention was not specifically coaching, though the importance of self-efficacy in college remains.

Bowman, Miller, Woosley, Maxwell, and Kolze (2018) also conducted a study on non-cognitive factors and retention. Non-cognitive factors included academic self-efficacy, academic grit, self-discipline, and time management. These factors were combined into one non-cognitive factor. Findings showed these non-cognitive factors were overall positively associated with college GPA and retention (Bowman et al., 2018).

Bean and Eaton (2001) developed a psychological model of college student retention, which focused on the individual psychosocial processes of students as a foundation for deciding to stay or leave a particular institution. Elements of this model included pre-entry characteristics (behaviors, personality, self-efficacy, attributions,
beliefs, coping strategies, motivation, skills, and abilities), environmental interactions at
the institution (bureaucratic, academic and social interactions, interactions outside of the
institution), and psychological processes and outcomes (self-efficacy, coping processes,
confidence, locus of control, internal motivations (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Pre-entry
characteristics, environmental interactions, and psychological processes influenced social
and academic integration; and social and academic integration influenced institutional fit
and commitment, which then directly impacted a students’ decision to remain at the
institute (Bean & Eaton, 2001). This model helped to understand the psychological
processes of the individual student and exemplifies how programs in higher education
can influence individual student decision making and ultimately, retention.

Richardson, Abraham, and Bond (2012) conducted a meta-analysis to examine
five areas of non-intellectual domains that included: (a) personality traits, (b)
motivational factors, (c) self-regulatory learning strategies, (d) students’ approaches to
learning, and (e) psychosocial contextual influences. Authors concluded college
interventions that included goal-setting and academic self-efficacy helped improve
academic performance (Richardson et al., 2012). Coaches in the broader field of higher
education have shown positive results with improved self-efficacy (Grant, 2003; van
Nieuwerburgh & Tong, 2013), and creating and taking action towards these goals as a
major component of coaching (Bresser & Wilson, 2016; Grant et al., 2009; ICF, 2020b;
Moen & Allgood, 2009).

Several non-cognitive factors have been influential in student success. Nagaoka et
al. (2013) defined non-cognitive factors as “sets of behaviors, skills, attitudes, and
strategies that are crucial to students’ academic performance and persistence in post-
secondary education” (p. 46). Coaches typically work with students individually, which provides them the opportunity to develop these behaviors, skills, attitudes, and strategies to help students succeed both inside and outside the classroom. In the next section, I described the benefits of coaching in the both in the broader field of coaching, as well as in higher education.

**Benefits of Coaching**

**Coaching Benefits in the Broader Field**

Coaching in the broader field has been found to have several benefits for clients who engage in the coaching process (Theeboom et al., 2014). One study was designed to examine the impact of life coaching with participants at a university who engaged in group coaching (Grant, 2003). Twenty participants created “three specific, tangible and measurable goals” and worked toward them during a 13-week period (Grant, 2003, p. 257). Students attended group coaching sessions once a week for 50 minutes. Coaches facilitated these group sessions “to help the coachees systematically work through the self-regulation cycle, monitoring and evaluating their progress towards their goals during the preceding week, and developing action plans for the coming week” (Grant, 2003, p. 257). Participants filled out questionnaires and significant differences were found using a within-subject design. Grant (2003) found participation in the life coaching program increased the likelihood of students in achieving one’s goals, improved mental health, positively impacted their quality of life, and helped students gain greater insight. However, the sample size was small ($n = 20$), there was no control group, and students self-selected into the coaching program.
In a randomized mixed methods study, for ten weeks, 41 executives participated in a leadership workshop combined with four individual coaching sessions (Grant et al., 2009). Coaches were external to the organization and used techniques from cognitive behavioral therapy and the GROW Coaching Model, described in the next section of the literature review (Whitmore, 2017). When compared with the control group, Grant et al., (2009) found participants in the coached group had significantly higher goal attainment scores, experienced greater resilience, and had lower levels of anxiety. Qualitative responses demonstrated that participants felt increased confidence, improved management skills, were better able to handle organizational change and stress, gained insight either personally or professionally, and developed in their career (Grant et al., 2009).

Executive coaching has also been found to increase self-efficacy among managers who participated in coaching interventions. In an experimental study, coaching helped participants feel more capable and confident that they could achieve their tasks when compared to the control group (Moen & Allgood, 2009). A pre- and post-test was conducted to understand growth. Although participants demonstrated high self-efficacy scores prior to participating in these coaching sessions, these same scores significantly improved after the coaching intervention. However, it was unclear as to how the experimental group was selected and if these participants were somehow already interested and ready to be coached.

Two meta-analyses have been conducted to examine the broader field of coaching specifically in the workplace. R. J. Jones et al. (2016) performed a meta-analysis that included research articles focused on workplace coaching and excluded articles with
peers or management who served as coaches. R. J. Jones et al. (2016) found coaching had a positive effect on affective (attitudes and motivations), cognitive (specific knowledge), and skills-based (behaviors relating to leadership, technology, etc.) outcomes. Theeboom et al. (2014) also conducted a meta-analysis focused on individual outcomes in organizations such as performance skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes, and goal-directed self-regulation. Eighteen articles were included in this meta-analysis because they fit the following criteria: (a) they used quantitative data to determine the effectiveness of coaching interventions; (b) coaches were professionally trained; and (c) participants who were coached were considered a non-clinical population. Non-clinical population in this context was used to differentiate from counseling or therapy. Results showed significant and positive effects on each of the measured outcomes (Theeboom et al., 2014). Interestingly, the second meta-analysis only included studies where coaches were professionally trained. The decision to only include these studies is important to consider as I move forward in the literature review and in the decision to exclude coaches who have not participated in any training in the current study.

Additionally, coaching has been linked to improved skills and performance (Goldsmith et al., 2000), increased self-awareness, and helping people take responsibility (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). Coaches in higher education strive to improve academic skills and performance to support students to improve their GPA. What was missing from many of the studies about coaching in the broader field, and within higher education, was what coaches perceive they do in their meetings that supports the outcomes they strive for. The current study helps fill this gap within higher education and in the broader field as well. While research hints at the effectiveness of coaching in higher education, understanding
what the coaching process looks like in the field of higher education is a necessary first step. In the next section, I provided an overview of the literature related to the benefits of coaching college students.

**Benefits of Coaching in Higher Education**

Institutions across the country have claimed that coaching their students often leads to impressive results, such as increased academic performance, improved retention rates, and higher levels of student satisfaction within their institution. For example, when assessing their own program at University of South Carolina, C. Robinson and Gahagan (2010) found 92% of students who were considered “academically deficient” improved their academic performance over the year because of coaching (p. 29). This specific coaching program focused on goal setting, self-assessment, and reflection to improve or develop skills. Bruner (2017) also reported the University of Colorado, Boulder observed students who participated in the academic coaching program improved their GPAs by .75 points on average in the fall and an average of .96 in the spring semester. While statements are positive and should be examined further, claiming outcomes based on reports alone does not prove coaching works, or that it works in all contexts. Rigorous studies are needed to explore these claims and an understanding of what coaching as a practice in higher education actually looks like is needed for language about the practice. An understanding of how coaches perceive their coaching practices in each of these scenarios is missing, particularly as it relates to coaching. How are coaches doing anything different than other academic support services on campus?

When surveying success coaches at various institutions, C. E. Robinson (2015) found the two biggest reasons programs were created: (a) to improve student retention
rates; and (b) to support struggling students to help them become increasingly successful academically. In this section, I first shared findings related to coaching benefits such as retention and academic performance. I concluded this section with benefits that students have experienced by participating in coaching, which resulted in student development and personal growth.

**Coaching for retention and academic performance.** Farrell (2007) found students who were coached at Our Lady of the Lake had an increase in persistence from Fall to Spring when compared to years prior. Coaches were hired and trained through the InsideTrack methodologies. Hoover (2011) reported University of Dayton saw an increase in retention after implementing their success coaching program. Florida State University reported “Students who actively engage in this program average higher GPAs than their peers, stay at the university longer and express higher levels of satisfaction with their overall college experience” (College Life Coaching, 2020, para. 3). Each of these individual programs claimed positive results, justifying the need for more research to systematically understand coaching in higher education further.

The largest and most frequently cited study was conducted to determine the effectiveness of success coaching and examined outcomes such as increased persistence, retention, and graduation rates (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). In this quasi-experimental study, students (mostly non-traditional) who were coached using InsideTrack services via phone were found to have higher retention, persistence, and graduation rates than students who were not coached (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). Students did not have to participate in the coaching intervention, but were still included in the outcomes, which were positive. Retention rates still improved between 9%-12%. Even when controlling
for incoming characteristics, such as ACT/SAT scores and high school GPA, results were statistically significant. Additionally, the sample was large (over 16,000 students) and included various age groups (though most were non-traditional aged), and students attending both public and private institutions. When compared to the non-coached group, coached students continued to have better persistence rates even after the intervention was completed their first year (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). For the three campuses who had graduation data, the graduation rates were four percentage points higher for students who were coached. While almost all students had at least one meeting with a coach, it was unclear what the average number of meetings was with a student. This lack of clarity is important. Did coaches only have one meeting with a student to have an impact on retention, or were coaches meeting more frequently with students? Clearly, authors found success coaching had a positive impact and delivered results. However, more information is needed to understand this impact.

Although findings are encouraging, the study is limited to students who were coached using the InsideTrack coaching model via phone. While the InsideTrack coaching model was not an approved training through ICF, the coaches used a proprietary model to inform their coaching practices. It was unclear in the article as to what these coaching practices might be. Authors acknowledged this limitation, particularly regarding “the specific actions of coaches which are most effective in motivating students” (Bettinger & Baker, 2014, p. 14). While the most effective motivation strategies are not the focus of the present study, I focused on the specific actions that coaches perceive they engage in to support students. I anticipated how coaches perceive they motivate students will inevitably arise.
Generalizability was also questionable for institutions who do not use this type of coaching service, because many institutions develop in-house coaching models, instead of outsourced coaching services. Specifically, are coaches outside of the Bettinger and Baker (2014) study using the InsideTrack methodology, or some other framework to guide their coaching practices? That being said, an InsideTrack (2018) case study projects generating “6.9 million in additional revenue” as a result from their coaching at one particular institution (p. 5). Why institutions do not invest in the company more frequently is curious, especially when there is data to support how the coaching program cited generates additional revenue. In the article title, researchers used both coach and advisor to describe the student intervention. On many campuses, these roles are different from one another and the lack of differentiation adds to the confusion.

One recent dissertation has contributed to the study of success coaching. M. M. Hall (2017) conducted a quasi-experimental study at a community college to determine the effectiveness of proactive success coaching on GPA and persistence using predictive analytics to identify students who would perform moderately well in courses (as opposed to low or high). Findings were mixed between coached and non-coached students in 10 different subgroups. However, the moderate-risk students were matched with students in the high or low risk student groups using covariates.

The success coaching intervention included proactive outreach during the first two weeks of the semester for pre-identified students based on an early alert system and offered individualized support to address obstacles (M. M. Hall, 2017). Students opted-in to participate in the coaching service, yet it was unclear as to how many students ended up participating, and how frequently students and coaches met. A Theory of Change
Model for Proactive Student-Success Coaching highlighted key components of this program: “(a) Become a single point of contact for students; (b) Develop relationships through multiple contacts; (c) Provide academic advice on yellow-flagged [students predicted to do moderately well] courses; and (d) Educate about college services” (M.M. Hall, 2017, p. 57). While this description of success coaching is more thorough than other studies and often missing, it could be controversial that coaches offered advice to students (Bresser & Wilson, 2016). The type of coach-specific training was also unclear. For example, coaches “attended two specified professional development sessions on advising and an off-campus retreat for student-success coaching staff development” (M. M. Hall, 2017, p. 48). Coaches also engaged in some professional development weekly, including one session on Appreciative Advising (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008).

M. M. Hall (2017) also listed the ways success coaching in the study aligned with the InsideTrack model described in the Bettinger and Baker (2014) study. Several similarities existed, however, what coaches perceive they do in meetings was not addressed. While professional development is crucial to any profession, it is not clear if any of the professional development opportunities related to specific coaching techniques or strategies, though, the one session on Appreciative Advising could be considered. Based on findings, M. M. Hall (2017) suggested more research should be conducted on success coaching because of mixed findings, with a particular focus on the quality and quantity of the student-coach interactions during meetings. In the present study, I focused on the quality of what trained success coaches perceive they do in their meetings with students.
Two additional studies about coaching in higher education have shown improved retention efforts. The first study was conducted as an experimental design comparing coached and non-coached students. The treatment group participated in three coaching meetings over a year, where researchers called this a “brief coaching intervention” (Sepulveda et al., 2020, p. 10). Students in the treatment group were included in the analysis regardless of participation. No significant differences were found. However, within the treatment group, students with no meetings retained at a lower rate than students who participated in all three meetings, which was 22% compared to 35%; (Sepulveda et al., 2020). Students in the study were historically less likely to graduate, as they completed a survey stating they were thinking about leaving the institution within the first few weeks of the semester.

In the second study, researchers used a logistic regression model to compare the retention of coached and non-coached students over several semesters (Capstick et al., 2019). All students in the intervention had fallen below a 2.0 GPA. Students in the coached group had higher GPAs and higher retention rates than those who did not engage in coaching. Coaching was described as a way to address barriers, develop skills, and to support academic success and retention in a collaborative relationship (Capstick et al., 2019). It was important to note that in both studies, students who were considering leaving within the first few weeks of the semester and students who fell below a 2.0 GPA are historically less likely to stay on campus. It will be necessary to understand the coaching practices embodied by coaches who have seen changes in retention as publications continue.
Other studies have been conducted on a smaller scale to examine the impact that coaching college students has on outcomes such as retention, persistence, and academic success. In a research brief, Barnhart and LeMaster (2013) examined five institutions’ coaching centers and found students who engaged in success coaching had higher GPAs, higher graduation rates, and shorter time to graduation when compared to non-coached students. However, specific numbers were not reported and were only limited to specific coaching types as defined by the authors as success coaches, academic coaches, and academic-success hybrid coaches (Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013). In another study, coaching and mentoring nursing students was found to improve retention for Hispanic students (Anders, Edmonds, Monreal, & Galvan, 2007), but the description of success coaching was confusing. Authors used academic tutors with coaches in parenthesis, to support students with classes specific to the nursing field. As described, the intervention sounded more like tutoring than academic coaching. This lack of clarity makes it challenging for readers, researchers, and practitioners to understand what type of support these students actually received (Anders et al., 2007), and further justifies the need for the present study. The consistent lack of clarity of the academic coaching role highlights the importance of only including trained academic coaches in the present study.

Every coach is likely to strive to make their program and model work to support students. However, until administrators fully understand what coaches perceive they do in their meetings and in their coaching practice, researchers will continually find it challenging to determine if coaching actually supports their intended outcomes, or if it is some other factor such as who coaches serve, what topic(s) coaches talk about, or how
often they meet. It is crucial that we understand what coaches perceive they do in their meetings as it relates to coaching, and how they engage in these coaching practices.

**Coaching students to thrive.** In one notable dissertation, LaRocca (2015) explored the experiences of first-year students who engaged in both academic advising and success coaching. Although students chose to participate in the coaching portion of the program (as opposed to being mandatory), coaches helped students develop a sense of autonomy, provided support in developing goals, helped students take action toward their goals, and helped students “reach their full potential” (LaRocca, 2015, p. 80). What “full potential” means to the student was unclear. Coaches supported students in both their academics, as well as their life outside of college (LaRocca, 2015). Students described academic advising as a process, and success coaching as an experience, perhaps because of the frequent meetings and personal connection students made with their success coach (LaRocca, 2015). However, the interactions between a coach and a student, and an advisor and a student can largely depend on each institution’s model, the training they received, as well as how they individually interacted with each student. In LaRocca’s (2015) study, students met with coaches once a week or every other week, and how coaches were trained was missing from the study. A question remains as to whether the actual interactions differed between advising and coaching, or whether the student had the opportunity to develop meaningful connections with the success coach because they had more time to develop a relationship (e.g., frequent meetings). Further, various student populations including first-generation college students, non-traditional aged students, international students and transfer students found success coaching to be beneficial in their transition to college (LaRocca, 2015). In this narrative study, I hoped to uncover a
deeper understanding about success coaching *as an experience*; what might coaches perceive they do in their meetings to create this experience?

Coaching was also found to be a helpful strategy to encourage academic success with students with learning disabilities (Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016). A survey was conducted to assess the outcomes of a coaching program. Students were supported in finding solutions, developing strategies, and explained that their coach “helped them identify resources and develop an action plan” (Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016, p. 252). The coaching session structure was described at length, providing insight into the coaching practices. However, the survey was completed by 15 students, which makes generalizing findings challenging. Additionally, a graduate student served as an academic coach and the training (outside of “previous coursework and experience in postsecondary academic support and disability services” (Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016, p. 251) was not specified.

Coaching was also found to provide positive benefits for students with ADHD, particularly when the task co-constructed by the therapist-coach and student was relevant to their overall goals (Prevatt et al., 2017). In their study, therapist-coaches met with 34 college students once a week for 50 minutes and used Cognitive behavioral therapy and psychoeducational orientation to support their interactions over the course of eight weeks. Students worked mostly on goals related to time management and skills that improved academic performance, with the biggest challenges being motivation and time management (Prevatt et al., 2017). Students created their own goals and worked on these goals for an average of 7 coaching meetings. However, the authors consistently used the terms coach and therapist-coach interchangeably without making distinctions between the
two. For example, is a coach different than a therapist-coach or are these roles the same? Additionally, the therapist-coaches are doctoral students in either counseling or school psychology and it was unclear what type of coach-specific training these students engaged in.

One mixed methods study was conducted to examine the impact life coaching had on undergraduate students at a small liberal arts college in the U.S. Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018) administered a pre- and post-survey for students who chose to participate in a life coaching program. Ninety-four students completed both surveys, which had Likert-type questions, as well as open-ended responses. The seven domains measured were:

a) Awareness of values and alignment with decision making; (b) Confidence in goal setting and attainment; (c) Confidence in choice of major; (d) Satisfaction with major; (e) Compatibility of choices with faith, values, and strengths; (f) Confidence in life purpose; and (g) Confidence in self. (Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018, p. 75)

Researchers used a paired samples t-test and found every measure was statistically significant, showing positive changes in the students who participated in life coaching. The open-ended responses confirmed the college students found life coaching to be extremely beneficial in their growth and development. Additionally, while a small subsample of the data, minority students increased in every measure, but particularly in the area of self-confidence. However, there was no control group for this particular study, and what coaches did in their meetings with students was missing from the article. While details were missing, every life coach in the study was either Board Certified Coaches (through the CCE) or ICF certified (through International Coach Federation). What trained coaches perceive they do in their meetings will be an important component to consider given the positive outcomes from this particular study.
Confidence in life purpose was a major component of the coaching program examined in the Lefdahl-Davis et al. (2018) study. To thrive in college, a student arguably needs to know their purpose at the college, and perhaps, even in life. It is uncertain from this study if other coaches discussed purpose in their meetings with students, though it seemed likely given the importance of goals and action plans in coaching practices. For example, a coach could ask students about their choice to attend college, as it provides insight into students’ short and long-term goals as well as their purpose for earning a college degree.

**Coaching students for self-determination.** Self-determination theory was based on the notion that individuals “have a natural tendency toward gaining integrity and enhancing their human potentials” (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002, p. 5). Self-determination has been defined as “the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of self-awareness and self-esteem” (Field & Hoffman, 1994, p. 164). Coaches in higher education, similar to life coaches in the broader coaching field help students to find out what they are capable of. The institution, and in particular coaches, influence the social environment, as well as the development and growth of the student through multiple interactions over a period of time (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002). Interactions between the coach and the student can help improve motivation and student success by improving competence, autonomy, and relatedness (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002). Additionally, competence, autonomy, and relatedness helped understand the what and the why people pursue their goals, or motivations (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000). When coaching college students, an example might be exploring why a student is motivated (or not) to pursue a degree. Coaches also helped students develop goals and creating action plans toward
these goals (C. E. Robinson, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017). Developing a student in terms of self-determination will help students develop and achieve these goals.

Self-determination theory can be broken down into three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence is focused on confidence and what an individual believes about themselves, including their capabilities to achieve a goal or develop a skill (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002). Students often attend college without feeling confident in themselves, their academic abilities, or their major or career decisions (Moen & Allgood, 2009). One example of developing competence from a coach perspective is helping students develop goals and skills and to identify what is working (Spence & Oades, 2011).

Autonomy is developed when an individuals’ values and actions align and originate from them (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002). Often students who attend college immediately after high school make decisions largely based on others (i.e., family, friends, society) and college is a first step in self-authoring one’s life and making decisions based on their own interests or values (Magolda, 2008). A sense of autonomy can provide the student a voice, giving the student ownership of their decision making, in their development, and what is important to discuss in a meeting (Spence & Oades, 2011). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are also factors of autonomy. An increase in autonomy could fuel these motivations and influence whether a person achieves their goals (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002).

The third element, relatedness, refers to sense of belonging and an individual feeling accepted and connected to others in a community (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002). Sense of belonging has long been an important factor in the broader field of student
affairs, as well as in a students’ decision to stay or leave an institution (Strayhorn, 2012). Relatedness might also be important in the relationship between the student and their coach, faculty, and other students. Competence, autonomy, and relatedness can be influenced, for better or worse through environmental factors such as coaching to support the optimal functioning of individuals (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2002; Spence & Oades, 2011).

Spence and Oades (2011) further argued self-determination theory was useful when understanding coaching practices. For example, the coach can support a students’ autonomy by having the student take ownership of their decisions or encouraging the student to decide on the topic for the meeting. To develop competence, the coach encourages the student to identify and use their strengths, become more self-aware about what is working and what is not working, and identify what skills to focus on in meetings. For relatedness, the coach builds a trusting relationship with the student in order for coaching to work (Spence & Oades, 2011).

In addition to autonomy, competence, and relatedness is the importance of motivation. Motivation is crucial to self-determination theory and often determines whether a goal actually gets achieved. When a coachee, or student identifies a goal, they could be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to achieve this goal (Spence & Oades, 2011). Intrinsic motivation “refers to doing an activity for the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself” while extrinsic motivation “refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). Each of these can impact how much effort and energy people are willing to put in and how satisfied they are when they achieve the goal.
Internalization refers to “the process of transforming external regulations into internal regulations” (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994, p. 120). Introjection happens when a person internalizes, or ascribes to a certain value or goal, though they do not actually believe in it or want to accomplish the goal for themselves (Deci et al., 1994). For example, college students might work toward a major that they deem is worthy by their parents, or perhaps even society. When introjection happens, people tend to act based on guilt and can experience anxiety as a result (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Another process of internalization is integration. Integration happens when a “person identifies with the value of an activity and accepts full responsibility for doing it” (Deci et al., 1994, p. 121). For example, a college student sees the value of turning an assignment on time, and they take responsibility for completing the task. When integration happens, people feel more autonomous and that they have a sense of choice in life. Gabriel, Moran, and Gregory (2014) described how coaches can facilitate self-determination:

Fitting with core ideas in SDT, this will help coachees internalize and integrate their goals with their own beliefs and values over time, given that they are being encouraged to pursue goals because they want to, as opposed to another individual (e.g., coach, manager) wanting them to. This provides not only autonomy for coachees but also helps increase their competence via growth and development in achieving goals, more internalized forms of motivation, performance, and higher-order status of well-being. (p. 66)

Internalization can be explored and facilitated in the coaching process to support the growth and development of people.

While no studies have been conducted to explore how coaches perceive their coaching practice, two studies have been conducted using self-determination theory as a guiding framework to investigate coaching college students with learning disabilities. Parker and Boutelle (2009) found students who participated in coaching achieved
meaningful goals and developed skills, which helped students move towards self-determination. Using a phenomenological approach, seven students were interviewed about their experiences voluntarily participating in the coaching program. Researchers engaged in line-by-line coding, developed themes, and reached 66 percent inter-rater reliability. After discussions and revisions, the three researchers reached 93 percent inter-rater reliability (Parker & Boutelle, 2009). Coaches were trained and certified through ICF and the coaching model highlighted how students’ goals “shape the agenda of coaching sessions” (Parker & Boutelle, 2009, p. 209). Students met with coaches for one hour a week. Several strategies and techniques were mentioned which supported the students in a coaching capacity including: self-awareness, being non-judgmental, asking questions, identifying and carrying out goals, reflection, trust, accountability, developing autonomy, and helping students find their own solution, which students described helped in a reduction of stress, increased motivation and confidence, greater self-awareness, and better quality of life (Parker & Boutelle, 2009).

Students who participated in this study were purposefully selected because of their perspectives. Not all students may experience these results, and the results could also be influenced by the quality of the coaching experience because of the extensive coach training. One recommendation from this study was to understand the actual delivery methods of coaching “because the philosophy and methodology of coaching differ significantly from other services” (Parker & Boutelle, 2009, p. 214). While it was unclear how the role of a coach might differ to some, these authors described the coaching approach as significantly different. Parker and Boutelles’ (2009) findings...
highlight the need to better understand coaching practices from trained coaches, which is
the focus of the current study.

A mixed methods study was also conducted to understand how coaching
influenced executive functioning and self-determination skills for students with learning
disabilities and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD). Richman et al.
(2014) compared groups using a quasi-experimental design to measure any changes in
self-determination using the Self-Determination Student Scale based on a coaching
intervention. Coaches were trained and certified through ICF, met with students between
12 and 24 times throughout 2 semesters, and chose whether to participate in coaching.
The following description offers context into the coaching intervention:

Coaches assisted students in setting specific and measurable goals for their lives
while helping them develop action plans to reach those goals. Students were held
accountable for implementing their plans and encouraged to reflect on what
helped and hindered their progress. Rather than provide solutions, coaches used
broad questions to encourage student reflection. (Richman et al., 2014, p. 37)

Though the treatment group showed improvements, results were not significant.
However, a small sample size for both the control ($n = 8$) and treatment groups ($n = 16$),
and that these participants self-selected to participate, make it difficult to draw
generalizable conclusions. Themes from the qualitative portion of the study included
“enhanced autonomy by promoting their self-awareness, bolstering their self-esteem,
increasing their effectiveness in working toward goals, strengthening their ability to
establish more realistic goals, and encourage their critical reflection on their goal
attainment efforts” (Richman et al., 2014, p. 40). Findings were rooted in self-
determination theory, specifically in the areas of autonomy and competence. Although
participants included students with learning disabilities and ADHD, as well as both
undergraduate and graduate students, findings shed light on the potential coaching has on the self-determination of students. Self-determination theory is used as a theoretical framework to guide this study.

**Mixed Findings**

While many studies have shown coaching is a beneficial service for students, not all are positive. For example, in one dissertation, Bosworth (2006) found students felt like if they needed help, they could just go see their academic advisor. Students who participated were enrolled in at least one online course and were assigned both an advisor and a coach. While some positive benefits were reported, most students found coaching to be redundant and time consuming given they met with a coach once a week (Bosworth, 2006). Coaches provided process-oriented support, such as registration and financial aid, which are not typically associated with success coaching and could arguably be more aligned with the support of an academic advisor. While it appeared that coaches had some sort of training, it was unclear what the training consisted of and how frequently students met with coaches. Coaches did not work for the institution, but through an outside organization.

In another dissertation, Valora (2017) conducted a correlational study on the impact of non-cognitive coaching and student persistence at a community college. Students who were coached were required to meet with an achievement coach if they experienced academic difficulty. Very limited information was offered as to what the achievement coaches did in their meetings, other than “remove their barriers in the hopes they will become more academically successful” (Valora, 2017, p. 75), and it was unclear as to how frequently coaches met with students. Additionally, the coaches were trained as
social workers who “utilize social work competencies and best practices to strengthen students’ non-cognitive area of opportunity for growth through guided coaching practices” (Valora, 2017, p. 75). Findings showed no significant differences between the students who participated in coaching and those who did not.

Both of these studies (Bosworth, 2006; Valora, 2017) highlighted the importance of the current study. Not all coaching programs are created equal. The lack of description about what coaches do in their meetings with students and finding no differences between the coached and non-coached groups highlighted the importance of training. How coaches perceive their coaching practices, particularly in the context of their meetings may be influential in the results that coaching programs boast about. As an emerging profession, it is crucial to grasp what coaches in higher education perceive they do with their students, as coaching differs drastically across the country and globe. Because of this differentiation, I choose to limit the participants to those who have coach-specific training.

**The Coaching Process**

The coaching process, or specifically what happens during a meeting and throughout several coaching meetings in higher education, is ambiguous. While coaching is described as an individualized approach (Blankenship, 2017), little is known about coaching practices in higher education. In this section, I first focused on the literature regarding the importance of the coach-client or coach-student relationship. Next, I offered descriptions of the coaching process in the broader field of coaching, and then conclude with literature to understand what we know about the coaching process in higher education.
The Coaching Relationship

The relationship between helping professionals and their clients are crucial to facilitate change and ultimately be successful (Rogers, 1980). Specifically, Rogers (1980) described that having unconditional positive regard for clients, expressing empathy and genuineness are foundational to cultivating a positive relationship between helping professionals and clients. Baron and Morin (2009) examined the relationship between the coach and the client. The relationship was crucial and described as “a prerequisite for coaching effectiveness” (Baron & Morin, 2009, p. 99). In this study, 73 coachees completed multiple surveys about their relationship with their executive coach in the workplace. While a positive, client-centered relationship appears crucial to coaching, how might this be developed and used during a coaching meeting with students? In this study, I anticipated relationship building to be a major component in what coaches perceive they do in their meetings.

Additionally, in a systematic review on the importance of the coaching relationship, Lai and McDowall (2014) reviewed 64 research articles and categorized them into different areas of interest in the coaching relationship. Several factors contributed to a positive coaching relationship that included “building trust, understanding, and managing coachees’ emotional difficulties, having a two-way communication process, facilitating coachees’ learning and development, and having clear contract and transparent processes” (Lai & McDowall, 2014, p. 130). Coaching attributes found to enhance the relationship involved: required knowledge (education, coaching frameworks), personalities and attitudes (being open, honest, non-judgmental,
passion), and interpersonal skills (communication, developing a constructive relationship, and facilitating learning and development).

While the positive relationship between the coach and coachee is a crucial factor to the success of a coaching intervention, researchers have also found that the success of a coaching meeting may go beyond that of the relationship. In the study mentioned previously, Baron and Morin (2009) also found the techniques coaches used to help the client learn and grow were significantly correlated to the working relationship. These techniques included “the ability to establish a development plan, track learning progress, use a structured approach, help make connections, and identify obstacles” (p. 99). In the next section, I will review the various elements of coaching meetings and the process in the broader field of coaching.

The Art and Science of Coaching: Meetings in the Broader Field

In his book, *An Introduction to Coaching Skills: A Practical Guide*, van Nieuwerburgh (2017) described the “three elements of becoming an effective coach: having the necessary skills; knowing a conversational process; and adopting an appropriate ‘coaching way of being’” (p. 8). The first element, skills, included active listening, powerful questions, paraphrasing and summarizing, and giving and receiving feedback. van Nieuwerburgh (2017) described the second element, the conversational framework, as “the heart of coaching” (p. 75). Using a conversational framework was highly recommended as a way to elicit thinking, reflection, and action. The framework brings intentionality for a coach to manage the conversation while the coachee chooses the content. The coaching way of being was the third element of becoming an effective coach (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). This way of being described those who care deeply
about people, who believe people are capable of more, and who have respect, integrity, and strive for cultural competence. They inspire others towards ‘a-ha moments’ and are genuinely interested in human growth and development. Coaches embody these characteristics and incorporate this way of being into their practice. When the skills, conversational framework, and way of being are combined, the art and science of coaching comes forth. I explored each of these during data collection to compare coaching in higher education to the broader field.

A handful of strategies and techniques were commonly used during coaching meetings with clients in the broader field of coaching. For example, Grant (2003) described the role of a coach is to facilitate options and action plans in a systematic way using a self-regulation model to help participants reach their goals. Grant described this as a generic model of goal-directed self-regulation with techniques that included: identifying the issue, setting a goal, developing an action plan, acting, monitoring, evaluating, and changing what’s not working or doing more of what works (Grant, 2003, 2012). A key word in this process is systematic. Grant (2003) outlined a specific process coaches engaged in to help coachees reach their goals.

D. T. Hall et al. (1999) wrote a report and shared what coaches found worked in an executive coaching meeting from both the coaches’ and coachees’ perspective. D. T. Hall et al. (1999) wanted to describe what actually happens during a coaching meeting. In their study, D. T. Hall, et al. (1999) found coaches described practices such as connecting with clients, recognizing where the client is at, being a good listener, reflecting, caring, following up, committed to the clients’ success, demonstrating honesty and openness, and pushing the client when it was necessary. Providing feedback to the clients was also
helpful in progress towards their goals (D. T. Hall et al., 1999). While these findings provided insight into what coachee’s found helpful, their findings were mostly descriptive. Furthermore, an explanation of how they chose to analyze the data was missing. In this study, I provided in-depth, analytical perspectives into how coaches perceive their coaching practices. I also shared how I analyzed then data in Chapter III.

Grant (2011) argued that the structure of a coaching session is “primarily designed to act as a guide for the coach, helping the coach and coachee to stay focused on relevant issues and preventing the coaching session drifting off into a conversation that has no clear purpose or goal” (p. 118). In light of this comment, coaching models and frameworks have been created to help systematize the coaching process and focus the conversation in a coaching meeting. In this section, I highlighted a few popular coaching models to better understand what happens in a coaching meeting in the broader field of coaching.

While models and frameworks have been created, little research has been done, even outside of higher education, to determine which session structure produces the best results, in certain contexts, as well as for which populations (Grant, 2011). Particularly for new coaches, however, these models or frameworks could be useful to understand the process of what happens during a coaching meeting and in the coaching process (Grant, 2011). Components of various coaching models and frameworks will be described below.

At the core of these models is ownership and understanding who sets the goals or agenda of each meeting. Spence and Oades (2011) described the coaching process should be driven by the coachee, that is, the coachee determines what is priority to discuss each meeting. Other authors who have written about coaching agree--the client, or coachee
sets the agenda (Salter, 2015; Thomson, 2012; van Nieuwerburgh, & Tong, 2013). Stoltzfus (2008) described four techniques in identifying the topic to discuss, which include the following: (a) Ownership (where the topic is identified by the client); (b) Passion (the client wants to accomplish this); and (c) Urgency (client wants to do this now); and (d) Significance (the goal or agenda is important to the client). Coaching models lean on the client to set the agenda for a coaching meeting. Having the client set the agenda also aligned with self-determination theory, which is used to frame the current study.

Stoltzfus (2008) also presented The Coaching Funnel to describe coaching conversations, which can be used “to coach practical challenges or issues that require exploration and self-discovery” (p. 30). He described the steps as setting a goal, exploring the situation around the goal, looking at options, making a decision, and taking action. He offered techniques such as identifying goals, using powerful questions to understand where the client is at and their thinking processes, brainstorming solutions, helping a client commit to one of these solutions, creating steps to accomplish this task, taking action toward this goal, encouraging commitment, and holding the client accountable. Stoltzfus (2008) also explained that coaching could be used in “identifying and pursuing your life purpose, and refocusing your present life for greater energy, fulfillment, and productivity” (p. 49). To do this, he described helping the client understand who they are, helping them figure out what motivates them, identifying their dreams and desires, barriers that get in the way of their dreams, articulating their ideal life, and understanding their own values. While coaches work in higher education, it is unclear which, if any of these techniques are used in their coaching practices.
The Co-Active Coaching Model was another popular coaching model in the broader field of coaching. Four cornerstones were described to be crucial for an “engaged and empowered relationship”: (a) People are naturally creative, resourceful, and whole; (b) Focus on the whole person; (c) Dance in the moment (e.g., being present and collaborative during coaching meetings; invoking vulnerability); and (d) Evoke transformation. (Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, Sandahl, & Whitworth, 2011, pp. 3-8). Working towards a fulfilling life, balancing various aspects of life, and focusing on the process was described as “the heart of the model” (Kimsey-House et al., 2011, p. 8). The five aspects coaches bring to these meetings are listening, intuition, curiosity, forward and deepen (e.g., to create change within the client involves action and learning), and self-management (Kimsey-House et al., 2011). To summarize, Kimsey-House et al. (2011) described,

In coaching, our primary responsibility is to help clients determine their best course of action and support them in staying on track, helping them uncover the learning for themselves so that they become more resourceful over time rather than more dependent on the coaching for answers. As coaches, we are always empowering our clients. (p. 158)

On the cover of Co-Active Coaching, the book was described as influential in defining coaching in the broader field (Kimsey-House et al., 2011). The co-active coaching model was a foundational resource in the broader field of coaching, and it was unclear how this model compared to what coaches perceive they are doing in their meetings.

Another popular coaching model cited often in studies and in practice is the GROW Model (Grow, Reality, Options and Will; Whitmore, 2017). Whitmore (2017) described four distinct stages in a framework for coaching: “(a) Goal setting for the session as well as the short and long term; (b) Reality checking to explore the current
situation; (c) Options and alternative strategies or course of action; and (d) What is to be done, When, by Whom, and the Will to do it” (p. 96). Whitmore (2017) further described the importance of powerful questions, active listening, and the need for flexibility within the framework. Grant (2011) has since challenged the GROW model, adding two additional steps to link one coaching meeting to the next coaching meeting. Adding the elements of Reviewing and Evaluating the actions of the previous coaching session can help connect past meetings with the present and offer accountability.

A linear model of coaching can be helpful in the beginning for a novice coach (Grant, 2011). As a coach gains experience, they often find the process is not linear, and that the process in a meeting is more of an “iterative process, allowing coaches to be more flexible in their meetings” (Grant, 2011, p. 122). This aligned with van Nieuwerburgh’s (2017) description of coaching as both an art and a science.

Bresser and Wilson (2016) described both the process of coaching, as well as the content of coaching. The role of the coach was to guide the following process during a meeting: “timekeeping; ensuring that the coachee sets clear goals, strategies, and actions; holding the coachee accountable; and keeping the coachee’s focus on track” (p. 6). The role of the coachee is the content. Bresser and Wilson (2016) described how the client should decide the specific content to be discussed during a meeting, which included: “choosing the topics of the coaching; creating the specific goals and actions to be worked on; and deciding upon the time frame” (p. 6). From this perspective, both the coach and the coachee have a role in a meeting. It was unclear how coaches in higher education facilitate the coaching conversation.
**Governing Bodies of Coaching**

Two governing bodies currently exist in the broader field and offer training certifications to support coaches. The International Coach Federation (ICF, 2020c) “defines coaching as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (para. 9). The ICF offers accreditation for training programs, credentials, research, a list of coach competencies, and a support network. To become an Associate Certified Coach (requiring the least amount of requirements), one must complete 60 hours of coach-specific training, 10 hours of coaching from a mentor who is certified at a higher level, a minimum of 100 hours of coaching experience (75 of these hours have to be from paid clients), a performance evaluation, sit in on an exam called the Coach Knowledge Assessment, and pay a fee of, at minimum $300 (ICF, 2020d). The ICF also has 11 core competencies: (a) meeting ethical guidelines and professional standards, (b) establishing the coaching agreement, (c) establishing trust and intimacy with the client, (d) coaching presence, (e) active listening, (f) powerful questioning, (g) direct communication, (h) creating awareness, (i) designing actions, (j) planning and goal setting, and (k) managing progress and accountability (ICF, 2020b). The core competencies “were developed to support greater understanding about the skills and approaches used within today’s coaching profession” (ICF, 2020b, para. 1). Coaches in higher education might be implementing some or all of these core competencies in their work; however, it is unclear if coaches are even aware of these governing bodies.

Another governing body was the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE). The CCE offered the credential of a Board Certified Coach. The governing body claimed
their certification “met professional coaching competency standards established by CCE and subject matter experts” (Center for Credentialing and Education, 2018, para. 1). While the specific competency and standards were not provided on their website, a list was provided of the requirements to become a Board Certified Coach. Requirements are dependent on the applicants’ educational background. To give the reader an idea, if one has a Master’s degree in a behavioral or social science field, the following is required: professional coach training of 60 hours, 30 hours of coaching experience post degree, one professional endorsement, an exam, and a fee of $279 plus $40 annual maintenance fee. Given the cost and time it takes to become certified, for the purposes of this study, participants will only have to have completed at coach-specific training program.

Additional professional development opportunities have emerged in recent years. The National Tutoring Association (2020) developed a certification for academic coaches and the Association for the Coaching and Tutoring Profession (2020) developed an academic coaching certification. The National Academic Advising Association has a community for academic coaches and has provided coaching webinars and in-person training at conferences. InsideTrack provided coaching and training to students and institutions across the country (InsideTrack, 2020). Training varied in length, content, cost, and format.

While various coaching frameworks and trainings existed, some similarities are present throughout the broader field of coaching research. There was a process and strategy coaches used in their meetings with clients. While no standards currently exist in higher education, governing bodies, training, and certifications are growing at an immense rate in the broader field. The quality of coaching meetings is likely to depend
largely on coaching practices. While anyone can call themselves a coach, many researchers highlighted the importance of training when coaching and when considering the outcomes of coaching (Brennan, 2008; Lefdahl-Davis et al., 2018). Coaches in higher education are trained in vastly different ways—some are being trained through these two governing bodies, the ICF and CCE, while others are given the title of a coach without any additional training. Coaches who have participated in coach-specific training were included in this study.

**Coaching Meetings in Higher Education**

Because coaching is an emerging field in higher education, little is known about what might be systematic in their approach, as well as what they perceive they do or techniques they use in meetings. Additionally, confusion exists about the role on college campuses, and how the role of a coach might be different than others on campus (Sepulveda, 2017; Strange, 2015). Some authors have written about coaching, but no studies have specifically explored coaching practices. Salter (2015) described how success coaches guide students using a non-directive approach. Instead of telling a student what they need to do to improve their GPA, a coach guides the student to make their own decisions about what to do next. Helping students take ownership of their college experience is another element of coaching mentioned in the literature (LaRocca, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017; Thomson, 2012). A crucial element to coaching is the relationship, which takes multiple meetings to build (M. M. Hall, 2017; Sepulveda, 2017). Another aspect of meeting several times is following up and reflecting on the students’ progress toward their goals (McClellan & Moser, 2011; Richman et al., 2014; C. Robinson & Gahagan, 2010; Sepulveda, 2017).
In C. E. Robinson’s (2015) dissertation, participants were asked the top three primary emphases of coaching sessions. The top emphases included study skills (65%), goal setting (55%), academic recovery (39%), academic planning (26%), personal concerns (14%), engagement planning/involvement (11%), and career planning/development/exploration (9%; C. E. Robinson, 2015). Percentages included total respondents and were rounded to the nearest whole number. Each of these can play an important role in the overall students’ success at the institution. For example, improved study skills can lead to higher grades, more involvement can lead to greater sense of community, and career conversations can lead to a greater sense of purpose and motivation.

Additionally, the open-ended survey responses from the survey included a list of specific topics that were discussed during coaching meetings. Participants listed over 130 different responses to this question, as coaches emphasized the importance of tailoring the coaching meeting to the individual student (C. E. Robinson, 2015). Responses were grouped into categories of academic concerns, personal concerns, institution focus, and techniques.

Despite this helpful and needed understanding of the emerging field, questions like, how do coaches determine what is most important to the student? And how do coaches help students reach their goals? remain unexplored and unanswered. Additionally, the responses provided in this survey were open to any position that was “related to a coaching program within their college or university” (C. E. Robinson, 2015, p. 53). Given the vast number of topics coaches focused on in any given coaching session, and how vastly different coaches were trained, I limited the sample of the current
study to only coaches who have participated in coach-specific trainings. My hope is that this narrative study not only fills this gap by exploring the techniques and practices coaches perceive they use in their meetings with students, but also builds upon C. E. Robinson’s (2015) study.

In a conceptual article, Dalton and Crosby (2014) described coaches as unique because of their proactive approach. Coaches initiated meetings with the student and did not wait for a student to walk in their door (Dalton & Crosby, 2014). However, the proactive approach may differ depending on the individual coach, program, or institution and authors raised issue with the efficacy of coaching particularly because of the limited research available. Moreover, in their book, Brzycki and Brzycki (2016) described the organization of higher education does not function optimally because personal and career goals are often separated by departmental or programmatic goals. Coaching often combines the personal and career goals of the student to provide this holistic support. How coaching differentiates from other support services is still misunderstood.

One group of authors explored the use of what they have described as between session assignments, or BSA’s. BSA’s were assignments the student commits to doing in between the coaching meetings. These included topics related to studying, time management, organization, overall health, and social activities for students participating in ADHD coaching (Prevatt et al., 2011). This study provided some examples of what success coaches did with students. Coaches reviewed the goals the coach and student agreed upon previously, evaluated how it went, anticipated what is coming up for the student, and then planned, which included having the student decide what needs to be done before the next session (Prevatt et al., 2011). However, no in-depth studies have
explored how coaches conduct their meetings with students with the general population or from a national perspective. Additionally, each coaching program was described as unique in their approach, though commonalities do appear. In this study, I wanted to gain some commonalities in how coaches perceive their coaching practices from a national perspective.

Strange (2015) conducted an evaluation case study to explore and understand a Chancellor’s College Success Coach Initiative in one community college system. Strange (2015) interviewed eight success coaches “to understand how Success Coaches achieved the initiative’s goals, how the Success Coaches defined their role of academic advising and academic coaching, and what elements the Success Coaches perceived promoted student success” (p. 25). One major finding included the importance of creating an academic plan with the student. The academic plan was comprised of self-assessments, goal setting, breaking down goals into manageable steps, and understanding students’ academic and personal background. Interestingly, academic advising was also included, even though academic advising was not in their job description (Strange, 2015). However, one participant felt as if coaching and advising were distinct roles.

Additionally, Strange (2015) found success coaches helped address barriers to student success such as finances, helping to monitor grades and connecting students to resources (e.g., tutoring, disability services), connecting students to opportunities on campus (career services), and non-academic support (e.g., transportation, child care, or basic needs such as food). Success coaches described building rapport as crucial to the coach-student relationship (Strange, 2015). Success coaches had regular student contact and provided feedback and reflection to increase self-awareness (Strange, 2015).
However, what coaches perceived they did in these meetings, how often coaches met with students, and how, or when they provided this feedback was unclear. Additionally, it appeared the success coaches did not have coach-specific training through governing bodies such as ICF and CCE.

While findings were not solely focused on what success coaches did in their meetings, some components were similar to coaching in the broader field such as supporting the whole person (Gibbs & Larcus, 2015) and trust in the coaching relationship (Baron & Morin, 2009; ICF, 2020b; Rogers, 1980; Santoro & Keenan, 2015). Strange (2015) acknowledged how the academic advising and coaching role embedded together does not align with current research in the broader field of coaching.

I also conducted a study to explore the roles and responsibilities of academic coaches in higher education. While the focus of the study was not specifically on coaching practices, a theme emerged regarding the role coaches have in meetings. First, a “customized approach tailored to each student” was described as being unique to the academic coach role (Sepulveda, 2017, p. 73). Academic coaches described “the overall goal of their interaction was to facilitate growth and change, as well as address barriers which may negatively influence student retention, graduation, and overall success” (Sepulveda, 2017, p. 73). Techniques academic coaches reported using were powerful questioning, motivation, ownership, helping students achieve their own agenda, giving students voice, exploring and identifying strengths, developing self-awareness, developing academic and life skills, creating and identifying goals, creating and implementing action plans, reflection, and accountability (Sepulveda, 2017). Broadly, the
coaching role included relationship building, student development, action planning, and reflection and follow up (Sepulveda, 2017).

Findings were helpful to begin to understand the role of a coach during meetings. However, findings were limited to eight participants and it was not specified what type of coaching training participants had, or if they had any coach-specific training. Findings were also limited to a specific geographical region. Each of these limitations were taken into consideration when making decisions in the present study. Findings from the present study will confirm, expand, and challenge these descriptions.

While little to no coaching models have undergone empirical research in higher education, one model has been described as the process of coaching college students. Santoro and Keenan (2015) presented the Dynamic Circular Model, which had various elements such as Connect, Collaborate, and Act. Connect referred to the coach-student relationship as being a crucial component, placing it at the center of the model. Collaborate included the “process whereby the coach and client work together to discuss multiple areas of the client’s life to determine what will be in their best interest to focus on” (Santoro & Keenan, 2015, p. 15). Coaches used powerful questions, considered the situation, used reflection, and engaged in activity to turn thought into action. The next phase was Act, which is where the client or student commits to an action toward their goals. The final phase, Continue, focused on continuing the coaching relationship and highlighted the importance of “facilitating follow-up and starting a new topic” (Santoro & Keenan, 2015, p. 16). In addition to meetings, authors also argued that “the power of the coaching relationship lies not just in what happens during the coaching meeting itself, but also in what happens in between coaching meetings” (Santoro & Keenan, 2015, p.
The model was not empirically generated or tested. The Dynamic Circular Model offered some structure and organization to coaching, as well as flexibility as Grant (2011) suggested within the broader field of coaching.

One element of coaching in higher education is clear. The creation of an action plan or goal and following up is crucial in a coaching meeting. While the goal might differ for students, coaches help to move students towards goals they create themselves. I was particularly curious as to what success coaches perceive they strategically do in their meetings. For example, what does a plan or goal look like, and how do coaches perceive they help students create a plan in their meetings?

While both the role of an advisor and coach in higher education is to support each student holistically, how they approach meetings appear to be different. For example, an academic advisor has specialized knowledge in an area and their goal is to provide support and help students graduate with their chosen major. Academic advisors play a crucial role on college campuses and they certainly develop students over time. Coaches focus on student growth, and what topic coaches and students discuss can vary greatly. From my own understanding and research, during every coaching meeting, the student and coach co-create an action plan to intentionally work toward a goal that the student created (Santoro & Keenan, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017). The agenda for the coach and student can change every single meeting. Another key difference is the time spent with students. While programs clearly vary, coaches see students regularly and follow up on the goals and actions created from previous meetings. The consistent interaction provides opportunity for reflection and stronger relationships between coaches and students. While both aspects deserve more attention as coaching continues to permeate higher education,
in this study, I explicitly focused on coaching practices. However, with the push toward a more developmental approach to advising, it is unclear how these two positions in higher education will evolve over time. While coaching may appear to be an innovative practice, some advisors argue they have been ‘coaching’ their entire career. Understanding the practices of coaches in higher education is crucial as we move forward in the field to better support students.

As described earlier in this chapter, there were several elements to student success. A combination of Kuh et al. (2006) and Habley et al. (2012) definitions of success include: (a) quantifiable outcomes such as retention rates, graduation rates, academic performance (e.g., GPA) that are traditional institutional measures of student success; (b) academic and social integration; and (c) student and personal development (e.g., cognitive and non-cognitive factors, skill development, mindset, self-awareness, purpose, personal goals, etc.). Each of these student success components can be addressed in a coach meeting and I am interested in how coaches navigate these various components in their practice.

Training in Higher Education

The lack of affordable, coach-specific training further complicates the role of success coaches and understanding how they perceive their practice. For example, if an academic advisor was given the title of coach, would they be ready to “coach” students? Or will they need additional training? Should administrators simply hire more advisors (or counselors, or mentors) to provide additional support, instead of creating an entirely new position called a coach? Understanding coaching practices in the context of training is a crucial piece to the differentiation puzzle.
InsideTrack (2019) is an organization who claims cost-effective coaching strategies can “improve enrollment, persistence, completion and career readiness” using proprietary coaching strategies (para. 1). Replicating these coaching services for college students is costly (Keen, 2014), and many institutions are developing in-house success coaching programs and individual positions, with various levels of training (C. E. Robinson, 2015). Most coaches (48% of respondents) reported they do not follow any theoretical or conceptual framework to guide their work with students (C. E. Robinson, 2015). When training varies widely, and is even non-existent at some institutions, researchers find it challenging to examine the broad effectiveness of coaching. Researchers and administrators cannot determine broad effectiveness of a strategy based on position title alone.

Bosworth’s (2006) dissertation highlighted how college administrators struggled having a third-party service within the institution. Administrators were unaware of what coaches were doing and had questions about “How do coaches coach?” and “What does coaching look like?” (Bosworth, 2006, p. 58). Role confusion remains on campus about coaching as an emerging profession (C. E. Robinson, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017; Strange, 2015). These same questions could be asked among programs who have developed their own coaching models or among coaches who attend trainings outside of the institution. I hope the current study sheds light on how coaches “coach,” and what coaching looks like from trained, four-year coaches.

Some coaching programs have certified coaches who attend a specific training approved by the International Coaching Federation or the Center for Credentialing Education as a Board Certified Coach (BCC). While some are trained and certified
through a larger governing body, many are unable to obtain specific training related to coaching (C. E. Robinson, 2015) because of costs. Limited standards, poor or infrequent training, and lack of clarity make it challenging for coaching to be understood as a unique service from other support services on campus or to grow as a profession. A former president of the International Coach Federation argued the need for more standards and credentials in the realm of coaching as other professions have done (Brennan, 2008).

In one dissertation, Blankenship (2017) conducted a case study to explore a university coaching program who invested in an ICF approved training for their coaches. Blankenship interviewed four success coaches, conducted observations, and collected documents to gain a deeper insight into their role on campus. Even though they all had graduate degrees, participants highly valued the coach-specific training. Coaches used ICF competencies to inform their work with students and described “how coaching pushed students toward designing actions that help students move closer toward their stated goal(s)” (Blankenship, 2017, p. 108). Participants described important elements of the coaching process as managing progress and accountability by following up on progress of the goal, self-directed learning (student owns process, rather than coaches telling the student what to do), challenging belief systems and mindsets, creating self-awareness, and developing and implementing action plans (Blankenship, 2017). Coaches were purposeful and intentional about their actions with their students. Blankenship (2017) also linked both the coaching literature and findings, which “showed that the value of coaching students goes beyond GPA and the noncognitive factors addressed by coaching may be important to retention in ways that are unique from traditional student
success roles (such as tutoring and academic advising)” (p. 131). Coaches were able to spend more time with students and support student success from a variety of angles.

Concluding his research, Blankenship (2017) acknowledged the findings are limited to the particular university under study and only included four coaches. However, the research findings provide deeper insight into the role of coaches who were trained through ICF. While C. E. Robinson’s (2015) study found most programs in higher education do not train their coaches using coaching methodologies, I chose to limit my participants to coaches who have participated in coach-specific training. The value of coaching-specific training was evident in Blankenship’s (2017) findings and are a criterion for the present study. While there is currently no standard in higher education for coaches, if coaching is to remain a viable role on college campuses, I anticipate standards will be inevitable.

The coaches in Blankenship’s (2017) study also focused heavily on the process of coaching and trusted that the results would come by way of student growth, and ultimately increased GPA and retention. Understanding what trained coaches perceive their coaching practices, particularly in meetings, will shed light on coaching being described as both an art and a science (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017) and help to make sense of the messiness in the coaching process (Hicks, 2017). Further, in his conclusion, Blankenship (2017) suggested research be conducted “to more fully understand exactly what happens in a coaching conversation between a student and a coach” (p. 141). By focusing on what coaches perceive they intentionally do during meetings, researchers will be able to dive deeper into how coaches perceive students grow, increase retention, GPA,
and ultimately help students thrive. Additionally, I strive to expand on Blankenship’s (2017) study by gaining a national perspective of trained coaches.

**Conclusion of Literature Review**

Students have experienced benefits from various coaching programs such as increased academic performance (I. H. Allen & Lester, 2012; Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013; Bruner, 2017; *College Life Coaching*, 2020; C. Robinson & Gahagan, 2010), better time management (Prevatt & Yelland, 2015), improved study skills (Field et al., 2010; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; Richman et al., 2014), increased sense of ownership (LaRocca, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017; Thomson, 2012), increased understanding of logistics in higher education (e.g., additional campus resources, deadlines; Bosworth, 2006), increased self-awareness (Richman et al., 2014; Sepulveda, 2017), clarity in their vision (Conner et al., 2012), and increased experiences of being supported in reaching their goals (LaRocca, 2015; Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016; C. Robinson & Gahagan, 2010; Webberman & Carter, 2011). However, given the limited sample sizes and the unique implementation of each coaching program, more research needs to be done to understand what success coaches perceive they actually do in their meetings and in their coaching practice. Additionally, results are mixed and depend on a variety of factors that have yet to be understood (Bosworth, 2006; Valora, 2017).

Hundreds of institutions across the country have implemented coaching programs as a service to students (C. E. Robinson, 2015). With increasing pressure from the state and federal government to increase graduation and retention rates (Middaugh, 2010), institutions will need to understand if and when coaching is the best use of resources. Theories suggested that improving retention is a complex process involving many aspects
of both the institution and individual student (Bean & Eaton, 2001). We have not yet scratched the surface in determining if this strategy is the best way to support college students in higher education or in what context coaching works best. Given the limited training of coaches, the lack of clear definition to this emerging role, the variety of ways to implement a coaching program, mixed findings as to their effectiveness, and how many institutions are investing in programs, it is clear further research is needed to understand coaching practices in higher education. Answering the proposed research questions will help bring about a better understanding to the overall emerging profession of coaching in higher education.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how trained, four-year success coaches perceive their coaching practice with students in higher education, particularly in the context of their meetings. The methodology section will provide details and justification for each research decision in the study. First, I described my epistemological stance, self-determination theory, and the selected research design as a narrative study. I then presented the research questions, researcher paradigm, and researcher role. Finally, I offered details on data collection, data analysis methods, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations of the presented study.

The following research questions will be used to guide this narrative study:

Q1 How do trained college and university coaches perceive their coaching practices?

Q1a What specific strategies do coaches perceive they use to help students define their goals in first meetings, and over several meetings?

Q1b What do coaches perceive they do in first meetings, and over several meetings to help college students reach their goals?

Q1c What role do coaches perceive they have in retention?

Q1d How do coaches perceive they fit into the undergraduate student support system on their campus?
Researcher Epistemology

Creswell (2014) recommended researchers are explicit in how they view the world and philosophical assumptions based on their worldview. I approached this narrative study from a social constructivist worldview. Social constructivists believe the world is socially constructed as “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). From a social constructivist worldview, researchers focus on how people view and make meaning of an experience (Creswell, 2013; Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010) and the researcher and participants construct reality together (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Social constructivist researchers tend to focus on the processes and interactions between one another (Creswell, 2013, 2014).

In addition, social constructivist researchers focus on the “complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). A social constructivist approach aligns with narrative as it allows me as the researcher to explore the complexities and uniqueness of each participants’ experiences, as well as provide a greater understanding and narrative in what is perceived to happen during a coaching meeting and in meetings over time in the coaching process. In higher education, ambiguity exists in how coaches serve students (C. E. Robinson, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017) and findings will offer clarity for this emerging profession. Additionally, social constructivists rely heavily on the participants’ perceptions of an experience (Creswell, 2014). This study relied heavily on how coaches describe, interpret, and make meaning of what they perceive they do with students during meetings and in the coaching practice.

One group of researchers explored the experiences of black men who attended a historically black college and university (HBCU) and the role of family support in their
graduation and success (Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011). Through a constructivist lens, Palmer et al. (2011) conducted two interviews and “engaged participants about their academic and social experiences at the institution” (p. 583). After the first round of interviews, researchers conducted follow up interviews to elaborate or clarify initial themes (Palmer et al., 2011). They chose this approach because social constructivists rely heavily on the participants’ perceptions of an experience and the context in which they are in (Creswell, 2014).

For this study, I focused on the participants’ understanding of their coaching practice within their institution. I also chose to conduct the first semi-structured interview to develop initial themes, and the second interview to build upon these themes through elaboration and clarification. I understand a social constructivist lens as a way to explore the coaching process and make sense of the complexities and individualistic approach to serving students. However, by understanding how coaches perceive their coaching practice, and their meetings, I can provide more nuance and clarification to the various components of coaching practices in higher education.

**Theoretical Framework**

Researchers have suggested ways to incorporate the use of theory in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, Creswell (2014) suggested qualitative research can be used to generate theory or used as a broad explanation of a phenomena. Additionally, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained no study is designed without some theory guiding the work. I believe theories can provide a way to frame the study for the researcher and the reader when answering research questions and understanding a phenomenon. For this particular study, I used theory as a
way to strengthen findings and contribute to the research on coaching in higher education and the greater field of coaching. Understanding coaching practices in higher education that are rooted in theory can provide coaches with a much needed, theory-based understanding to guide their work. Additionally, self-determination has been described as the goal of coaching in the broader field (Moore, Jackson, & Tschannen-Moran, 2016) and the current study will build upon this theory.

I used self-determination as the theoretical framework to guide this narrative study. Self-determination is rooted in research and well-known in the greater coaching field because the coaching process relies so heavily on the major tenets described by the theory. Because coaching in higher education emerged from the broader field of coaching, I have made some assumptions that self-determination theory is influential in the work coaches do in higher education. Self-determination theory provided an underlying structure and strong framework to explore coaching practices.

The three elements of self-determination theory (competence, autonomy, and relatedness) described in the literature review guided the development of the interview questions and analysis. Questions were asked about how coaches develop competence, autonomy, and relatedness in their meetings with students. For example, in relation to competence: What is an example of how a success coach has developed a skill during a meeting? How do success coaches develop confidence in their meetings to help a student believe in themselves? What do success coaches do to help students identify and achieve their goals? While prior theory guided this narrative study, I am also open to discovering new insights (Riessman, 2008).
A study was conducted using self-determination theory as a guide to understand the experiences of women who participated in a co-active life coaching intervention. Harvey, Pearson, Mantler, and Gotwals (2018) interviewed nine women who participated in coaching after their first pregnancy. Researchers used the three basic needs of self-determination (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) to code interviews in data analysis and in the organization of findings. Authors found there were detractors and supporters of each of these needs and organized them as such. For example, supporters of autonomy for the mothers regarding lifestyle changes included being in the present moment, letting go, being flexible, owning choice, and attaching meaning to health-related goals (Harvey et al., 2018). For this study, I gained the perspectives of the coaches, specifically in how they intentionally facilitate autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their students.

**Narrative**

Qualitative research is generally helpful to researchers who are trying to understand or make meaning of a particular phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further, Grant (2017) argued “qualitative research is fundamental to developing our understanding of coaching processes, for example, by providing unique insights into the coach-coachee relationship” (p. 317). Grant (2017) highlighted the unique perspective qualitative research can bring to understand what happens between a coach and a client, or for the purposes of this study, between the coach and the student. To explore this interaction and understand what coaches perceive they do in their meetings, a narrative approach was used. “Narrative stories tell of individual experiences, and they may shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves” (Merriam & Tisdell,
Riessman (2008) also suggested researchers take history and context into account when conducting a narrative study. In this narrative study, I asked coaches to describe how they became a coach, how their coaching-specific training changed the way they engage in coaching, and what their practice looks like during meetings with students. This provided the context of where each coach was coming from and how they individually approached their practice with students.

A narrative approach is focused on the human experience and is “implicated in practically every aspect of human communication, social interaction, and cultural practice” (Hiles, Cermák, & Chrz, 2017, p. 158). Narrative was one-way coaches could express how they perceived what they did in their meetings through stories and the coaching process by which they supported student success. Narrative uniquely prioritizes “attention to sequences of action” (Riessman, 2008, p. 11), making narrative an excellent fit to answer the research questions presented earlier. For this study, I constructed a narrative from these sequences of actions to describe, explain, and interpret what happens in a coaching meeting from the perspectives of the coaches themselves (Riessman, 2008). Pentland (1999) explained “because narrative embodies sequence and time, it is naturally suited to the development of process theories and explanations” (p. 717). For example, I asked coaches: How do you start the initial coaching meeting with a student?, How would you describe what you do in the middle of the meeting?, and How do you end your first coaching meeting? I also asked: How would you describe what you do in the following coaching meetings?, How do you figure out what to discuss in each coaching meeting?, and How do each of the coaching meetings connect? By asking these types of
questions, I was able to understand the beginning, middle, and end of each coaching meeting, as well as the coaching process over time.

This narrative study was conceptually similar to the study conducted by Lindström and Isaksson (2017). In their study, Lindström and Isaksson (2017) collected the narratives of occupational therapists working with people with severe psychiatric disabilities. The purpose of the study was to understand the therapeutic process, particularly in how this process unfolds from the perspective of the occupational therapists. For the present study, I collected narratives from coaches to understand the coaching process and how they perceive their coaching practice.

Lindström and Isaksson (2017) analyzed the narratives by identifying important aspects in how the occupational therapists took their clients through the therapeutic process. Researchers organized the findings into temporal sequence of actions and created a storyline to present the therapeutic process. When analyzing the data from the present study, I identified specific actions coaches took and the thought process behind these actions, to get a sense of how the coaching process unfolds in each meeting and over time. I used self-determination as a guide for data collection and analysis of this study. Even though coaching is an emerging profession, research in the broader field of coaching suggested self-determination is a useful framework to understand coaching (Spence & Oades, 2011).

**Participant Selection**

In qualitative research, a sample is “the unit of analysis” that can include sites, events, people, activities, and documents (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 95). In this study, the sample included people and documents. Criterion sampling refers to the researcher
identifying criteria to select participants who would offer strong narratives about the topic of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Criterion sampling was used to identify coaches who would best represent the topic of interest--trained, four-year coaches. Criterion sampling was useful in this narrative study because coaching is a unique and emerging student support service (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, there are a wide variety of coaching programs in higher education. I was very specific in the participant criteria so the findings would be clear and easily understood in the context of the criteria.

A similar study was described to highlight the type of criterion sampling I used for this study. Davis and Cooper (2017) used narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of professionals who supervised new professionals in the field. They first used Network Sampling to recruit participants. Next, researchers sent out a survey to determine if professionals met the criteria for the study, which included being employed by a university or college, holding a specific degree, and having a minimum number of years in supervision. In the present study, I emailed all 4-year public and private institutions with a coaching program from a database I have created from a prior study with a group of researchers. I sent the recruitment email (Appendix A) to each coach to determine if the coach meets the criteria, as was the case in the Davis and Cooper (2017) study.

**Participant Criteria**

Coaches must work at either a public or private 4-year institution in the United States. Most coaching programs in higher education were implemented at public institutions (C. E. Robinson, 2015) and when using criterion sampling, it is ideal to be as specific as possible to fully understand your participants (Creswell, 2013). While I
initially chose to limit the sample to public institutions, I decided to include coaches from private institutions to increase the sample. Given the challenges that existed to visit or travel abroad and the innate challenges to collect data abroad, I chose to limit data collection within the United States.

Next, I initially had my criteria set for coaches to have formal, coach-specific training approved by one of the two governing bodies in the broader field of coaching, through the International Coaching Federation or the Center for Credentialing Education. I wanted to limit the study to coaches with coach-specific training, as I hoped it would offer some depth and quality to coaching practices. I expanded the criteria to include coaches who completed any coach-specific training, as gaining participants with ICF or CCE training was more challenging than anticipated. C. E. Robinson (2015) found over half of coaches who completed their survey used no theory to guide their work. I wanted to exclude coaches who have not had any coach training to increase the likelihood of depth, quality, and similarities to coaching practices. I am making an assumption that coach-specific training makes a difference in the quality of interactions with students. Therefore, coaches who were currently in a training program but have not completed and those who have no coach-specific training were excluded from this study. I initially chose to limit participants to those who have had some similar training because not all coaching programs are created equal (Bosworth, 2006; Valora, 2017). However, my assumption that more coaching programs had certified coaches, and would be willing to participate proved to be false. In the recruitment email (Appendix A), participants were asked to complete a demographic survey (Appendix B) to determine if they met the criteria. Potential participants were asked to provide the training program they have completed
and whether the training was approved through a specific governing body and credentialed.

Regardless of their coach-specific position title (i.e., academic success coach, success coach, academic coach, college life coach, graduation coach), coaches must support the overall success of students, as described in the student success literature in Chapter II (Bean & Eaton, 2001; Schreiner, 2010, 2013). Coaches included in this study must support students with not only academics, but also with outside factors that influence a students’ success and their decision to stay or leave an institution (i.e., student well-being, helping them thrive, engagement on campus, sense of belonging, psychosocial factors).

Additionally, coaches had to have at least one year of coaching experience at their institution. This criterion eliminated any coach who did not have any coaching experience with students. I wanted participants to share stories working with students. Coaches also met with students individually. This criterion was chosen given the individualized approach to student success and as C. E. Robinson (2015) found, most coaches work with students on an individual basis. Coaches had to meet with students at least four times throughout the semester. This criterion eliminated coaches who have one meeting with a student per semester and provided more opportunities for coaches to tell stories about the coaching process over multiple meetings throughout one semester or year.

Findings shed light on coaching practices and what coaches perceived they did in their meetings (in each meeting, and over time) to support students to stay at the institution, improve their academic performance, and support the student experience.
To summarize, coaches needed to meet the following criteria:

1. Work at a public or private 4-year institution in the United States;
2. Must have completed formal coach-specific training—training included coaching skills, techniques, and process. An external organization, company, or consultant came in for this training.
3. Have the position title of coach (academic success coach, college success coach, academic coach, college life coach, graduation coach, or some other title with coach that does not relate to athletics);
4. Must have at least one year of experience coaching students in higher education;
5. Must work one-on-one with students;
6. Must meet with students at least four times throughout one semester; and
7. Must support students for overall student success.

I hoped to interview 30 coaches to create a national narrative in how coaches perceive their coaching practice and what they do in their meetings with students. I chose a minimum of 15 success coaches because of a prior study I conducted, where I interviewed eight coaches in one region (Sepulveda, 2017). However, after the first round of interviews were conducted, I determined I had reached data saturation with a total of 18 participants. Data saturation occurs when the same themes, categories, or information continued to emerge from the first round of interviews (S. R. Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). I analyzed the first round of interviews, and no new categories, themes, or information emerged. If new information had emerged, I would have continued to interview three additional coaches until I reached data saturation. Given the vast number
of coaching programs that have been created over the past few years, I did not anticipate gaining participants would be a challenge.

**Participant Recruitment and Consent**

Before seeking participants, I obtained approval for conducting the study through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at University of Northern Colorado (Appendix C). To recruit participants for the study, I sent emails to coaches who were listed as “coach” at their institution. Several schools did not have their coaching staff listed on their website. Therefore, I had to use a general email such as successcoaching@college.edu and hoped a coach at the institution would see the email and respond if interested.

A total of 434 unique emails were sent to coaches who were listed at 219 different 4-year public institutions and 337 unique emails were sent to coaches who were listed at 161 various 4-year private institutions. The list of coaching programs was created through another research project on coaching programs in higher education with a group of researchers. Coaches interested in participating were asked to complete a demographic survey (Appendix B) to determine if they met criteria. Coaches who met the criteria were sent an email with the following content: (a) a brief email message about myself and my interest in the study (Appendix A), (b) the informed consent (Appendix D), (c) the interview protocol (Appendix E), (d) sign up options for the interview, and (e) a description of the mind map activity (Appendix F). If I did not hear back from the potential participant within seven days, I sent a follow up email to ask if they had any questions about the study and if they were still interested in participating.
Participants

Out of the 771 of emails sent, a total of 56 coaches expressed an interest in the study by completing the demographic survey. An additional 92 coaches responded directly to the email because they either wanted to see the results once the study was completed, or were interested in participating, but did not qualify. Most participants who did not qualify did not have coach-specific training or had an in-house coach training. Twenty-seven coaches qualified for the study and a total of 18 participants completed the first interview. Eleven participants completed the mind map and 12 participants engaged in the second interview. Each of these are described in detail in the following section. Table 1 provided a list of participant characteristics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Category</th>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>African American or Black</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White or Caucasian</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Level</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Type</td>
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<td>22%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doctoral Universities</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s Colleges and Universities</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Degree Completed</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Category</td>
<td>Identifier</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credentialing Body</td>
<td>Center for Credentialing Education</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>InsideTrack</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International Coach Federation</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National Association of Colleges and Employers</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National Tutoring Association</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Population Coached</td>
<td>Academic Probation</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First Year</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>International Students</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students with Learning Disabilities</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All of the Above</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

Interviews are commonly used when conducting a narrative study to provide the space for participants to share their stories and experiences regarding a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews are also seen as a way to gain social and historical context, explore nuance, and understand the complexities of a phenomenon from a socially constructivist lens (Creswell, 2013). In narrative methodology, the researcher is encouraged to use “first-person accounts of experience told in story form having a beginning, middle, and end” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34). Interviews aligned well with narrative, as it provided the space for coaches to share their stories, experiences, and interactions with students’ over time. Additionally, interviews aligned with a social constructivist lens, as I relied heavily on the views and experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Data collection included a survey, two semi-structured interviews, a concept map, and a researcher journal. The following described the process of data collection: (a) the demographic survey (Appendix B) mentioned above to determine if a participant met the criteria for the study and to collect demographic information (responses from participants who did not participate in the study were destroyed), (b) First semi-structured interviews with coaches, (c) documents (mind maps), created in between the first and second interviews, (d) second semi-structured interview, and (e) researcher journal. I asked participants to create a mind map to represent their meetings with students after the first interview to prompt conversations in the second interview. Each data collection method is described, along with justification for each decision.

Demographic survey. A demographic survey was requested from potential participants. The survey was used to ensure each participant met the participant selection
criteria and is located in Appendix B. In addition to participant demographic information, I also asked participants to provide institutional type, position title, details about their training, and if they supported students holistically. Survey data were used to develop Table 1 and provide demographic information of participants. Throughout data analysis, I also used participants training, background, and years of experience to make meaning of nuance differences in coaching practices.

**Interviews.** Coaches were invited to complete the informed consent (Appendix D) and sign up to participate in semi-structured interviews if they met the sampling criteria. Semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to be prepared for specific questions, while I also remained flexible as the conversation progressed (Hiles et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews also have the potential to generate stories and perceptions of participants, which aligned with narrative as a methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Riessman (2008) described “the goal of narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements” (p. 23). The narratives told in these interviews provided detailed accounts to understand how participants perceived their coaching practice. I developed the semi-structured interview questions based on coaching literature in the broader field, coaching literature in higher education, self-determination theory, and my own experiences as a coach.

My goal was to complete two interviews for each participant. Riessman (2008) suggested multiple interviews for a narrative study and I believe two interviews were necessary for this particular study. I choose to build upon initial findings from the first set of interviews as a way to co-construct the findings with participants. As a social
constructivist researcher, I believe I am embedded in the research process and am active before, during, and after interviews. I anticipated the first interview would last approximately 60-90 minutes to gain an initial narrative of how coaches perceive their coaching practice and what they do in their meetings. Given my experience interviewing academic coaches in a prior study, I believed this was sufficient time to understand their perceptions. This time also provided time to establish rapport and create space to let participants unpack stories and share their experiences from their coaching practice. The first interviews lasted 25 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes. The questions in this interview were built from self-determination theory and coaching literature to answer research questions. The interview protocol is located in Appendix E.

Stories were solicited to better understand the coaching practice, particularly in meetings and how coaches helped students identify and reach their goals. To solicit these stories, I briefly introduced myself and encouraged them to ask any questions they had about the study before we began the interview. I reviewed the purpose of the study and reminded participants that if they felt uncomfortable at any point, we could stop the interview. I also reinforced from the informed consent (Appendix D) that findings would be socially constructed and explained the purpose of the second interview would be to build on initial findings.

Preliminary data analysis occurred to make sense of what emerged from the first interviews before conducting the second round. The second interviews lasted between 18-42 minutes. During this interview, I asked follow-up questions from the previous interview to gain deeper insight, asked participants to describe their thought process behind the concept map, and explored at least three preliminary findings based on the
first round of data analysis. From initial data analysis, three questions emerged: (a) How do you decide when to ask another question, move on to action planning, or introduce a new skill or tool?, (b) How do you want to grow in your coaching practice?, and (c) What do you hope students get out of coaching? The second interview provided the opportunity for participants to build on, confirm, or challenge these findings (co-construct meaning together), to gather a more nuanced understanding of their concept map, and to participate in member checking (Merriam, 1998). For example, I presented the initial coaching skill of knowing what to do when from the first round of data analysis and I asked participants how they determined when they ask another question, when they move forward to action, or when they introduce a new skill.

Immediately following the first interview, participants were sent the directions to complete a concept map. Each participant had approximately one month to complete the concept map. Before second interviews, I reviewed the participants’ transcript and developed questions to clarify responses or further understand their story or experiences. I also reviewed each concept map. Examples of concept maps are included in Appendix G. During the second interview, I asked participants to describe their thought process behind their concept map. For example, I asked participants to “Share why you chose to put this concept in the center of your map” or “What do these pictures represent?” I included all interviews and data collected, regardless of attrition rates in the study. For example, one participant completed the first interview and the demographic survey (participants had to complete the survey to be eligible for the study) but did not complete the second interview or the concept map as described in the next section. One interview was conducted in person, while rest were conducted through Zoom, a video
communication tool, or over the phone. Each interview was audio recorded. I personally transcribed five interviews and used a transcription service, Temi for the remainder of the interviews. In less than five minutes, I had the additional 13 interviews transcribed. Because Temi uses advanced speech recognition software, I had to listen and clean up the data for each interview. Second round interviews were also transcribed using Temi.

Coaches who consistently interact with students were able to speak on their experiences of how they help students succeed as people and as students. I questioned what intentional strategies might coaches do to facilitate this growth to support student success, as prior studies suggest in the broader field of coaching (Grant, 2003). During interviews, participants were asked to tell stories about their experience with students during coaching meetings. Asking for stories helped develop a stronger coaching narrative and allowed me to use examples to understand the coaching practice and how coaches perceive what they do in their meetings to support student success.

**Documents as visual narrative approach.** Documents as a visual narrative approach provided insight into the structural components of a coaching meeting. Documents, by way of concept maps were used to generate conversation in the second interviews. Creswell (2013) explained “constructivist researchers often address the ‘processes’ of interaction among individuals” (p. 25). In alignment with social constructivist, I asked participants to explain their thought process in how they approached their coach meeting(s) using a concept map. Using a “visual narrative approach links words and images in a visual narrative analysis in which investigators interpret found images (in archives and other collections) and craft a narrative where the researcher is part of the image-making process” (Given, 2008, p. 540). I asked
participants to create a concept or mind map to visually represent the components, process, and construction of a coaching meeting or coaching over time. I wanted to understand the logic behind the conversation and how coaches facilitated meetings. In second interviews, I asked participants to share what it was like to complete this activity. Serena shared how it was helpful to have a visual representation, even for herself, though she felt like something was missing. Connie explained,

Because there are a lot things that you typically, you do, but you don’t always think about how you do them or why you do them or everything that goes into those decisions. And so actually sitting down and, and mapping it all out, really put into perspective number one, how complicated the process can be.

The mind maps were helpful to get another perspective on how coaches approach their practice. They also served as a way to get participants to think critically about their practice.

The process looked similar to a study which used visual mind maps to understand the relationship between academic and medical professionalism among first-year medical students (Janczukowicz & Rees, 2017). Participants were asked to “Prepare a mind map presenting medical and academic professionalism and indicating connections and relations between these two types of professionalism. You may prepare either a hand-made or a computer based project” (Janczukowicz & Rees, 2017, p. 4). Researchers used a computer program to analyze the data. I reviewed the concept maps to generate questions for the second interview. Additionally, Wheeldon (2011) conducted a study where half of the participants were asked to complete a mind map to understand a reform project and all participants engaged in interviews. Participants who completed the mind map exercise were able to provide greater depth and offered unique insights in their
second interviews when compared to those who did not complete a mind map (Wheeldon, 2011).

Directions were provided to the participants and are available in Appendix F. Directions focused on the connections and relationships of the different decisions and intentional choices coaches make in where they place certain aspects of the coaching process. Documents can help answer the research question in an unobtrusive way and add support for data triangulation to increase trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I consistently referred back to the research questions as data was collected and analyzed.

**Researcher journal.** A researcher journal was used to reflect as I collected data to keep track of themes, speculations, and relationships that emerged (Merriam, 1998). During the interviews, I wrote about potential topics or themes that piqued my interest, or insights that emerged on sticky notes. As I read each transcript, I had the journal next to me to connect ideas or consider other alternatives to what was being said. Maxwell (2012) described memos as an analytic strategy to “facilitate your thinking about relationships in your data and make your ideas and analyses visible and retrievable” (p. 239). Memos in the journal helped me to make meaning of the data as I went, and I was able to revisit these reflections throughout analysis. After broader themes were developed, I revisited sticky notes and journal entries to determine if anything was missing.

**Data Analysis**

The purpose of data analysis is to classify, interpret, and make meaning about the data collected (Flick, 2014). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described data analysis as “the process used to answer your research question(s)” (p. 202). In social constructivism, data
is analyzed, and meaning is co-constructed with participants. As such, participants were asked to clarify and build upon initial findings when possible. Several ways exist to analyze data in narrative studies. For this study, I focused data analysis on the following steps developed by Merriam and Tisdell (2016): (a) coding, (b) sorting and constructing categories, (c) naming the categories, and (d) revisit research questions. I described each of these data analysis strategies, how I used each in the study, and why these strategies were a good fit for this study.

After I transcribed the first two interviews, I read over each transcript once, and then again. During the second time, I began category construction. Because transcribing took longer than expected, I choose to use a transcription service. Once the rest of the interviews were completed, I submitted them to Temi for transcribing. After I listened to each recording and cleaned up the transcription, I printed each transcription. Then, I used open coding for each interview, journaling as I had insights, additional questions, or interesting findings.

Category construction is a shorthand way to organize data and make sense of the information (Merriam, 1998). Category construction is the first part of data analysis and described as:

This process of making notations next to bits of data that strike you as potentially relevant for answering your research questions is also called coding. Since you are just beginning the analysis, be as expansive as you want in identifying any segment of data that might be useful. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 204)

I first used open coding initially to make sense of participants’ stories within the context of my research questions. This was a great fit for this study, as coaching is an emerging field in higher education, and I wanted to be open to what I might find. I had each
transcription printed and coded by hand. A complete list of open codes is available in Appendix H.

Next, I sorted and constructed categories broader themes to make sense of the data. Broader themes from first and second round interviews are listed in Table 2. Maxwell (2012) explained categorizing and coding “makes it much easier for you to develop a general understanding of what is going on, to generate themes and theoretical concepts, and to organize and retrieve your data to test and support these general ideas” (p. 237). I organized codes by exploring reoccurring patterns that emerged to make sense of the different components of coaching practices. I created what are called nodes in Nvivo based on the themes and recoded each transcript in Nvivo to explore patterns further. Nvivo is a computer software system, to help qualitative researchers store, organize, categorize, analyze, and visualize data (QSR International, 2018).

After open and organizational coding, I reviewed the transcripts again to focus on theoretical codes using the main components of self-determination: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Using a theory to understand codes helped to focus data analysis, as well as build upon existing studies related to coaching and self-determination. For example, when a coach shared a story about how they developed a relationship with a student, this was categorized under relatedness. Another example included how a coach develops a skill with a student in a meeting, such as time management. Developing a skill was categorized under the code of competence. Autonomy as a code included helping the student develop their own plan or facilitating the student to make their own decision.
Table 2

*Themes and Categories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Interviews</th>
<th>Second Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Philosophies and Beliefs</td>
<td>Coach Growth and Insight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Process-Individual Meeting</td>
<td>Competence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Process-Over Time</td>
<td>Concept Map</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching Skills</td>
<td>Great Meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compares Coaching to Other Roles</td>
<td>Knowing What to do When</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Outcomes and Roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Meetings Crucial</td>
<td>Prioritizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth as Coach</td>
<td>Relatedness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human-Centered Instead of Student-Centered</td>
<td>Student Understanding Coaching Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes for Coaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion for Role</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspectives on Diversity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations and Rapport Building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying Issues or Challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who Drives the Meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Riessman (2008) encouraged researchers to attempt to keep the stories intact.

While breaking apart coaching as a practice and what is perceived to happen in a coaching meeting can be helpful, I also made it a priority to make greater connections
and not lose the whole picture. Connecting strategies within the data is a way to understand the context of what is happening or what is being said in the narrative interviews (Maxwell, 2012). I made connections and interpreted the data as a whole, rather than solely relying on general themes. As coaches shared stories about their meetings with students and their coaching practice, I not only understood the various elements of the coaching practice, but the coaching practice as a whole.

Next, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) encouraged naming the categories. I named each category according to the codes and data in each category. For example, the theme of Coaching Skills included individual codes such as active listening, powerful questioning, and underlying concerns. Additionally, the theme of Knowing What to do When came up when I was trying to understand how coaches decide whether they ask another question, introduce a new tool or skill, or move on to action planning. After reviewing the data and talking with colleagues, I named this category Skilled Intuition. During this time, I also revisited the research questions often to maintain focus when making sense of the data.

Journaling throughout data collection gave me the ability to revisit initial insights and reflections throughout data analysis. Maxwell (2012) described using this as an analytic strategy to “facilitate your thinking about relationships in your data and make your ideas and analyses visible and retrievable” (p. 239). I was able to extract a narrative to understand the conversational framework of coaches in higher education and make sense of what happens first, second, and third in a meeting. The journal gave me the creative space to write down thoughts, potential themes, and consideration to revisit during analysis.
A protocol was used to organize and manage the various amounts of data. Once each interview was coded (open coding) by hand, I uploaded each into Nvivo. I reviewed first round interview transcriptions again with my research questions in mind and recoded them into the broader themes listed in Table 2. As I coded broader themes, I wrote follow up questions in my researcher journal that I wanted to ask participants in second interviews. Once first round interviews were coded and then organized into the broader themes, I then re-coded each using relatedness, competence, and autonomy from self-determination theory. I conducted second round interviews and coded second interviews with the broader codes, theoretical codes, and new codes as they emerged. All transcriptions were uploaded into Nvivo. To reiterate, I did not analyze the concept maps, but rather used them to generate conversation in the second interview.

**Rigor and Trustworthiness**

Several strategies of rigor are important for qualitative research to increase trustworthiness, or “confidence in the research findings” (S. R. Jones et al., 2014, p. 36). Credibility, confirmability, and transferability helped increase rigor and trustworthiness for this narrative study. Each was described briefly in the following section and how I incorporated each into this narrative study.

**Credibility.** Credibility is increased when researchers seek expert review who can help confirm or challenge findings (S. R. Jones et al., 2014). I asked peers and colleagues who work as a coach in higher education to offer insight into codes and themes as they emerged to increase internal validity (Merriam, 1998). I had fellow coaches review findings and had several informal conversations to discuss findings. Additionally, member checking was conducted by asking participants in the second interviews to
provide feedback on initial data analysis and build upon what was already analyzed (Merriam, 1998). Reflexivity is another way to increase credibility of qualitative research. To account for reflexivity, I kept a journal to reflect on and examine my own biases related to the data collection and prior assumptions (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). A researcher journal was used to reflect as I collected data to keep track of themes, speculations, and relationships that emerged (Merriam, 1998). Janesick (1999) also described the benefits of journal writing which included allowing the writer to be more reflective, more focused, and helped to deepen the knowledge or understanding of the topic. Keeping a journal encouraged deep reflection, helped me challenge my own assumptions, helped to stay focused on answering the research questions, and served as ideas for future research projects.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability refers to a process where the researcher can “tie findings with data and analysis” (S. R. Jones et al., 2014, p. 37). To address confirmability, I offered thick descriptions throughout findings to describe data, interpret data, and help readers understand the context of the narrative and increase trustworthiness (S. R. Jones et al., 2014; Merriam, 1998; Ponterotto, 2006). Thick description was one way to increase confirmability, by using data to support emerging themes and findings (Hays, Wood, Dahl, & Kirk-Jenkins, 2016; Leininger, 1994). I also provided every open code and broader themes for the reader to increase confirmability. Quotes were used to enhance support throughout the findings section. Data triangulation can also increase rigor and trustworthiness (Denzin, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Data was collected in four ways: the initial demographic survey to participate, two semi-structured interviews, documents (e.g., mind maps), and researcher journal.
Transferability. Transferability refers to how “findings are meaningful to the reader” (S. R. Jones et al., 2014, p. 37). While qualitative research is typically not linked to generalizability, findings may be transferred, or helpful in similar contexts or situations (Leininger, 1994; Merriam, 1998). I anticipate coaches who read the findings will better understand how trained, 4-year coaches from the United States perceived their coaching practice and have terminology to build upon. In the discussion, I offer terminology to continue conversation about coaching practices in higher education. My hope is that coaches will use findings to improve their work with students, have common language to understand coaching as in higher education, and build upon what they are currently doing in their coaching practice.

Ethics

As in any research study, ethical considerations are a priority. In this study, informed consent was requested from all participants who met the criteria prior to interviews. I did not place pressure on any coach to participate in any portion of the study. I also made every effort to maintain the anonymity of both the institution and the individuals who participated in the study (S. R. Jones et al., 2014). Pseudonyms were used for each participant when reporting findings and sharing stories.

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam, 1998). During the research process, I was “deciding what is important—what should or should not be attended to when collecting and analyzing data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 216). I kept a researcher journal to be aware of and challenge my own biases. Additionally, in Chapter I, I shared what I believed I would find with each research question. I continued to make efforts to seek understanding and challenge my own
assumptions throughout data collection and analysis. To accomplish this, I discussed my biases with my colleagues familiar with coaching. As suggested by Diener and Crandall (1978), I also included detailed descriptions of data “to let readers draw their own conclusions” (p. 162). Conclusions drawn from analysis was supported by the data to further trustworthiness for readers. Additionally, I was aware of the many services campuses had to offer in supporting professional staff. While interview questions were not sensitive in nature, I was mindful that if any participant became uncomfortable or shared something vulnerable and needed additional support, I would refer the participant to seek services at their institution. No action was taken in this regard.

Limitations

As with any qualitative research study where the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, some bias is inherent (Merriam, 1998). While I made every effort to bring awareness to, and share my biases, it can be challenging to completely control bias given my research is approached through a social constructivist paradigm. I also acknowledge the limited generalizability of findings.

While 18 coaches participated in the first interview, not all coaches participated in the concept map or the second interview. I did try to investigate whether there were any trends or commonalities among those who did not complete the study. However, no major differences emerged between participants. I also reached data saturation because no new themes emerged. Second interviews were useful to think deeper about the interviews from the first round of data collection and build upon initial findings.

Data collection methods have inherent limitations. For example, semi-structured interviews relied heavily on participant engagement and interest in the topic. Interviews
also relied on how experienced and knowledgeable participants are about the research topic. In this study, I addressed this limitation by limiting participation to coaches with coach-specific training and at least one-year experience coaching students. Additionally, I want to acknowledge the challenge of differentiating the type of coach-specific training in findings. Different findings may have merged had I limited the criteria to coaches who have a credential or who have had several years of experience, as opposed to one year. Regardless, I hope findings add greater depth and understanding to the coaching practice and what coaches perceive happens in a coaching meeting in higher education.

Additionally, I excluded coaches working at a 2-year college, and coaches with no coach-specific training. In fact, many coaches expressed interest in participation, but were not be able given the sampling criteria. However, by excluding coaches who have not had coach-specific training, I focused findings on coaches who have similar perspectives of the coaching practice.

**Researcher Positionality**

In this narrative study, I, as the researcher was considered “the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). I was the sole researcher in data collection and analysis. Clandinin and Caine (2008) explained how “narrative inquiries begin with inquiring into researcher’s own stories of experiences” by continuing to reflect throughout the research process (p. 542). In this section, I described my background, my experiences with coaching in higher education, and how I came to the research questions to focus this narrative study. I hope to provide insight for the reader to understand who I am, as well as my role in the research process.
Prior to applying to doctoral programs, I coached hundreds of college students in two different locations. I first worked as an Academic Success Coach and Assistant Program Manager of a coaching program for first-year college students at a large, 4-year public institution. I then moved on to a position as a College Success Coach for a non-profit college access organization, where I worked with first generation, minority, low-income, and immigrant college students. As a coach and eventually in a leadership position, I wanted to learn more about ways to improve the work we were doing. I wanted to personally grow as a coach and help other coaches grow as well. However, limited resources were available for professional development and training, and those that were available were often not affordable.

I was also fascinated about the larger body of knowledge related to the field of life, business, and executive coaching, and how it might influence coaching college students in higher education. I questioned how institutions implemented their coaching programs because I saw people doing it in so many different ways. Some used student development theories, advising models, or coaching models to inform their coaching practice, some followed a curriculum, while others had zero training to guide their practice--basically just winging it. Some programs had one coach on their college campus, while others had a large staff of coaches working with specific student populations. Some coaching programs worked with a student once and called it coaching, while others met with students’ multiple times throughout a year, or their entire college journey. I wanted to know what works best. And for who? In what contexts?

I soon realized that training, and what coaches actually do in their meetings, might be important to fully understand the practices coaches engage in on a national
scale. In my first experience as an academic success coach, I attended a week-long training solely focused on a coaching framework and how to coach students to develop holistically and support the student to enroll the following fall semester. I learned more about the many barriers a student can face, and how to connect students to opportunities and resources using a coaching framework. I received feedback on how to grow as a coach, on how to build better relationships, help students identify and reach their goals, and help them grow and develop as students and as people. At the non-profit organization as a college success coach, I received no coaching framework to follow and no coach-specific training. I looked for resources related to college and academic success coaching to develop something we could all use, but I found limited information. I advocated for us to purchase a book from one of the top coaching models in the greater coaching industry so we could have a common framework to support (and coach) our students.

Throughout my time as a coach, I researched multiple websites to try and understand more about the emerging area of coaching in higher education. Institutions claimed the service was increasing retention and graduation rates, but I found little empirical evidence to support these claims. I wondered how these numbers were being used and wanted to learn more about this support service and how coaching fit in to the greater field of higher education. I wondered if other support services on campus were using coaching strategies and techniques with their students, or if coaching was particularly unique in increasing retention for students and overall student success.

To fully understand success coaching practices and their role on college campuses, I believe it is necessary to explore what coaches perceive they do in their meetings with students. If this is indeed a unique role and an emerging profession, we
need to take a deeper look into what success coaches perceive they are doing in their meetings with students, particularly from programs who have proven success. I hope the findings from this narrative study can help clarify what coaches perceive they are doing in their meetings with students, build this emerging profession, and help to support the work that is already being done in this area by improving coaches and ultimately the student experience.

My interest in the topic of success coaching was also personal. When I started working as an academic success coach at the same institution I graduated from, I was dumbfounded. I had no idea the opportunities and programs that were available to me on campus as an undergraduate student. I either did not know they existed or did not take advantage of them for one reason or another. I identify with what I have heard many in higher education call the murky middle. I was pretty good in school, so I never went to office hours or tutoring. And if I did struggle, I just struggled alone. I was not bad at anything, but I also was not great. I did not stand out as a student who needed extra support, but I also did not stand out as a leader. Now, I identify with being a leader, but I did not realize my potential until after I graduated from college. Based on these personal experiences and coaching hundreds of students, I believe we can help more students see their potential in themselves while they are in college.

I was also a first-generation college student. But I did not know that what I was feeling and what I was experiencing was normal. I also did not have this identity in college--I had never heard the term before. I had no idea what I was doing, and my parents did not either. We took out many loans without really understanding what that meant. My parents were also going through a divorce, so they told me we could figure
out the student loan situation later. I felt awkward and out of place most of the time. When I realized my initial major was not for me, I contacted an academic advisor in another department who told me just to get a degree in something else because I did not have enough of the pre-requisites--whatever those were. I say all this acknowledging the fact that I am still in an incredible position. I am getting my doctorate degree! But I also wonder how many murky middle students are out there who graduate (or leave before graduation) because they are just going through the motions; going to class, hanging out, doing enough to get by, and graduating. I know college has so much more to offer--especially to those of us who have no idea what they are doing with their careers or in life.

I came to a doctoral program so I could learn how to conduct research studies and investigate coaching in higher education. I have many more questions than I have answers. I feel it is necessary to find out more about coaching and empirically investigate the topic given the limited literature that currently exists. Additionally, the combination of dwindling resources in higher education and increasing pressure to support students from all backgrounds to graduate, I believe it is crucial that we understand coaching in greater detail. While I have seen the potential power coaching can have in higher education, we are far from understanding it. I also realize that the benefits might be dependent on how we coach and what we do in our meetings. This study aims to better understand coaching practices, particularly in the context of coaching meetings. It is crucial that we understand and explore success coaching as it continues to grow in the field of higher education.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore how trained coaches from 4-year institutions perceive their coaching practice with students in higher education, particularly in the context of their meetings. Findings revealed coaches perceived a variety of factors influenced their practice including beliefs, skills, intentionality in meetings, their willingness to continually learn, and their role on campus. I begin the chapter sharing the deeply held beliefs of coaches, as this permeates every aspect of their coaching practice. Next, I share coaching skills that are present throughout meetings. Then, I explain how coaches facilitate individual meetings. Next, I describe how coaching the student progresses over time. I then share how participants experience training, as well as development on their own. Finally, I end with explaining the role of a coach in higher education. After the presentation of major themes, I provide a discussion into what these findings mean for this emerging profession.

The interview questions prompted participants to share stories and experiences to understand what happens in a coaching meeting, why coaches do what they do, and how they do it. Several themes emerged in the sharing of narratives and stories about the participants’ coaching practices. Prior to discussing findings, I provide a brief description of the participants as a group. Findings are then organized into six major themes: (a) Coaching Beliefs; (b) Coaching Skills; (c) Coaching Meetings in Higher Education; (d) Coaching Progression Over Time; (e) Training, Growth, and Development as a Coach;
and (f) Coaching Role in Higher Education. Each theme was described in detail to offer the reader insight into the practices of trained, four-year coaches in higher education.

**Participant Description**

Coaches came from a variety of experiences and backgrounds. Table 3 provides a summary of demographics to provide context, as participants’ stories were connected to their experiences. The coaches who participated in this study had strong beliefs, were thoughtful in their responses, and cared deeply about this work. In the findings section, I share their experiences, perceptions, and stories.

The coaches who participated in this study did not see their coach role as a job. Coaches found their work rewarding and described their role as a dream job, a mission, a calling, and a passion. While I recognized coaches who participated in this study may not be representative of the coaches across the United States, the way they talked about their role was with passion, excitement, and with positive energy. They were enthusiastic to share stories of student successes. Michelle shared,

> And so as a coach I find the work really rewarding and I love that it’s something different every day. And it keeps me on my toes and it, I feel like it really helps me to lead my best life. Because the things that I’m talking about with students are things that I need to be doing every day myself. And so it’s like a constant reminder of how to be an effective human.

Reciprocity was present in the narratives when coaches talked about their interactions with students. Participants believed the work they were doing was helping students grow and develop, but they also felt fortunate to be able to coach because of the benefits they personally experienced.
Table 3

*Participant Overview*

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Carlos shared a story regarding his personal experience in college where he struggled academically, earning below a 2.0 GPA his first semester. He explained,

And what the catalyst was to kind of get me to come back is I had a couple of people through work. They were, they just so happened to be the Dean of student and an assistant in that office. They sat down with me and just asked me what the heck was going on, talked about the opportunity that I had here and kind of encouraged me to just give it one more shot cause I saw a lot of potential in me.

Carlos was able to bounce back because of the support he had on campus. This helped him connect with students because he knew what it was like to be in a similar experience. Carlos, along with others were personally connected to this work and could see themselves in their students. The work was described as exciting and they loved watching people grow and develop over time.

Participants were creative and resourceful, just as they instill in their students. Participants often talked about how they would be the catch all when staff did not know what to do with a student. Staff often referred “challenging students” to coaches because they were not sure where else to send students. Challenging students included those who have several concerns or students who were in a situation unfamiliar to most staff.

Coaching Beliefs

In this section I explore findings related to the beliefs coaches in higher education have about their work and assumptions they make about their students. These beliefs guide how participants approached their coaching practice. My main finding is that these beliefs permeate every interaction between a coach and a student. Coaches, regardless of training, background, or experience have similar beliefs that underly their practice. Participants talked about these beliefs with conviction and without prompting. I developed six subthemes based on these beliefs, which include human-centered, students’
agenda and goal, to meet students where they are, students are capable, the student is the expert, and learning is a process. While themes are separated so that I may describe them, they are part of a holistic philosophy, or approach to coaching.

**Human-Centered**

Coaches described their role as focusing on the whole person rather than the student. While I anticipated participants would describe their practice as holistic given one of the criteria was that they support overall student success, the language they used was surprising. No questions were asked to develop these responses, however, 13/18 participants described how important it was that coaching was about more than helping students achieve a degree--the coaching experience was about their life as a human. Coaches used words like human, humanness, and humanity. Kara asked questions like, “How are you doing as a human?” Kara hoped by asking this question, she would get a more meaningful answer, along with showing the student she cared about the them as a person first. Connie shared “Every touch point that you have with a student should be helping them to grow into a better version of themselves, a better student.” From the participants’ perspectives, the skills developed in one meeting were translated and connected to their long-term goals. Coaches described this logic: as students became a better version of themselves as humans, they would ultimately be better humans. By improving time management, building confidence, or asking for help as humans, they were able to transfer these skills to their current situation as a student.

Many coaches shared this belief in how they talked about supporting the student as a human first. For example, Mallory shared her personal philosophy when stating “I want to be in my students’ corner no matter what, whether that is here at (this institution)
or elsewhere.” No matter what, Mallory was alongside with the student, even if that meant the student was enrolling at another institution. Tucker shared “I want them to know that I care about them as a person more than I care about how they do in school.” Tucker wanted his students to know that they were a priority when they were in his office. While school was considered a priority, school was not the most important priority in the office, it was the person. Gina explained,

> I do believe that if you are okay, if you are healthy as a human being, then the grades are going to come. Then the being able to study is going to come then, then all this other stuff is going to come, but we got to take care of you first.

In order for the student to make progress, basic human needs must be met. Participants wanted every student to know they were more than just a student, that they valued their life as a human, and their experience in coaching was about more than just college. This speaks to the transferability of coaching within and beyond college. Coaches assumed students would ultimately be better students, by valuing them as humans.

**Students’ Agenda, Students’ Goal, Not the Coach**

Coaches interviewed described how the student needs to lead the meeting and choose the topic or agenda. For example, when I asked a clarifying question about who picks the topic, Randy responded with “No, no, no, they are picking it.” Randy was very clear and wanted to make sure that I understood who was picking the topic. Jenny shared “It’s up to the student to choose the topic because this is their coaching. So it’s about them and that’s part of the relationship and the partnership.” Jenny emphasized their coaching because she believed strongly in the autonomy of the student. Participants perceived students would be more invested and motivated if they choose their own goals and what to discuss in meetings. Having the student pick the topic or agenda, as opposed
to the coach is in alignment with the coaching beliefs in the broader field (Salter, 2015; Thomson, 2012; van Nieuwerburgh, & Tong, 2013).

Grace shared a story about a student who came in apologizing because they did not follow through on what they had committed to in a prior meeting. Grace explained her response, “I will say, why are you apologizing? Or why are you looking that way?” And the student responded, “Well because I said I was going to do it, but I didn’t do it.” The coach responded with,

This is about you. And it’s about, and you will find time. If it’s important to you, you will find time to do it. So there’s no apologizing here. This is not an assignment. This is not about me at all.

Grace did this as a way to build up confidence and ownership within the student. While the participants wanted to see their students grow and develop both in meetings and in between meetings, the ownership was placed on the student, not the coach. Connie highlighted this when she described, “They have to be the driver of their education. So I can coach them all they want to, but if they don’t want to play ball, they’re not going to play ball.” Connie made it clear the student has to show up and be open to coaching, or they would likely stifle progress. From choosing the topic to scheduling another meeting, students were encouraged to have agency and autonomy throughout the process. Participants not only believed coaching was about the student, but they consistently reminded students about these beliefs in their meetings. While the student picked the topic, the coach facilitated the process. More on the intentionality behind the conversation will be shared in a later section.

Participants are also mindful of the societal pressures and how their role at the institution may play a factor in how the students perceive coaching. When students
identified goals, Mallory shared “We have to do more to help them identify their goals. And we have to do more in terms of powerful questions to identify goals that they have secretly instead of the goals that we want to hear.” Mallory underscored how coaching is more than just identifying goals and powerful questions. She stressed the importance of coaches to dig deeper and be aware of the dynamics at play, whether societal, institutional, or otherwise, influence the interactions between the student and a coach.

Michelle provided one example when a students’ parents wanted them to major in something because it was highly revered, but the student had little interest in the subject. Societal pressures are likely to come up in a coaching meeting, but it is the role of the coach to be mindful of these factors as they interact with students. They incorporate mindfulness in coaching by asking questions to provoke thought, observing students as they talk about their interests and goals, and learning about the student experiences.

**Meet the Student Where They Are**

The phrase “meeting the student where they are” came up several times during interviews. In fact, Gina, Michelle, Tucker, Lauren, Carlos, Jenny, Grace, and Lindsey used this phrase. Participants talked about being ready for anything each meeting, even if they already had a strong relationship with the student. Grace described,

> A student can enter your office, you have no idea what they are thinking, what they might need, what they might be experiencing at that time. And that too, is what is important about meeting the student about where he or she is.

The ‘ready for anything’ mentality was present because so much can change since the coach and student last met. For example, in a previous meeting, a student may have presented with wanting to better manage their time. In the next meeting, the student may need more support and a referral to the counseling center. Being ‘ready for anything’ was
seen as both a challenge, as well as an exciting part of the coaching practice. This also meant that a student could simply have questions and no interest in engaging in the coaching process. Michelle explained “And I think those are effective meetings, too. It’s really about what the student needs and not about my agenda and where I hope to get them to go.” This quote highlights an example of meeting a student where they were at, even if they are not interested in participating in coaching.

Meeting a student where they are also highlights the importance of the relationship and assessing from the students’ perspective. Students are not always forthcoming or even self-aware about their opportunities for growth and development. By asking questions, the coach is able to get a sense of what is happening, what challenges the student might be experiencing, and also helping the student reflect on their own life. Meeting a student where they are provides opportunity for individualization regardless of the students’ background, identity, goals, or experience. This belief also aligned with the previous belief that the student has autonomy to choose to participate in coaching.

The Student is Capable

Participants believed and trusted in the capability of their students. While this belief was present throughout interviews, they varied in how much they trusted students based on previous academic performance. For example, two coaches Gina and Serena relied on a more prescriptive approach at first because they were under the impression students on academic probation may need a bit more direction at the beginning of their time working together. More often than not, the participants relied on the students for answers. Lauren explained “I try to let it be student led as much as I can because really, they know the answers.” Jordan described,
And it really just focuses on, again, the student being the expert, the student being, you know, creative and resourceful. And having what they need. And they don’t need to be fixed. And I really try to keep that as my fundamental coaching belief. To make sure that it’s really student centered. And again, that, you know, I’m looking to the student as an expert on themselves. You know, I’m not here to fix you. I’m just here to help you to draw out what you are already capable of doing.

This deeply held belief pushes coaches to help students come up with answers themselves instead of telling them what to do, when, and how to do it. Participants trusted students were creative and resourceful, similar to coaching in the broader field (Kimsey-House et al., 2011). Amanda explained this similarly when explaining her role. She shared,

My role is to see, well like help them see that they are capable of doing these things. It might take time, and more effort than they realized, or more effort than they’ve ever had to do in their life. But to encourage them to keep working at it, keep working hard, because they will ultimately, you know, find their personal success.

Part of believing in students is helping them to recognize what they are capable of.

Again, this was not only a belief that coaches held, but was also put into practice.

Participants put this belief that students are capable into practice in four ways: (a) Explicitly telling the student that they are capable of figuring this out; (b) Asking questions, which encouraged reflection; (c) Helping students take small steps toward their goals so they could build up the confidence and skills needed to reach more challenging ones; and (d) Intentionally holding back on giving the answers that the coach knows they can likely figure out with more thought. This not only builds trust within the coach-student relationship, but it also builds up the student trusting themselves. Participants really believed that the student could reach their goals, no matter how big or challenging.

Coaches also acknowledged that students could get stuck. But they did not believe that they, as their coach, had everything the student needed to be successful. As
mentioned earlier, however, Serena approached her work a little different with students who were in a challenging situation. While she did trust her students, she also believed she needed to be more directive because students had one semester to do well, or they were suspended for two years. This put more pressure on her, as the coach to provide tangible skills and tools. She felt pressured to provide more tools and strategies up front, so later in the coaching process she could be less directive. While the implementation varied, participants consistently put the ownership back on the student, while also meeting students where they are at. When a student gets stuck, participants have many tools and strategies they can share to help a student move forward. Working together over time, participants believed coaching could help students see that they are capable of much more than they realize.

**Student is the Expert**

Participants repeatedly stated that the student was the expert of their life. This was similar to the belief that the student was capable. However, “student as the expert” referred specifically to the student knowing oneself and making their own decisions about what they should do next, while “student as capable” referred to the belief in that student—that they were fully capable of reaching their goals or making change. Some participants shared this phrase explicitly, it was implied in others. Rachel shared, “I’m not here to tell them what to do or how to do it. I’m there to ask them questions so that they can unlock those answers themselves.” Rachel further explained the coach could not give a student a prescription and say this was what you need to do. She stated how this would be “problematic” and “That’s you putting your expectations on them.” Carlos explicitly stated that “the student is the expert in their lives.” Again, this supported the
prior belief in their students’ capabilities and aligned with the beliefs of the broader coaching field (K. Allen, 2016). Participants believed this was crucial to the relationship because it facilitated trust--when coaches trusted students to make their own decisions, students felt more empowered and comfortable to share their goals and challenges.

Participants believed that students should pick their goals and the focus, topic, or agenda for each meeting. At the same time, coaches believed they acted as facilitators of the process. For example, Amanda described her role as a co-pilot. She shared,

> And so you are there just to support them. If, you know, they have questions, or helping them kind of navigate their thought process. But ultimately, the student is the pilot and they are driving the plane. And they are making the complete decisions. And they have ultimately the say so of how they are going to live their life. So, kind of like the co-pilot of their journey.

While participants facilitate the coaching process, the student decided where to go and how to go about it. Coaches helped students stay focused on their agenda and help the student make informed decisions about how to move forward. More on how coaches facilitate this process in a later theme.

**Learning as a Process**

Learning as a process meant gaining new insight, learning and implementing a new skill, how to do something in a new or different way, developing a habit, or developing greater self-awareness. Learning as a process aligns with the definition of coaching in the broader field, as Goldsmith et al. (2000) described coach as learning, growth and expansion beyond the clients’ belief. Insight, implementation, habits, and becoming self-aware takes time and is a process. Participants embodied learning as a process, or a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). They believed to their core that their students could improve. They believed their students were capable and able to develop
and grow over time, and they trusted the coaching process would help students develop and grow. Participants believed students were malleable, which can be influential in the retention and success of students (Acee & Weinstein, 2010; Han et al., 2017; van Nieuwerburgh & Tong, 2013).

The belief of meeting a student where they are, as described earlier in this section, directly connects to the belief that learning is a process. Some students are ready to change and looking for support to do so. Other students have to start small and work towards bigger goals over time. Michelle explained “And for many of them, goals aren’t even really a concept. It’s just what’s expected. And so having their own personal thing that they’re working towards is an entirely new idea.” While some students have clear goals in what areas they want to grow, others have a hard time identifying what it is that they want to work on. Coaching was seen as a way to help students think and reflect on their own goals and motivations, instead of what other people want them to do. Regardless, by meeting a student where they are at in the learning process, the coach can help facilitate forward movement. Sara explained “You’re always just a work in progress and coaching is getting you those first few like awareness of like, what you can do and unlocking each step of potential.” Sara explained that coaching can help students gain more self-awareness, which helps build confidence. By taking small, self-directed steps towards goals, coaches believed they could facilitate learning and growth among students. While coaches believed that learning is a process, they also encouraged the growth mindset because the coaching process gives students the time to try things out, mess up, learn, reflect, and try things out again. The learning that happens in coaching takes intentionality and time.
Learning as a Process for Coaches

Participants also believed they were continuing to grow as a coach. They personally had a growth mindset and parallel development happened as the coach and the student grew and changed alongside each other. Tanya shared,

We all have areas of development. I operate from a growth mindset that you can achieve. There are things that you can do to help your success. Learning is not always easy. It’s difficult. But that’s part of the process and that we can improve in different areas. So that’s kind of my philosophy.

Tanya meant that her growth as a coach, along with the growth of other coaches did not stop after coach-specific training. I got the sense participants believed the way they approached their coaching practice was different than other professionals on campus. Interestingly, coaching in higher education has yet to be professionalized, leaving coaches who want to develop, on their own to do so. During second interviews, I asked participants how they were hoping to grow in their coaching practice. Participants wanted to learn how to ask better questions, better manage time in meetings, how to be more present in meetings, how to hold students accountable, more tools they could implement, incorporate different models or frameworks among other ways. Participants craved more development so they could be a better coach and ultimately better support students.

Summary of Theme One: Coaching Beliefs

Participants had many strong beliefs about their coaching practice, even though no questions asked about these beliefs. Participants were human-centered and had a deep passion and love for their role. They believe setting the agenda or goal should be placed on the student and not the coach, while the coach acts as a facilitator. Coaches believe they need to meet the student where they are at, and that the student is capable and the
expert of their life. Learning is a process—not only for themselves, but for their students. Not only did coaches speak strongly, and with conviction about these beliefs, but they also worked to put these beliefs into practice. These beliefs were embedded in their meetings, sometimes using different strategies or explicitly putting these beliefs into practice. In the next section, coaching skills and strategies are shared.

**Coaching Skills**

The second major theme for this study is related to coaching skills. In this section, I share skills that participants explicitly share and name. I also share skills that emerged in the narratives of participant stories but were not explicitly named. For example, some coaches were not able to explicitly name coaching skills, but they shared examples of these skills when sharing student stories. I anticipate some of this is related to the type or length of coach training, or perhaps the professional development of the coach. While each participated in some training focused on coaching, many of these coaches talked about reading research and books on their own, connecting with colleagues to discuss their coaching practice, and watching webinars to grow in addition to training.

Coaching skills are important to the study because they are used throughout every coaching meeting. My main finding is that skills help the student gain insight and self-awareness, create opportunities for learning moments, and help student move forward. These skills help students feel valued as humans, and at the same time, helps them become increasingly autonomous over time. Coaching presence refers to how coaches show up in their coaching practice. These skills include active listening, authenticity, being comfortable with the uncomfortable, and non-judgment. Building relationships, active listening, reflection and open-ended questions are similar to the broader field of
coaching (D. T. Hall et al., 1999). Broader coaching skills that are used in every coaching meeting include powerful questions to elicit insight and reflection, underlying concerns, skilled intuition, macro and micro level thinking, and building students up. I conclude this theme by sharing how participants engage in relationship and rapport building, as this is foundational to the coaching practice in higher education (Baron & Morin, 2009; Marks, 2015).

**Coaching Presence**

In this section, I describe coaching skills my participants thought important to display in every meeting. Coaching presence is described in the competencies of a coach by the International Coach Federation as the “ability to be fully conscious and create spontaneous relationship with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible and confident” (ICF, 2020b, para. 7). In this study, coaching presence in higher education came up as the ability to be fully present and engaged with a student—in active listening, showing up authentically, being comfortable with the uncomfortable, and being non-judgmental. van Nieuwerburgh (2017) referred to some of these skills as the coaching way of being. A brief description of each of these skills will be offered

**Active listening.** Active listening was described by participants as one skill applied in the coaching process and relationship. Fifteen out of the 18 participants stated active listening as a skill they used. Participants shared how much of a priority it was to listen more as a coach, instead of doing the talking. Tucker mentioned the importance of the 80/20 rule. This rule referred to students talking 80% of the time, while the coach talks 20% of the time. The 80/20 guideline can be helpful for coaches to self-monitor how much they are talking. Listening was a core skill to meet a student where they are,
help a student feel valued and heard, and take them through the coaching process. Tucker believed there was a relationship between how much a coach talked in their meeting and how effective their coaching was.

For participants, active listening meant really hearing what the student is saying. This phrase refers to a coach’s ability to hear what is being said, how it is being said, and what is not being said. Lauren explained how “it’s like reading between the lines concept. Whereas what you hear students saying, what they’re actually trying to say are not the same thing.” Coaches would describe asking for clarification or summarizing to make sure the coach understands what is being said or unsaid. This meant coaches would often point out discrepancies or inconsistencies. Some participants also described how there are different levels of listening, which they learned about during their training program. Though specific details were not shared, understanding the different levels of listening helped coaches to be more aware of how they were, and sometimes were not listening to the best of their ability. The main purpose for active listening was to show the student that the coach was present.

**Authenticity.** Participants must show up as their full, authentic self. Amanda explained, “And I think for rapport building, the most important aspect for any student, I’m always authentic. Meaning, like, who I am is who you are going to get.” Amanda, along with other participants, were real, open about who they were. Amanda went on to say, “I am the most unprofessional professional.” This was not stated to minimize her role, but as a way to connect with the student in a real way. Tucker also felt strongly about what feels authentic to him when introducing new tools, techniques, or strategies to students. “No student wants to sit in your office and do a bunch of worksheets. It’s just
not going to happen. It’s not genuine. It’s not authentic.” While doing a bunch of worksheets did not feel authentic to Tucker, this may not have been the case for other coaches. The purpose of his comment was for coaches to reflect on what does feel natural and authentic to them.

The skill of being real and authentic came up in the way coaches challenge students. For example, Tucker shared a story about a student who was appearing to be a bit non-committal to the next steps that they identified together. He explained,

And if they give me kind of a, ohhh I don’t know. Then it’s like, ok. I can tell you are not completely invested in this. Which is ok. . . . Is this something that you are going to do? If it’s not, you are not going to hurt my feelings.

Tucker was able to be real and authentic while, at the same time put the ownership back onto the student. This also gave Tucker permission to challenge the student when they were not completely invested. Jenny further explained, “But they, they pick up on when we’re being authentic or not and if they think they’re just going to be just another person who doesn’t really care or connect, then they’re not going to open up.” The belief was that a coach could only help a student to a certain extent if they were not being authentic with their students. Participants seemed to really enjoy being authentic in their role. By showing up as authentic, they created space for students to show up as their authentic selves.

**Being comfortable with the uncomfortable.** Participants shared how getting uncomfortable was part of the process for both the coach and the student. Sometimes getting to this discomfort takes time, trust, and a lot of questions to get a student to open up and be vulnerable. At the same time, participants shared how coaches were to model this during meetings. Michelle shared “A good coach is willing to be vulnerable and
willing to sit with the uncomfortableness.” This was another way Michelle was authentic in her meetings with students and ok with some discomfort. Michelle modeled for her students that being uncomfortable might be awkward, but it is also necessary in the learning process. Other coaches talked the use silence. When a coach asked a powerful question to elicit insight, the student would need several seconds or longer to process the question and engage in a thoughtful response. Coaches have to get comfortable with silence and allow space for the aha moment(s) to occur. Participants also modeled this vulnerability by being willing to try new strategies or tools with a student. For example, a coach may learn or create a new tool they believe could help students gain insight or perspective. The coach may ask the student if they would be willing to try a new tool without knowing if it will work for the student. This again puts ownership on the student, and models trying new things and feeling comfortable even if the tool or strategy is not as effective as they hoped.

**Non-judgmental.** Kara, Sara, Grace, and Connie talked about the importance of being non-judgmental. No commonalities, such as training or years of experience, were found among participants as to why they each found this to be an important skill for coaches. However, Kara, Sara, and Grace all had training approved through the ICF. Other participants who had training approved through ICF did not mention non-judgment as an important skill. However, just because the coach did not mention non-judgment as a skill does not mean they do not believe it is important. Being non-judgmental was the reason it was so important to get to know a student at the beginning of working together. Participants believed they could not know where a student was at, where they want to go, or how to approach the meeting until they got to know the student. Kara explained,
I feel like, no matter what, that I have to implement all of the time is the, like, kind of blanket no judgment policy and this is an open and safe space. That no matter what to me is probably the most important of all.

This statement was shared to encourage honest conversations. If a student knows the coach will not judge them, they are more likely to share struggles and challenges, and even show up to meetings if they do not follow through on their next steps. Participants did their best to not make assumptions or judge a student for what they were, or were not doing, or for the grades they were earning on homework and tests. By approaching each student from a non-judgmental stance, it encouraged open communication. The belief was coaching would not be as beneficial for the student, and perhaps even a waste of time if open communication was missing.

**Skills Used in Every Meeting**

Coaching skills used in every meeting related to powerful questions for reflection, addressing underlying concerns, and skilled intuition. The purpose of reflection in meetings was to increase self-awareness, understand what is happening with the student, and to help the student gain insight. Participants used powerful questions, as well as skills already mentioned to get at the underlying concern or issue with the student. Participants also talked about the skill of knowing what to do when and using their intuition. I call this skilled intuition. Factors that make up skilled intuition include knowing your student, readiness to move forward, student needs more support, knowing your toolbox, observations, exploring possibilities, and diving deeper. Each of these is described further in this section.

**Powerful questions to elicit insight and reflection.** Every participant shared the use of questions in a coaching meeting. Close-ended questions were used less frequently,
when the coach was clarifying something with a student. Different types of questions mentioned throughout interviews included open-ended questions, powerful questions, reflective questions, analytical questions, creative questions, practical questions, miracle questions, current state questions, ideal state questions, challenging questions, and scaling questions. I did not ask participants to provide details to explain the different types of questions. Tucker offered a definition as follows:

A powerful question is an open-ended question. It is a question that is going to make your students think. As long as you are not asking a yes or no question, which those are valid at points. But you are asking a question that is meaningful.

Regardless of what type of question the coach is asking, questions are intended to be meaningful, purposeful, and to elicit reflection. Coaches asked questions to encourage the student to think and reflect and assess where the student is at. Randy shared “I think a good coach is someone who is able to keep a student on track, but also allow them to come to their own conclusions by sort of thinking and reflecting critically.” Questions are asked as a way to encourage the student to think and draw out answers from the student, instead of telling them what to do. Questions also help students to gain self-awareness and think for themselves. They are used to help students think through decisions, choose an agenda, and figure out what they want to do moving forward. Asking questions is an example of coaches trusting the student as the expert and trusting they have the capability to think and make their own decisions. Asking questions with the purpose of generating thought and reflection is an example of self-determination in action: trusting the student is the expert is an example of relatedness, encouraging the student to make their own decisions is an example of autonomy, and believing that the student has the capability to do so, is an example of building competence (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002).
Coaches used these questions to elicit what they described as an aha moment or light bulb moment. Mallory shared a story during our interview that highlighted this type of aha moment students can experience during coaching.

I have a student that I coach and we had this incredible session where his goal was to be better about getting things done early because he works quite a bit. He’s busy all the time… he travels quite a bit, so he’s almost never in class. Which of course leads to not being successful, but he is extremely capable, extremely intelligent. And I asked him a series of questions regarding getting his stuff done early. You know, what keeps you from doing that? What are you willing to sacrifice to get things done sooner? Why is it important to you to get these things done early? What does that even look like on your most perfect day? What does that look like? And he gave me these answers, but I have his transcript in front of me. And when I asked him why it was so important to him, he says, well, because I’m a man of my word. I always live by my word. And then I want to be this, this, and this for my family. And I said to him, I hear what you’re saying and I believe you. But we’re missing something because when I’m staring at your transcript and when I’m listening to what you say, there is a major disconnect. So how much of a man of your word are you if there is a disconnect between what I can see here, which is not the full story of your life, and what you’re telling me. And it was just this mind blowing question for him because he’s always considered himself a man of his word. And so I challenged him on it. It was like he had this epiphany.

In this story, Mallory had a strong relationship with the student and observed trends over time that the student was not able to see in themselves. Instead of explicitly telling the student what to do, or what to think, Mallory asked several types of questions to help the student realize the discrepancies on his own. Mallory could challenge the student to think deeper and be reflective about what was happening because of this strong relationship.

While participants were clear that the aha or the light bulb moment was not likely to happen every meeting, it was one of their favorite parts of the coaching process.

Participants loved seeing their student gain new insight because of a question or questions they asked.
In addition to using questions, participants also summarized as a way to reflect what the student said to help them gain insight. Sara shared how she reflects back what she hears to help the student realize the disconnect between what they are saying and what they are doing. Sara explained “But also just knowing like what change talk is and like being able to reflect that back and you know, the incongruence of language throughout a meeting, whatever it might be.” Sara picked up on subtle aspects of the conversation, which helped her see what was disconnected. Reflection and summarizing were used to address inconsistencies, provided space to gain insights, and challenged students to think on their own. Clearly, reflection is an important part of the coaching process and aligns with prior coaching research conducted in the college setting (McClellan & Moser, 2011; Richman et al., 2014; C. Robinson & Gahagan, 2010; Santoro & Keenan, 2015; Sepulveda, 2017; Strange, 2015).

**Underlying concerns.** Participants found often that as they worked with students, there was usually more happening than what was being said. Groh (2016) described this as getting to and understanding the underlying problem. Participants described this in a variety of ways such as getting to the heart of the matter, getting to the root of the problem, underlying issues, or underlying challenges, or describing the student as an iceberg. This iceberg analogy indicated that often, there is much more going on than what we can see, or what is being said. This skill also highlighted the purpose of active listening. While the student may be presenting with wanting to grow in time management, the underlying concern was often something more. Tucker explained, “If I have a student doing poorly across all their classes, usually that’s an indication that there is something else going on in their world, besides just doing poorly in their classes.”
When a student was consistently performing poorly, this served as an indicator to go deeper. Questions helped the coach dive deeper and explore what was really happening for the student. In this scenario, the coach used his knowledge about the students’ classes as a flag, indicating he needed to ask more questions to understand the underlying concern so they could move forward.

Time and trust were two factors that helped the coach get a better sense of the underlying concerns. Michelle shared,

And being able to pull that out and get to the root of what is causing them to have these ineffective habits. And sometimes it can be very challenging. It takes a while to build the rapport to the point where you can get the student there and really dig deep enough to get at the issues. Sometimes I feel like the first few sessions are kind of dealing with the symptoms rather than the problem. And then once we can get to the underlying problem, that’s really where the magic happens and the transformative change occurs.

In this scenario, addressing symptoms could be helpful, but would not necessarily lead to the lasting change they are looking for. Lasting change was key to the coaching process. Coaches did not want a simple fix to improve a habit for the upcoming week but wanted students to create lasting change they could implement in their own lives, outside of coaching. Time was also needed for both parties to feel comfortable talking about vulnerable topics or challenges. Because of this finding and the time it takes to engage in the learning process, I imagine a single coaching meeting would be less effective than several over a semester. As coaches developed stronger relationships, they could go deeper, ask more challenging questions, and see transformation happen.

Coaches acknowledged the need to refer to counseling in some circumstances, but there were underlying concerns that were able to be addressed in a coaching relationship.
For example, Connie shared a story about a student who was referred to coaching because of class attendance. She shared,

I was like, you know what’s going on? And, and you can tell that it was a touchpoint. Okay. And that was, he did get a little bit defensive and he was like, you know, he goes, I’m a nontraditional student, I work full time. He goes, I commute in from an hour and 15 minutes out. He said, there are weeks that I have to choose between buying food and buying gas to go to classes. And that was the root cause.

After Connie built the relationship, and asked a few questions, the student was willing to open up. While it can take some students several meetings to open up about these underlying concerns, Connie and the student were able to make it happen during the first meeting. She was able to get to the root concern without referring to counseling and support the student to get access to a food pantry on campus. While the student was referred because of class attendance, there was much more going on with the student she was able to uncover.

**Skilled intuition.** Skilled intuition emerged as a skill which appeared to be unique to the context of higher education. Participants expressed how they leaned heavily on intuition and their prior experience working with students. For example, Tucker shared “I think for me, there’s a little, I think I feel like I have a little bit intuition when it comes to this.” After initial data analysis of the first interviews, I kept asking myself what was happening in the brain of a coach, during a coaching meeting. For example, how do they know what to do when? Or when to ask another question instead of pulling out a tool to introduce to a student? Or how to keep the conversation moving forward? I wanted to understand why coaches do what they do and when coaches do what they do. Initial interviews hinted at what was happening, but I needed to dive deeper. Initial data analysis revealed coaches would check in with themselves and ask questions like: Am I
really listening to the student? Or what else might be happening here? When discussing her concept map, Jenny described how it would depend on how the student presents. She would ask herself, “If this, then what?” While both participants discussed intuition, they, along with other participants shared stories to help make sense of what was happening. Second interviews helped clarify factors a coach takes into account to strengthen this intuition, since they have the opportunity to take the coaching conversation in a multitude of ways. These factors include knowing your student, readiness to move forward, student needs more support, knowing your toolbox, exploring possibilities, and diving deeper.

**Knowing your student.** Not surprisingly, one of the most important factors of skilled intuition is knowing your student. Randy shared,

I think a lot of it is intuition and sort of understanding the nature of the relationship that you have with the, with the students that you’re working with. For example, if I’m working with a student who I’m less familiar with, I’m going to lean on asking maybe more questions, then immediately jumping into a plan because I don’t want them to think that I’m like trying to commandeer the session or trying to push them out the door. Whereas like a student that I’ve met with routinely and knows our structure and knows me, I might push a little harder on that student early on.

In this example, Randy leans on how much of a relationship he has developed with the student to determine if they are ready to move into a plan. There was a delicate balance between making the student feel comfortable and making progress early on. When a student was more comfortable with the coaching process, the student knows what to expect, and therefore, can take more ownership.

Serena shared how it also depends on how the student shows up in your meeting. They may be ready to engage, but they also may feel exhausted, stressed, or something else. Recognizing how the student shows up helped the coach determine how to move the
conversation forward. Jenny echoed the significance of knowing the student when she said,

So, so much of it is just the best way a coach can do that is by being connected to their students. So if you are present with them, you’re reading facial expressions, body language, you’re hearing tone. All of that’s going to go into your assessment of which direction am I going to go with that. So if I have an agenda and it’s not my student’s agenda, most likely I’m going to pick the wrong time to do one of those things that you’re saying. But if I’m going with where they’re at and also if I’m unclear, it’s asking. Really asking them. So at this point, are you looking more for a suggestion from me or are you looking to brainstorm? Is there more to that, that you want to share? Or are you looking for action right now?

Connection, presence, and simply asking the student how they want to move forward would help Jenny think about how and when she moves forward with tools, techniques, questions, or plans. Skilled intuition leans heavily on knowing the student.

**Readiness to move forward.** Part of skilled intuition also includes gauging the students’ readiness to move forward. Participants did this by getting a sense of how self-aware the student was and observations. Observations included participants being able to recognize key themes and patterns in a conversation, noticing key words or gap words, and paying attention to non-verbal cues. Observations helped the coach determine if they were able to get the student to answer on their own, if they should be moving forward with a new tool, or to ask more questions. Sometimes these are observations that the coaches make, and other times the coach explicitly asks the student where they are at. Sara shared, “Throughout our time together, making observations around that and checking in with them to see like my instincts. Like am I reading this well or you know, you’re presenting in this way.” Sara explained how she challenges her instincts by reflecting observations to check if the instincts are accurate. While participants did tend
to rely on instincts some of the time, part of the purpose of this study is to understand how they are getting to these instincts within their coaching practice. Mallory shared,

I think that the silence part of it is really helpful. I give the student a lot of space because I really want them to reflect in the moment. And when the student finally answers after that time that they’ve spent in my office in front of me silent, and I didn’t let them off the hook. If their answer has no real reflective thinking in it or real critical thinking in it, then I introduce something like another tool to help them.

Mallory used reflection and silence to give space to the student. During this time, she also gauges how introspective the student appears. If the student has a difficult time, she might choose to introduce a tool to help facilitate the process and help the student gain more self-awareness. Carlos shared how he also gets a sense of how much the student struggles to answer these questions. He shared,

If they’re just knocking it out of the park and they 100% understand and I feel like there’s some really good reflection, then I might not use a tool just because they don’t need the tool to continue on the coaching conversation.

Coaches felt like they could get a sense of how thoughtful the students’ responses were. While coaches believed in their students’ ability and coming up with answers themselves, they used observations and gauging self-awareness to determine if a student needed more support.

Non-verbal cues also helped coaches determine the students’ readiness to move forward. Grace explained how she did this in the following statement:

I look at how ready the student is, him or herself through language, through our conversation and or body language, body language is extremely important. Body language is, is equally or maybe even a tad more important than the verbal. So I observe both. I will also simply ask as well. So are we ready to move forward with or not so much? Are we ready? It sounds like you’re ready. And the decision is always the student’s decision. If they are not ready to, to develop an action plan or if they want to continue talking about something that seems relevant and important to talk about or discuss because it will hinder their progress.
Grace used non-verbal cues and explicitly asked the student if they were ready to move forward toward action. She was clear that, if the student was not ready to move forward, they did not. Grace also shared how she encouraged the student to pay attention to their own body and their energy as they talked about certain topics to develop self-awareness in the student. Participants did their best to help the student become aware on their own, while also meeting a student where they are at when they could not get to that insight on their own. Reflecting what was observed by the coach was a helpful skill to implement during this time. Other examples of non-verbal cues included hesitations or noticing when a student feels a bit hopeless or stuck in their situation or goals.

**Student needs more support.** One of the unique challenges coaches have in higher education is that of being an educator. As such, skilled intuition is recognizing when a student needs more support. Participants described students need more support when they are missing a big, obvious piece of the puzzle (not managing their time, and not realizing they need to; not taking notes in class and not remembering the content discussed), when a student felt stuck, or when a student explicitly asks for new strategies or tools to implement (study skills because they state they have no idea how to study). Once the topic is selected, the coach will ask several questions to understand where the student is at and gauge their self-awareness to determine if the student needs more support.

Michelle explained how she did this in a student scenario. Michelle was meeting with a student who said they needed help because they were not performing well on tests. She asked several questions about what they have tried, what was working, and what was not working. During this process, she realized that the student was not taking notes
during lecture. This was an obvious missing component to studying for Michelle, but not for the student. She stepped in to talk more about notetaking. She then tried to get the student to come up with the answer themselves. She said “Well, we’ve talked through it enough and you can’t come up with anything. So now let me offer you something new.” Once she felt comfortable that she provided enough space for the student to come up with the answer first, then she was able to move forward in supporting that student where they were stuck. Carlos explained,

Because I find a lot of times, I don’t know if it’s just freshmen or students in general, but if I was just like, well, what are the possibilities in front of you? They get stuck and they’re like, well, I don’t know. That’s, that’s the problem. And with me actually taking the time to brainstorm, go back and forth with them, let them know that it’s okay to even say something that seems like the craziest idea. That that’s when they start to identify possible routes, different possibilities that they can pursue.

When a student is stuck, the coach collaboratively generated ideas with the student. Carlos gave a little help to the student (meeting the student where they are at) in order to get the brainstorming started. In both scenarios, coaches create opportunities for autonomy and growth, differentiating coaching from other support services on campus.

**Knowing your toolbox.** Participants were aware and knowledgeable about what resources they have available in their office, from their own experiences, as well continuing to learn more tools to implement in their meetings. The toolbox was described as a rolodex, toolkit, and toolbelt. The basic purpose of the toolbox was to offer some ways to build tangible skills (such as time management, study skills, test preparation strategies) as well as activities to get students to think about various aspects of their lives and their future. Jordan explained how the student is the expert, not the coach. She continued by saying,
However, sometimes it’s hard for the student to, I guess conceptualize why something’s not working for them. And so, and so for me, like if I do introduce something to a student without them asking for example or without having asked questions of them to help them reach that conclusion, it might be, you know, it sounds to me like, you know, this might not be working for you. Do you agree? You know, they will say yes or no, whatever have to say about it. And then I just say, you know, here are some things that other students have found to be helpful or here’s something that I found to be helpful or here’s something that I researched and explain that strategy to them and just ask them like, you know, what do you think?

Once Jordan determined what is working or not working with the student, she reflected back what she noticed. Then she shared what has worked for previous students and put the ownership back on the student by asking “What do you think?” This is another example of how coaches use their toolbox—not as a way to share a new tool or strategy in every meeting, but they bring them out when the student needs, wants, and is ready for them. Jordan also still gives the student the opportunity to determine what is next, which assumes the student does not have to move forward with any of the tools if they do not want.

Coaches are diverse in how they implement these tools. For example, Serena and Gina shared how they focused more on specific tools the first few meetings with a student. Interestingly, both coaches specifically worked with students who were on academic probation. The logic behind sharing similar tools in the first few meetings was because of the possibility of suspension. This might also be an example of meeting a student where they are at. Based on the experience and knowledge of the coach, two strategies they prioritized were time management and test preparation because they knew students on academic probation would likely need these skills. However, majority of the participants made it a point to explain they have started to lean less on these tools as they grew as a coach. Perhaps, as these coaches gain experience, they will lean on the skilled
intuition more heavily. Participants had a strong sense of the tools they could use but did their best to only use them in certain situations, depending on the other factors listed here. Knowing what is in the toolbox and when might be an appropriate time to reference them, was helpful for participants.

*Exploring possibilities.* Another factor participants considered when moving the conversation forward is exploring or recognizing possibilities. When a student is able to think of solutions on their own and explore possibilities they have not yet tried, participants would not need to jump in and share a coaching tool from their toolbox. However, if a student had a hard time thinking about possibilities or options to reach their goals, the coach used their toolbox to help them out. Grace shared how she would step in and help explore in the following story:

> And then I will use their name and I will say, so coaching is not about me telling you, Sarah, what you should or should not do. And focuses 100% on your making discoveries about yourself, you are learning who you are, the direction that you want to move in, and then my assisting and supporting that movement with suggestions, ideas, opening you to possibilities and so forth.

In this story, Grace explained how the focus is on the student making discoveries as a priority, but then the coach steps in when necessary to open up possibilities and ideas. Jenny also explained this when she stated,

> And I think that’s the key piece to it, is that the possibilities, it’s not just one answer. So when they do have one solution, don’t stop there with them. Have them come up with a variety and from there pick what’s going to be most successful for them.

In both scenarios, the coach is helping students see possibilities they are not yet aware of or do not know exist yet. Coaches often challenge the dichotomous thinking of students to consider additional options and possibilities they are not yet aware of.
Diving deeper. Knowing when to dive deeper was another skill participants relied on to determine if they could move forward to action or if they needed or could explore more. Amanda shared,

As they identify a goal, and asking them why is that important to you? But like, you know, listening to words that they are specifically saying, or maybe feelings that you are kind of, you are using your intuition, like there’s some feelings behind that goal. And exploring even deeper, what’s the meaning of the goal? And why is it important to you?

Participants used observations and non-verbal cues to determine if they could, or even should dive deeper into what the student was saying. In Amanda’s example, she noticed there was more to the story. Instead of moving forward with the goal without question, she acknowledged the hesitancy and dove deeper to help the student gain self-awareness.

On the other side, participants were also very aware they were not the reason for the students’ success or failure. Participants believed they could not do anything for the student because it would be counterproductive to the coaching process. For example, if a student did not want to dive deeper, participants were able to recognize this based on observations and non-verbal cues. Knowing when to challenge the student and dive deeper was dependent upon all of these factors combined and relied heavily on the relationship with the student. Michelle highlights this well as she described this internal process.

And so, just that delicate balance of knowing what question to ask and when and how much to push while keeping them comfortable, keeping them wanting to come back, but feeling like, Oh yeah, I felt challenged in a good way.

Delicate balance is a great way to describe the concept of skilled intuition. While the ultimate goal was to help a student get to the insight or answer on their own, as it was in life coaching, sometimes this was just not realistic. Sometimes, the student needed help
or felt stuck. The combination of these factors together (knowing your student, readiness to move forward, student needs more support, knowing your toolbox, exploring possibilities, and diving deeper) helped participants decide what to do, and when to move the conversation forward. The practicality of being limited by time was also a component of skilled intuition.

**Macro and Micro Level Thinking**

Participants shared many stories about how they wove in the macro and micro level thinking and goals throughout their meetings. Participants shared how they elicit the students’ goals and intentionally connect to smaller goals to larger ones. The small actions taken in between meetings were connected to the overall larger goal the student was working toward, either that semester, or even beyond college. Sara explained how she asks, “Like what’s their long term (goal) and how are these things measuring up to that and getting them in that direction. So I think that’s, you know, I think that’s the whole essence of it all.” Sarah connected long term goals with what the student was doing in the present moment. Participants helped student identify goals, and then help the student break them down into small, manageable pieces to lower stress and move forward. Knowing the students’ long-term goals would help the coach notice when things were out of alignment for the student. This served as a north star for both the coach and the student throughout their time working together. While participants hoped the student would gain insight on their own, sometimes they would point this out to the student directly. When things were out of alignment, this prompted the coach to ask further questions to get the student to have the light bulb moment and increase awareness.
Participants went in and out of this macro and micro level thinking throughout the coaching process.

Throughout meetings, participants referred back to previous goals that the student created. Part of the coach role is to remind students of their goals in order to hold them accountable to what they said they wanted. Connie explained, “But once you set those goals, short term, long term, very specific and then you break it down into steps for achievement, then at that point it’s just continuously touching base with them on it and holding them accountable.” Participants bounced forward, toward what the student was working towards, while also holding them accountable in the moment. This back and forth between future and present helped the student see next steps and how they could move forward toward their goals. Breaking down larger goals into more manageable steps would also alleviate some of the stress and anxiety experienced by students. The micro and macro are connected when students have a goal, a plan, and take action toward that goal, leaving students feeling less overwhelmed.

**Building Students Up**

Coaches also recognize and prioritized student strengths when they were not able to recognize this within themselves. Grace explained how she helped students identify strengths or areas they are proud of during first meetings with students. Tanya, Randy, Jordan and Amanda shared explicitly how they highlighted a students’ progress or strengths after they had been working with them for a while. Helping students identify their strengths was found in C. E. Robinsons’ (2015) study as well. Mallory and Jenny approached their work from a strengths-based perspective. Over time, participants pointed out strengths and progress within the student when they were feeling a sense of
defeat or had failed at something. Sara shared a story where she pointed out how the
student was making progress around decision-making. She shared,

It seems like your decision-making process around that is, is very different. Can
you tell me more about that? And then like them even just realizing how they’re
going to, how they’re thinking differently about whatever topic they’re bringing up.

Sara helped the student become more aware, as well as see how much progress she had
made since working with a coach. Working with a student over several meetings gave
coaches the opportunity to see progress and growth when the student did not see it in
themselves. Coaches offered a new perspective to students. Other ways coaches helped to
build students up included celebrating successes or progress. Celebrations happened for
big and small growth areas. Coaches acknowledged shifts in thinking or new ways the
student was approaching school or life. Participants offered encouragement as needed and
wanted to instill hope in students when they felt like there was none. This is also an
example of meeting a student where they are at. Sometimes, the student needed
challenge, while other times they needed encouragement and hope.

Building students up became apparent when participants felt like they had to give
students permission to change their goals. Permission was not used as a way to give the
student consent but as a way to think about their life from a different angle, perspective,
or possibility. Coaches helped student see alternative routes or possibilities to reach their
goals and encouraged them to dream bigger. Grace shared an example with a student
where she helped them see that they could approach planning and organizing in their own
way, which gave the student permission to use what he already knew was working for
him, instead of changing what already works to align with a specific tool she offered. She
also explained generally,
But helping them understand that they are human beings. First and foremost, you are a human being and have grace for yourself and changing your mind. Using poor judgment, making errors, that is normal, and natural. As long as hopefully you’re not making the same error over and over and over again. You just make new ones. So yeah, that permission from oneself and to know that it’s okay and it’s part of being a human being.

Grace felt she was able to help the student to elicit their own permission to make mistakes and change direction. Some other examples included dropping a class, changing majors, or shifting one of their goals and pursuing what they want, instead of what others wanted for them. Participants explained how challenging it was for students to make these shifts and talking with their coach gave them awareness and permission to change direction.

**Relationship and Rapport Building**

According to participants, relationship and rapport building was a foundational coaching skill. While I planned to ask questions related to how participants develop a relationship with their students, every coach mentioned relationship building as a key component in their work prior to me asking how they actually do this in meetings. When asked about techniques or skills used, Gina shared:

I think first of all, rapport building and really building that relationship. Just knowing that, you know, if a student feels like I’m in their corner, I have their best interest in mind and I’m going to be working with them, not against them. I think that’s unique. So rapport building.

The relationship was critical to have the student know the coach is in this with them, as a partner and as a collaborator. Findings align with prior research where Baron and Morin (2009) described the relationship as “a prerequisite for coaching effectiveness” (p. 99). Participants wanted students to know they are not alone in this journey. Coaches prioritized relationship building in every aspect of the coaching process--in first meetings...
and every meeting after. Tucker said, “You are always rapport building.” When a student and coach have a strong relationship, it builds trust and allows the coach to ask more meaningful, challenging questions.

**How coaches build relationships.** Participants expressed several ways they build relationships with their students. First and foremost, participants prioritized getting to know the human first, and then the student. While this was not present with every participant, it was surprising how often this came up. Participants would then gauge how deep the student was willing to go during the first meeting and over their time working together. The time it takes to build a meaningful relationship with a student varied. Michelle explained,

> But really the relationship building. That’s so key in the first few meetings. It needs to be in depth and it needs to be reciprocal. And it really relies on the pace that the student is comfortable going in. And so some students, it takes so much longer, some students are an open book and within five minutes they’re, you’re there. And other students, it takes several meetings for them to finally even like make eye contact with you in a way that feels comfortable, you know?

Participants tried to weave rapport building naturally throughout meetings and remembered to ask about the personal things in the students’ life outside of academics. The sense of reciprocity in the quote also aligned with goal of partnering with the student (ICF, 2020b). Prioritizing this in every meeting also aligned with the human-centered beliefs discussed earlier in this chapter.

Participants started to build the relationship with small talk. This would include logistics such as classes, where and how much they work, what their major is, and their living situation. Small talk was a way to open up the door to the relationship. Participants then might dive deeper, asking more questions about the students’ personal life. Topics they mentioned included asking about hobbies, interests, why they came to the
institution, family, transition to college, if they have animals, what their strengths are, and more generally, their story. As the conversations continued, deeper relationship building included discussions around what their challenges are this semester or were in a previous semester(s), goals, dreams, motivations, areas they want to grow in, what is working, what is not working, what excites the student, and what makes the student happy. The coach uses these questions to get a sense of how much the student is willing to open up and connect.

Why coaches prioritize relationships. Participants prioritized the relationship for a variety of reasons. One of the reasons that was present throughout interviews was, put simply, it was fun. Participants’ voice inflections and their energy shifted as they shared stories and talked about their relationships with students. Additionally, Tucker stated he “just loves people,” and Lauren shared “I just love helping students.” There was also an overwhelming sense that participants thoroughly enjoyed connecting with students and building relationships. Many talked about how it was a favorite part about their job--specifically getting to know humans in a deep and meaningful way and seeing them grow and develop.

When participants really knew their students, they could make more progress with students because of a strong relationship. Connie shared a story where her student talked about being on the volleyball team on campus. When the student talked about the team during their first meeting, the student lit up with excitement. However, in subsequent meetings, the student did not light up in the same way as before. Because Connie noticed this shift, she asked herself first, what might be happening here? Connie could have focused solely on classes or grade. Instead, because she knew the student as a person, she
noticed the energy shift and reflected the observation back to the student. She addressed the concern and built the student up in the same meeting.

Part of building the relationship is being able to draw the student out when they are not as comfortable sharing some of these topics. By developing this relationship, participants believed the student was more willing to trust them initially and over time. When a trusting relationship was present, the participants could get to the underlying issues quicker and ask more thought-provoking questions. The coaches felt more comfortable asking these questions and the student was more comfortable answering difficult questions.

Participants believed prioritizing the relationship also helped students feel valued, seen, and heard. Students would feel a sense of belonging on campus because of their relationship with their coach. Connie shared how she believes “Every single student that has been referred to me literally just wanted to be heard.” Since coaching inherently encourages the client, or in this case, the student to talk, think, and lead the conversation more than the coach, this encouraged the student to have a voice in spaces where they traditionally may have not.

Having a strong relationship also gave participants the permission they need to challenge their students. Carlos explained,

I think that the stronger the relationship the easier it is to ask like those really big powerful questions like the ones that, that might kind of shake their world a little bit. Because if I, if I’m doing that in the first time that I meet them, they’re gonna be like, you know, who the heck is this guy? Who does he think he is? But if you’ve really developed that trust, and I think that developing trust is so important for being able to have those conversations.
Carlos leveraged the relationship he had with his student to challenge him. When participants had this strong relationship, they were able to go deeper and recognize when a student was not living up to their capabilities. Lindsey explained,

So it’s not really that hard to build a rapport with them, but I also let them know that, you know, I’m here to support you, but I’m also here to challenge you too. So if you’re not doing what you’re supposed to do or you’re not, you know, you’re not hitting your full potential, I’m going to call you out on that and I’m going to find out why you’re not doing that and how we can get you where you are supposed to get to.

Lindsey challenged students when she knew they were not living into what she knows they are capable of. In addition to supporting students, the coach was able to leverage their strong relationship to challenge the student.

**Summary of Theme Two: Coaching Skills**

Participants discussed several coaching skills they implemented and used throughout their meetings with students. While some participants explicitly named these skills, others described these skills in the narratives they shared without explicitly naming what they did as coaching skills. Coaching Presence included active listening, authenticity, being comfortable with the uncomfortable, and non-judgment. Strategies used in every meeting with participants included powerful questions to elicit insight and reflection, addressing underlying concerns, skilled intuition, macro and micro level thinking, and building up students. I ended this theme with the foundational skill of relationship and rapport building. I addressed how participants build relationships and why this was so important to their coaching practice. Participants thoroughly enjoyed the relationship building piece of their practice. While coaching skills are crucial to
recognize, additional components are necessary to understand coaching practices in higher education. In the next section, I discuss coaching meetings in higher education.

**Coaching Meetings in Higher Education**

The third theme that emerged in this study was the elements of a coaching meeting in higher education. This refers to how participants facilitated conversations with students during meetings. In meetings, coaches helped students make progress towards goal through actions or next steps. However, it was unclear as to what a coach does to get a student to the next step. I had to prompt participants to share what they did at the beginning, the middle and the end of each of their meetings. Many participants responded with, *it depends*, but were then able to articulate some processes they incorporate in their meetings. For some participants, I had to rely more on the stories they told than how they described meetings. Different terminology was used to describe this progression. In the discussion section, I make sense of this process by developing a conversational framework for coaching in higher education and explore why some coaches were able to talk about this progression while others were not.

Common themes emerged to understand how coaches facilitate meetings with students. When participants shared stories, I asked “*What happened next?*”, and I had to ask follow up questions to make sense of their role in the meeting. In this section, I describe how participants facilitate a coaching meeting, choosing the topic or agenda, how they keep students on topic or agenda, and how they prepare for meetings.

**Facilitating the Process**

Participants described how they facilitated each meeting and at the same time, made sure to explain how important it was for the student to lead. Participants helped to
move the conversation forward and help the student make progress towards their goals. However, repeatedly, participants talked about how this process was student led, and student driven. Bresser and Wilson (2016) described this similarly in the role of the coach was to keep time and stay focused on the goal of the meeting, which was the role of the client or student. Gina described this balance by sharing, “They’re leading the conversation and I’m kind of guiding the conversation to identify what we need to talk about and what goals we want together.” Participants kept track of time and kept students focused on the topic of choice throughout the conversation. This is similar to the role of a coach in the broader field (Bresser & Wilson, 2016).

Participants described their individual meetings lasting anywhere from thirty-minutes to one hour long. The length of a meeting may be an important factor to consider in how meetings are structured as described in the discussion section. Participants kept students on track given the varying lengths of time given to an appointment. Randy shared,

So I think that that’s the first thing is that I’m providing them with the space to, to explore the issue. The other thing that I think I’m providing them with in the meeting is some structure. I think that their minds are all over the place.

The structure Randy referred to in this quote was not explicit. Participants talked about the importance of finding balance between getting things done and leaving enough time for exploration, reflection, or skill building. Tucker explained,

If they come in, and we have a wonderful conversation, and it’s awesome, but they have nothing to work on, or any action that they want to try and adhere to between now and the three weeks when we meet, then all we had was a great conversation. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it doesn’t really allow them to excel or to change or go in that positive direction.
In this comment, Tucker differentiates a good conversation from a coaching conversation. A good conversation could support a student from a holistic perspective, leaving both the student and coach feeling better. However, a coaching conversation was said to be productive, insightful, and a way to provoke growth and change. Gaining insight was found in the broader field of coaching as well (Grant et al., 2009).

**Students’ Agenda**

Participants consistently reminded students that coaching was about them, not the coach. Participants used the following questions: “What is most important to discuss today?” “What is priority?,” or “What is pressing?” The agenda might include a topic already discussed in a previous meeting(s) or could be a completely different topic. Coaches might cover more than one topic in a meeting, but most participants talked about having some sort of focus, while at the same time, not limiting the topic or agenda to only one item. Grace reinforced the student sets the agenda when she said,

> It’s about you and your time and what works for you and has nothing whatsoever to do with me. It’s what works for you, and what’s realistic and reasonable for you. I say also, you might go home and change your mind that this is not a goal that you want to pursue at all. I’d say, so this is 100% about you and what you want for your life. And then they will decide on when they are going to take action.

Grace encouraged the students’ autonomy in agenda setting, in their actions and what their goals were. She supported the student, even when their goals changed. Participants consistently put the ownership back on the students in the first meeting, as well as throughout the coaching process.

Keeping students on track was a large reason for some type of structure. In the broader field of coaching, Grant (2003) described this as a systematic and intentional process. Participants helped students stay focused on whatever goal they were hoping to
work toward. Amanda described trying to keep a student focused by explaining, “So it’s just kind of drawing back to the set agenda. And if students go like off topic of what they are talking about and start ranting. I try to keep a little bit control of the conversation.”

This is another example of the difference between a good conversation where the student rants or vents about something and getting back to the agenda that was set. Grace reinforced one of the philosophical beliefs to meet the student where they are at. She shared “So it’s meeting that student where he or she is at that moment in time. But then bringing it back to, without a doubt, goals.” Having a strong agenda helped both the coach and student recognizing when they were off track. Participants strove to move the conversation along, meet the student where they are, and encourage the student to lead, all while getting something done.

**Preparing for Meetings**

Before meeting with students, participants made a point to talk about how they prepared for meetings. Reviewing notes served the participants in three ways: (a) Connection - this was one way to connect further and build a relationship with that student and remember small pieces of the students’ life; (b) Accountability--to follow up on the goal or action the student was supposed to take or strategy they wanted to implement since the previous meeting; and (c) To review original goals of the student, typically created in the first meeting. In addition to these, participants also used meeting notes as a way to develop plan B topics, which will be described later in this section. A few participants talked about having access to grades. If the coach did have access, reviewing grades was also part of meeting preparation.
Summary of Theme Three: Coaching
Meetings in Higher Education

Similar to the broader field of coaching, coaches in higher education facilitate meetings with students. Coaches focus on the process within a meeting, keeping time, and staying focused, while incorporating coaching skills and helping a student get to an action step. The students’ role is to be engaged, choose a topic, and focus on their own growth and development. In the discussion section, I built upon coaching meetings and connected various components of findings to create a conversational framework for coaches in higher education.

Coaching Progression Over Time

In this section, I explore findings to understand how coaching meetings connect and unfold over time. A major finding is that first meetings are crucial, as they set the foundation for all other meetings. The first meeting, coaches prioritized building the relationship, explaining coaching and expectations, getting the student to buy in, and providing value. Additional sub-themes in this section include the threading of meetings, continued relationship and rapport building, and the flow between directive and non-directive.

First Meetings are Crucial

Participants repeatedly explained how important the first coaching meeting was to the success of the relationship over time. In the first meeting, participants prioritized the coach-student relationship, learned about the goals and areas of growth the student wanted to work toward, clarified roles and expectations of the coach and student, and worked to get buy in with students. Buy in refers to the ability to convey what coaching is and the value of coaching to encourage full participation, engagement, and belief in the
coaching process. Participants referred to the first meeting often with students to revisit goals and highlight progress the student has made. Tucker explained “So our first meeting is arguably the most important meeting. We have big challenges of setting rapport. Meaning we want to get to know the student a little bit better.” The first meeting was crucial because coaches had to build a relationship, explain their role and expectations, and get students to buy in to the coaching process.

**Prioritize the relationship.** While relationship and rapport building were mentioned in the coaching skills theme, the relationship was important to every aspect of the participants’ coaching practice. Particularly in first meetings, the relationship was a priority. Participants connected in a variety of ways with the students. Examples were given about liking a similar football team or having a dog, as the participant also liked that team and dogs in general. Other commonalities related to watching Netflix, music, movies, where they grew up, and their major. Participants also shared about themselves. Some shared their own stories and modeled vulnerability because they believed this would help build a human connection with students. By sharing more about themselves as coaches, participants believed this would also help students open up about their own stories and challenges.

Overall, the reason to prioritize this relationship was to develop trust so the student would be vulnerable, and the coach would be able to get to the deeper, more transformative work. Michelle explained “And just really the first meeting is all about getting them to trust me and feel like they, we can talk about anything.” Mallory also stated, “And so I try really to make them feel comfortable first because we’re not going to get anywhere coaching wise if they don’t feel comfortable, if they don’t feel safe in the
space.” This statement explained why it is so critical for the coach to build a relationship with the student. A key aspect of relationship building was for the student to feel comfortable enough to come back to another meeting.

**Goals for semester, life.** Participants also prioritized getting to know the goals, dreams, strengths, and challenges of students. Participants described setting goals for the semester as foundational. Some encouraged their students to write down their goals while others verbally discussed goals. Generally, participants asked questions around: What do they want to get out of coaching? Participants used a variety of questions, tools, and self-assessments to get a sense of the overall picture of the student. Participants would have a list of different areas and ask students to rate themselves on how confident or strong they were in each area. Participants would get a sense of skills the student wanted to develop, areas they wanted to grow in, or potential obstacles the student might face. Jordan explained,

So my first session with students, I really just try to get to know the student. I like to hear a little bit about them, a little bit about what they’re studying. And we do like an assessment of their strengths and their areas of growth.

Jordan used the first meeting to get a sense of where the student is at, generally in their college experience so far. Both tools and questions gave participants an idea of the self-awareness of the student, as well as what areas might be helpful to address in the first meeting and beyond.

**Coaching role and expectations.** In addition to building the relationship in the first meeting, participants talked about the importance of explaining their role as a coach and setting expectations. To explain their role, participants used language such as partnership, partnering together, collaborator, and individualized, while also clarifying
that they were not the same thing as other services on campus (i.e., counseling or advising). During the first meeting, many participants reviewed a coaching agreement, contract, or form. These were used as a way to ask students to fully commit to the coaching process and, again, set up expectations. Other areas covered, but mentioned less frequently included confidentiality, FERPA policies, cancellation policies, privacy policies, review of ICF competencies, and addressing requirements the student needed to meet if they were below the minimum GPA requirements needed to remain at their institution. Participants also explained how often the student would be meeting with their coach.

In addition to clarifying their role, participants made it a priority to explicitly tell students that they were the focus of meetings. Grace explained “I then share with them the focus of coaching, which is focusing 100% on their vision, their goals, and how they define success for themselves.” Grace wanted the student to know they pick the topic or agenda. She wanted her students to know from the beginning of their time working together, they have ownership in the process. Sara explained that students would be working towards goals. Sara said,

So I think that setting that from the very beginning, we are working towards goals and, you know, we’re always trying to point our way that way. I think from that first meeting it’s really, I think for the most part they, like they’re really understanding that they’re working towards something or bettering ourselves in some way by reaching their goals.

Sara wanted the expectation to be clear that the student would be working toward their goals during and throughout the coaching process. Participants also gave students ideas of what they could talk about during meetings to better themselves. These included broad topics such as improving awareness and decision-making, as well as specific strategies
such as time management and study skills. The goal of explaining their role and setting expectations encouraged students to commit to the process and be open and willing to talk about a variety of topics.

**Coaching buy in.** Prioritizing the relationship and explaining the role and expectations of a coach had another purpose--to build buy in. In this context, buy in refers to the ability to convey what coaching is and the value of coaching to encourage full participation, engagement and belief in the coaching process. For many of the participants, students were invited to participate in coaching and were not necessarily looking for additional support. Rachel described this phenomenon as,

> Coaching is something that they are opting into. Not something, again that somebody is telling them that they always like have to do. Like while it can be highly encouraged, like if they’re on probation or something like that, it’s not forceful in nature.

This statement directly contradicts the concept of mandatory coaching. Participants must get buy in and they did so by providing value or a takeaway for the student after explaining their role, expectations, and building the relationship. Lindsey explained “And I think that because I show them that I know what I’m talking about it kinda helps with that buy in with them.” This could be in the form of a strategy, a tool, a task, or just something to reflect on. Serena talked about how she often reviewed a success guide with students, which gives them an idea of topics they could discuss.

Amanda offered a brief coaching session when she had time towards the end of the meeting to give a student a taste of what coaching is. She asked questions like, “What is pressing for you now?” and “What are you nervous about?” Amanda described,
And so I have them kind of pick out areas that may be a concern for them. And so from that, they pick up some areas, and I do a coach session, like an introductory coach session. So we kind of chat and help them understand how they can navigate this concern, and a plan to overcome this concern. And then explain to them, that is coaching.

Amanda gave her students a sense of what coaching was all about. It also gave students ideas on what topics they could discuss and immediately start moving toward their goals. If a student could see the value of coaching and/or build a strong relationship with the coach, they were more likely to return for a second meeting.

**The Threading of Meetings**

The thread of meetings over time was a theme that emerged from interviews. I asked the question, “How might coaching meetings connect over time? Or do they connect?” One way this showed up throughout interviews was the referencing of the first meeting and initial goals set by the student throughout the time working with a coach. Participants would revisit what was shared in the initial meeting and weave this information into the rest of their meetings. Connie described,

And then the other part of it is, setting goals is one thing, but you also have to be continuously checking on them. So once we set goals, that’s something that we touch base on regularly. Every single time we meet. Oh hey, remember those goals that we set for the semester?

While goals could certainly change, Connie made it a point to remind the student of what they initially wanted to work on together. The first meeting served as a reference point for student goals.

Participants shared several stories in how the students are able to build off topics over time. Jordan shared,
So for example, if it’s a student who was struggling with time management, we’ll continue that conversation in a subsequent meeting. Perhaps now they want to work on a different skill or if they want to continue to improve the skill that we’re currently working on, we’ll continue to build on that.

The choice to continue to develop the previous skill or work on something new was up to the student. Jordan put the ownership on the student by continuing to improve upon a skill or starting on a new skill or topic. Gina described this as,

There is a thread. We’re actively working towards goals and we’re connecting between each session. I’m like, hey, this is where we left off last time. This is what we talked about. Now how are we doing and how do we need to pivot or change or what do we need to do to keep building and keep moving forward?

Having several meetings gave participants a sense that they were picking up where they left off instead of having to start from nothing. Each conversation could look drastically different, depending on how the student shows up. However, meeting over time provided continued conversation they could build off from prior conversations.

Randy also described the connection as a way to understand context and subtle changes. He shared,

But I do see them as connected because if I don’t have an understanding of the past meeting, even as context to say something shifted with you or something’s much better than it was last time then I haven’t really done anything and I haven’t shown them, I haven’t shown my students that I value them in the way that I want to.

When working with students over a long period of time, this became even more pertinent. Coaches were able to notice subtle changes that they believed could have been missed.

Jenny described,

I think also when you’re seeing the same person on a regular basis, a few things happen. One, you get, as a coach, you get familiar with the student. So you can bring up, you know, I’ve worked with some students for a couple of years and I can say, Oh, you know, remember where you were last year this time or with that
student who had that struggle with the professor last semester, she had another struggle with a class this semester. And I can say, remember how you felt last year and the success that you had. What can you take from that experience and apply it to this experience?

Jenny described how she was able to notice themes and ask questions to help the student connect and learn from previous experiences. She could also remind the student how far they have come and what areas they have grown in. Accountability over time was also a factor in threading the meetings together. Carlos shared,

So that’s probably the biggest connection, the accountability part of referring back to previous goals and action steps, but also just, you know, remembering their story, remembering those good conversations we have so we can sometimes refer back to them when we need to in the future.

Remembering the students’ story and who they were, was a common thread in meetings over time. Participants were able to pull in what students discussed in previous meetings to help students make connections between what they have already accomplished or what they have yet to accomplish.

As a student and coach get to know each other throughout the coaching process, observations are used as a strategy to help move a student forward. Participants picked up on things that were consistent, or not consistent in meetings over time. Patience was important for the coach to be mindful of during this process. While coaches hope every student will fully engage in the coaching process, the reality is that some students follow through on their goals, while others do not. Additionally, some students achieve their goals and have a lot of insight quickly, while this never happens for other students during their time working together. Participants clearly noticed trends, themes, and habits of students as they continued to work with them over several meetings.
While some participants talked about how the meetings easily connect to one another, other participants challenged the idea and explained how it was really dependent on the student. Michelle shared “And so I don’t feel like they have to connect. We can just work with whatever issue comes in. And so some students are very much just a one off.” Michelle felt like this was an example of meeting a student where they are at. If the student only needed or wanted one meeting, then she could coach around that topic.

Lauren also shared “That’s really the only thing that connects them I think is, it’s just a follow up. The fact that I take the time to go in and follow up with every student that I meet with at some point.” In this example, accountability was the only piece that connected meetings.

Perspectives varied in how coaching meetings connected over time. Meetings were seen as separate, specifically in meeting a student wherever they were at, but also connected if the student wanted to continue toward a specific topic or goal. Ultimately, the student decided whether they continued towards the same goal from a previous meeting or chose to discuss a different topic. If a student was coached over multiple meetings, topics could connect and build on one another and participants were able to observe trends or themes in the students’ actions or behaviors. When participants noticed trends or themes, they could reflect those to the student for insight and to highlight progress. The common thread was the relationship and how themes, behaviors, and trends showed up over time.

**Continued Relationship and Rapport Building**

The threading of meetings happened in large part because of the continued relationship and rapport building. Participants used words like consistent, a constant
resource, using an open-door policy, and trust to describe deepening the relationship.

Randy described,

The goal of our meeting is to be very relational and rapport building. So for me, connecting information from a previous meeting to the current meeting. Or pulling up a, you know, a small grain of information that maybe the student forgot about that wasn’t important.

Getting to know a student over time also gave permission for Randy to dive into the deeper work of coaching. Building these strong relationships happened over several meetings but were necessary for participants to create opportunities for the growth and insight they were striving for, aligning with prior research regarding coaching in higher education (M. M. Hall, 2017; Sepulveda, 2017). Participants held onto the stories each student shared and cherished this part of coaching. Stories helped to build the trust, as well as allow the space for a deeper human connection.

**Growth and Insight Take Time**

While growth and insight are priorities for the participants who were interviewed, they were very aware and clear that change and growth takes time. Part of the coaching process that was embedded in the stories shared by participants was that students had to learn what works for them, and what does not work for them as they engage in coaching. Lauren explained,

And sometimes students don’t even know what they like or don’t like. So we just, you know… shoot a shot in the dark for lack of a better reason, and then kind of test out, to see what works for them and what doesn’t.

Similar to C. E. Robinsons’ (2015) findings, trial and error was seen as part of the learning process, which can take time. Tanya shared,

It’s not just a, I’m going to wave my magic wand and everything will be okay. And so they see that it’s a process. That learning is a process. It’s not always fun. Sometimes it’s mundane, but sometimes it is fun. But it’s, that’s just a part of the
process. And so, with the meetings there is continuity with the meeting because we’re always reflecting back on the academics. We’re reflecting back on that individual, their well-being as a student.

Tanya emphasized that learning takes time, which is why several coaching meetings is likely more effective than a single meeting. Serena shared how difficult this can be when she shared,

And so it’s getting them to think differently about how they have done things for years. And it doesn’t happen in one day. Or one appointment, or three appointments. Sometimes it takes a lot of appointments to get them to that point. And they also have to want those kinds of things.

Serena highlights how challenging it can be to evoke change in thinking and create new habits.

Participants shared how growth and insight can build over time. Jenny described this process by sharing “It’s layering at that point and stepping back little by little each session and having them try it on their own.” As the participants helped students scaffold what they were learning, they started to be less hands on, having the student lean more on themselves than the coach. Tucker talked about this when he explained,

And a lot of times they have the where-with-all, to understand that they have these things within them that they are capable of, they just have never thought about it in the way that I am asking about it. So that’s how I help them see that the steps to the goal are long and tedious.

Students build up confidence over time as they take small action steps toward their goals. This finding aligns with prior coaching literature in the broader field. As coaches worked with a client overtime, they hoped the coachee would become less dependent on the coach overtime, empowering them to make their own decisions (Kimsey-House et al., 2011). Participants wanted students to see they were capable of more than they realized, and they used growth and insight as a way to expose what the student was capable of.
Building a skillset could help a student see what they are capable of because it builds confidence along with the skill. Connie shared,

We’re typically building on a skillset or following up on challenges and short-term goals. But at the same time, I’m helping them to build confidence in themselves. So it is important that they, that they feel that this is some sort of building.

Participants used their time in coaching meetings to help students develop and grow skills and, as a result, build up confidence over time.

Sara shared a story about a student who was having trouble getting enough sleep. While the student was also working with a therapist, the student had a hard time creating a morning routine and getting enough sleep that she knew she needed and wanted. They created small goals, such as being more productive throughout the day. Sara helped the student reflect on what was working and what was not working, and they incorporated a lot of trial and error over time. Eventually the student started noticing the difference. Sara described,

She’s, she’s noticing all the differences and she’s just, it’s all things that she’s collecting as evidence as to why this is really helpful for her. Which gives her the motivation to like keep adding like little things that help, you know, and knowing how to bounce back if she has a setback. So I would say she’s, she’s a good case of like, she’s putting in a lot of work and sticking with the process even though like the first few attempts were not successful.

The story is a great example of how the coaching process is conducted over time by participants. As time progresses in the coaching relationship, many participants were able to clearly help students identify, with examples, how they have grown in order to build up confidence within the student. Coaches believed the student was more capable than they think, and explicitly pointed this out when the student needed.
Revisit, Revise, and Changing Goals

Participants would revisit, revise, and change goals throughout this process because of the growth and insight they experienced alongside the strong relationship. Lindsey shared “So I’ll make sure that I check in with them about how they’re reaching that particular goal. And again, if they’re not really, if their actions are not supporting that, I’ll remind them of that.” However, it was not seen as a bad thing when the actions of the student did not align with their goals. Grace shared “And I again emphasize that you might change your mind about your goal. And that is ok.” Participants provided the space for students to reflect on what they really wanted to work towards, or what areas they wanted to grow in. From this process of trial and error, students sometimes realized what they initially wanted to accomplish is no longer the same. During this time, participants would incorporate some of the strategies discussed in the coaching skills section of this chapter. Participants could revisit goals to see if they were the same, challenge the student as to why they were not working towards their goals, or explore new goals and possibilities with the student. Doing this continued to put the ownership on the student, instead of the coach.

Progression from Directive and Non-Directive

Participants wanted to help students come up with answers on their own. Participants experienced the challenge of having to balance the heart of coaching (help students come up with answers on their own) with their role and knowledge about their institutional and college. Tucker gave the following metaphor to describe this challenge. “And we can fly the plane a little bit but eventually we are going to relinquish all control. So let the student take over and fly so to speak.” The flow between directive and non-
directive was particularly potent for some participants and less so for others. For example, most participants shared in a variety of ways how they did not tell a student what to do or how to do it. However, in the same interview, participants would share how sometimes they have to share a tool, a strategy, or some insight. The justification, from a coaching perspective, was to have the student pick the topic and try to get the student to come up with the answer first. When the coach took into account the factors related to skilled intuition mentioned earlier (knowing your student, readiness to move forward, student needs more support, knowing your toolbox, exploring possibilities, and diving deeper), they could then proceed confidently that sharing tools or strategies might be helpful for the student. Some participants asked if they could share strategies, while others offered three options and let the student choose what would be most helpful. Participants chose to give options because students could have more autonomy in the process, as opposed to a coach who just gives the student a strategy or tool.

Lindsey shared how the flow from directive to non-directive was just part of the process.

And also for some of the students that recognize, you know, for some, and I think even for the positive stuff perspective, there may be a student that maybe was a little bit more needy in the beginning and now they aren’t. And so it’s like, that’s, that’s a good thing too. You know we want them to be self-sufficient. So sometimes I might be like, Oh dang, they don’t need me anymore. And it’s like, that’s okay. You know, that’s a, that’s a good outcome as well.

The student may need a little bit of direction at the beginning, such as the approach used by Serena. But the ultimate goal was for the student to become more self-sufficient in their journey, which aligns with self-determination theory (Moore et al., 2016). Some participants were able to articulate this balance more so than others.
Four participants, Gina, Serena, Tanya, and Kara typically start out more directive, prescriptive, or hands on at first, then build up to less directive. They believed being directive, at least in the beginning of working with a student was an important component to consider. Gina, Serena, and Tanya worked with students on academic probation and Kara worked with students with learning disabilities. At surface level, this could be seen as meeting a student where they are or teaching students skills outside of the coaching practice. However, in the stories they shared, participants were constantly mindful of the coaching practice and eventually getting students toward self-determination. They also grappled with what the coaching term means in their role. For example, Kara was a coach who worked with students who had severe learning disabilities. Kara explained,

> We have to have something super, super structured for them in terms of the coaching relationship. So, pretty much every time they know we are going to do at least three things when they come in here. We are going to review their grades, we are going to see what’s coming up, and see what’s coming up in terms of assignments. And then we are going to have some kind of plan for the next week. And then we usually involve tutoring and see if they need to meet with teachers.

When asked about how coaching informed her work, she shared her role as a coach looked different at another institution. In a previous coaching role, she was able to engage in the coaching process more. In her current role, she had to be more structured, and less coach-like. While many of her students needed this structure, she was aware of her boundaries in that she knows she cannot do everything for the student. She also did her best to coach those students who were more autonomous personally and academically. She explicitly stated that she did not have the time needed to really support most of her students from a coaching perspective, even though her position title included ‘coach.’ This showcases the need for clarity regarding the position title of coach. If a research
article is published and claims that coaching helps to improve retention, what do they really mean when they use the term coaching? How can institutions replicate services to improve retention It cannot be assumed that all coaches are doing similar work across the country, which is why it is important to understand the context and which these coaches are coming from. Variety in and of itself is not the problem - it is the assumptions about the “coach” terminology being used in higher education.

Another coach, Michelle, talked about how coaching international students may take more time than domestic students because of the differences in culture. When asked if coaching is still a good approach for these students, Michelle explained “I don’t think that coaching at its core changes, but sort of the language or the delivery kind of changes.” She, along with Kara talked about how some aspects of the coaching process could take more time. An example from an international student perspective was that it might take more time to build the relationship, an important component to building trust and vulnerability. Subtle differences appeared when working with diverse student groups and should be considered as the coaching practice develops in higher education.

Gina took a slightly different approach and was more directive at first working with students who were on academic probation. However, after sharing more, Gina explained how it was really led by the student. Gina explained,

Yeah, so it’s always in the back of my head. I’m like, there’s four key areas and you know, the four-session model has some of those areas broken down into like talk about this in the second one, the third one. And I have that. I guess the way that best describes like I have it in the back of my head, but I’m more led by the student than I am anything else. So I’m not going to sit and be like, session two we need to talk about, you know, blah blah blah blah blah. No, like whatever the student is going through, whatever we co-decided we needed to work on, like that’s what’s going to happen. And if, and you know, and if the material from session three comes in on session two sweet. You know, it’s, it’s more guided by the student.
While Gina has common topics that were likely helpful for students, she also made sure the topic was student led. The goals and beliefs of participants was to get the student to a point where they can do it on their own. However, participants varied as to how they implemented skill building and strategies into their meetings.

**Summary of Theme Four: Coaching Practice Over Time**

In this section, I reviewed how participants think about their work with students, and how it builds over time. I talked about how the first meeting was crucial to participants because they had to prioritize the relationship, explain expectations and their role, as well as get students to buy into coaching. I then shared how coaching meetings over time thread together to catapult growth and insight for students. I also shared how participants vary in their approach, as it relates to being directive, non-directive, or somewhere in between.

**Training, Growth, and Development as a Coach**

In this section, I explore findings related to training, growth, and development experienced by coaches. My main finding is that training, growth, and development varies drastically, however, coaches see their coaching practice in a similar light.

Coaches participated in various trainings, in different formats which included UDEMY (online courses), half day trainings through NACADA (the National Academic Advising Association), one or several days through NTA (National Tutoring Association), two-week intensive training through InsideTrack, and several months of life coach training through various organizations. Training included a variety of topics including goal setting, coaching skills, structure of conversation, and theories or philosophies, those were not always explicit for each participant. I anticipate more is covered during
some of these trainings, however, this was not the focus of the present study. Several theories were mentioned in relationship to participants’ training, as well as what they have learned from additional resources, education, or professional development. Theories mentioned throughout the interviews included cognitive behavior theory (including positive self-talk and distortions), positive psychology, growth mindset, Tinto’s retention theory, suicide theory, motivational interviewing, appreciative advising, and LASER coaching.

Participants had various experiences with their training programs. Tanya shared an example where training felt a bit blurred with other services on campus. She explained,

And it also seemed as if it was designed for counseling. Although they said many times, this is not, you know, you won’t be certified to provide counseling and we’re not counseling. But it seemed to sit very, we’re overlapping into some counseling techniques and approaches.

While it was confusing for some, training helped clarify the coach role for others by providing similar language. Lauren shared,

What would change is my understanding of certain things coaches do and say, based on my training. I gained those skills of, I don’t want to call them coach appropriate words, but I don’t know what else to call them. But things that as a success coach you are more likely to do because you’ve had the training.

Training gave some participants a common language to use with one another. Participants also shared that they were given language to specifically name coach skills such as reflection and bottom lining. Coaching competencies were also addressed during some trainings.
Reflections on Training and Coaching Practice

In this section, I focus on how coaches changed, modified, or grew their practice because of training. To understand the growth of the coach, I asked participants “What do you think your job would look like without training?” Coaches shared how they now talk less than they would have prior to training. Before training, the shared how they gave directives and would give advice to students more freely without thinking much about it because it would help students. Carlos stated,

And I think that I would approach it so much more of like a general educational standpoint of, Hey, this is what you need to be doing right now. Where in reality they might be like actually perfect in that area. They really want to focus on something else. So I think it would be so much more like prescriptive than what I could be doing, like meeting a student where they actually are.

Carlos changed his approach from general education, assuming what the student needs based on his own knowledge, toward meeting a student where they are at and the students’ knowledge. Participants wanted to make a caveat here, that a general educational standpoint is not inherently a bad thing. It clearly has a place within an institution. However, they were also clear that sharing knowledge from an expert place and coming from the perspective of a coach were two different things entirely.

Majority of participants talked about how they would come from this educational standpoint before training by creating the agenda for the student, as opposed to helping the student create the agenda. Participants made it a priority to give the student the agency in what they talked about, how they moved forward, and what action they took. Prior to coach training, participants also asked more close-ended questions. Mallory shared “But I do think that my practice would be less reflective and that the student would have less intrinsic motivation.” Participants asked better questions, built stronger
relationships, trusted students more, and were able to have more depth in the way they explored with students. This showed up a bit differently in Kara’s situation. She explained,

We are trained through the ICF to, you know, partner with clients and all that. And really that model is not super applicable in this specific role, just because of the types of students that we work with. They end up needing more support and almost like helping them problem solve rather than them facilitating their own answer and their own awareness.

Kara worked with students with disabilities. Even though she had training that encouraged students to come up with answers on their own, she believed she was not really coaching. While her job title included the word ‘coach,’ she explained that she did more problem solving than coaching. As research continues to examine coaching in higher education, researchers will need to interrogate how coaches approach their practice before assuming that a coach is a coach simply based on job title alone.

Participants believed there was a difference between someone telling a student what to do and when to do it (problem solving), and helping a student come up with their own answers.

Participants shared how they would have less productive conversations without training specifically around the structure, frame, or process in each coaching meeting. However, this was talked about in two different ways. Most participants talked about this as a flexible structure that you could use with any topic, such as the six phases of a coaching meeting. However, one participant talked about having a structure from her training in a different way. Gina shared,

I would say having structure, definitely the structure was super, super helpful for me. That’s kind of how my brain works anyway. And so like walking away and be like, okay, cool. Like this is what you do in this session, this is what you do in that session and this is how you follow up. Definitely helpful.
In this scenario, Gina described how she used prescribed topics for each session. While this seems contradictory to other approaches, particularly in encouraging the student to set agenda, it is important to note that all of the participants in the study had coach-specific training. As mentioned earlier, Gina also clarified she encourages students to drive the process.

Without coach training, participants believed they would still support students. However, they did not believe students would experience as much growth, insight, and development they strive for, or in the same ways as other support services on campus. Training was used as a way to clarify their role and the process of coaching. Lindsey shared “I think without training I would probably struggle with boundaries with students and I probably would struggle with recognizing what is my role versus when to kind of refer to someone else.” Training helped Lindsey draw boundaries with other roles on campus and helped her feel more confident in her role.

Mallory explained “I think that the success coach is a resource expert that can hold back because in the moment it should not be me that does all the talking.” Training helped her see that, while she can still be an expert, it was important for her to hold back even when she has great advice or resources to share. When reflecting on her training experience, Grace shared,

What I needed to learn most was that coaching is not . . . as a coach, I am not responsible for being a fixer, for having answers, for giving advice. And I am certainly an advice person. I am one of those persons you know, share with me what’s going on, what the problem is, I can give you 100 suggestions. Use any one of them and they will work. (laughter) So that is me, and my mindset. So that was something that I needed to learn to not do.

Even though she loved giving advice, training helped her think critically about advice-giving in her role as a coach. This aligns with other training beliefs mentioned in that the
student is the expert, not the coach. Findings build upon prior research where coaches did not provide solutions but encouraged reflection to help students understand what they need to do on their own to make progress (Richman et al., 2014). While coaches can be experts in the coaching process, being an expert in other areas is not necessarily needed. Michelle shared the difference training made from her perspective. She explained,

I would be relying a lot more on the coaching way of being rather than like the structure and the theories and the stuff that helps me keep moving things forward. Cause otherwise, like the coaching way of being is being a good listener and being able to ask good questions and have productive conversations. But it’s not, it’s only one part of coaching. And so I think without the training I would still be effective but not nearly as much. And I... We wouldn’t get there as quickly. Or perhaps we’d focus on the wrong things. I’d be more of doing. . . . Let’s triage the symptoms rather than let’s focus on what’s the underlying problem. So less productive and more time wasted probably.

In this scenario, Michelle shared how training helped her see the importance of a structure within the coaching conversation. While she understood coaching skills, she realized the strategy and intentionality behind the meeting. She also felt like training helped her be more productive in her meetings with students. Lauren also shared how she may have figured out how to coach overtime. She explained,

So I think that there’d be missing points of my, of my meetings. But at the same time, because of how I think and how I function personally as a human being, I would have eventually probably figured that out. It just would have taken me a lot longer to get where I am now than, you know what I mean?

Both of these participants felt like they would have been supportive with their students, however, training helped them understand pieces of coaching they might have missed. They may have learned about these on their own eventually, but training helped speed up the process and helped them become aware of coaching in a different way.
Growth

Regardless of the level of training and experience from each coach--every single participant mentioned something related to their continuous growth and development as a coach. Growth had a glaring presence in the way they talked about their work. Some participants even suggested that you could not be an effective coach without also realizing that you are continually growing in your role as a coach. Participants shared they learned and incorporated other models into their practice, such as the GROW model, which they learned about before or after coach training. They also talked about reading research, textbooks, other areas of personal growth and development, and creating models at their campus.

Additionally, Lauren, Connie and Gina talked about leaning more heavily on their schooling or experience than their coach training. Lauren described her training as “They just kind of support what I already know.” Connie explained how she felt like coaching had a lot to do with intuition and natural abilities, but that her training had been helpful to fine tune techniques. Gina described her training as “brief” and that she leaned more heavily on her counseling experience. Based on their responses, I found it challenging to determine if this was because of the strength or weaknesses of their coach training or their graduate programs. For those with several training experiences, they had clear favorites and opinions about which was most helpful. Serena shared how coach training had been “hit and miss.” Coach training varies in format, length, approaches, and there are limited standards when it comes to training. As a result, training for coaches in higher education also varies in quality and should be considered when reading findings.
Since I am trying to understand coaching practices in higher education, during second interviews, I asked participants how they hope to grow, specifically as it relates to their practice as a coach. Answers varied drastically and no major themes emerged. For example, Gina shared how she would like to increase her toolbox, specifically around STEM strategies, while Tucker wanted to improve the way he integrates coaching and advising. Michelle, Lauren, and Jenny wanted certification from a training approved through the ICF (International Coach Federation). Connie wanted to learn how to engage in better recordkeeping and Jordan wanted to learn different models of coaching in higher education. Randy wanted to learn how to get to the core issue quicker in a meeting and Michelle and Jenny wanted to better engage students who are less motivated. Jordan wanted to learn how to better articulate what coaches do to staff, faculty, and students to clarify what coaching is, and is not. Mallory wanted to learn how to better assess her own coaching practice, as well as coaching practices more broadly. These areas of growth drastically varied because of the different levels of experience, training, and awareness of coaches interviewed in this study.

**Summary of Theme Five: Training, Growth, and Development as a Coach**

Training, growth, and development as a coach emerged as a major theme to understand coaching practices in higher education. Training varied in delivery, length, and approach. However, most participants talked about their training in a somewhat positive light. Training helped participants have similar language to discuss coaching, understand their role better, think about how and why they do what they do, and incorporate strategies to help them have more effective conversations with students.
While training certainly helped, participants had a variety of ways that they wanted to grow in their coaching practice and were excited for the potential to learn more.

The Coaching Role in Higher Education

To understand how coaches perceived their role in retention, I asked participants to explain how they perceived their role and how they described their role to others who might be confused about what they did. I asked these two questions at the beginning and end of each interview. At the beginning of interviews, participants talked about their role generally. They described this role as supportive, challenging students, helping students graduate, and helping students become their best self. Towards the end of the first interview, I also asked participants “Can you describe a time, if applicable, when another professional on campus was confused about your role and how did you respond?” Interestingly, half of all participants laughed out loud. The question generated more levity in the conversation and opened up participants to share more. During the second interviews, I also asked participants more about what they hoped students would experience or leave with as a result of their coaching experience. Throughout all interviews, participants often compared what they did to other roles on campus. In this section, four sub themes emerged: (a) identity confusion; (b) the interplay between coach, student, and institution, (c) coaching outcomes, and (d) training.

Identity Confusion

Participants described their role from differing perspectives based on institutional context and the experience of the coach. Grace shared,
Our coaching here at the institution, from what I have read at other institutions, is very different. Our coaching is not prescriptive. Our coaching is not transactional. Our coaching really addresses our students or engages our students in a reflective experience that is true to the essence of coaching where that person has time to make self-discoveries and increase their awareness.

This statement suggested that other coaches across the country might approach their work as more transactional and prescriptive. However, that was not completely accurate based on this study and depends on a variety of factors. It was unclear where this assumption is coming from, or if this assumption might be true among coaches who did not participate in this study, or who do not have coach-specific training.

Other participants used this as an opportunity to compare their role with others. Comparing their role with others was a common way to describe the coaching role.

Mallory described her role as supplemental. She shared,

I feel like because I have been an academic advisor and I know that the relationship that the advisor and the student have is so important to retention and to graduation on time and things like that. I feel like my role as a coach is really supplemental to the academic advising role and to the student affairs professional role. A good part of the time I explain it to the student as I’m just one member of your success team. So you have a career counselor that’s part of your success team, the learning center tutors, your academic advisor your faculty mentor. If you have one of those a peer success coach, if you have one of those. And I’m just one part of your success team and that we’re all kind of here for the student.

Mallory suggested that the role of a coach is valuable, but that this role is just one of many on campus that can help a student. She wanted folks across campus to collaborate to best support the student. Her choice of the word “team” was unique when compared to other participants.

Mentoring came up as a way to explain what coaches do, and also what coaches do not do. For example, Jordan explained her role “As someone who mentors students and kind of helps them to think a little deeper about their learning processes and whether
or not those processes are helping them or hindering them.” However, in the second interview with Jordan, I asked her to explain more about her perception about the role of mentor. She explained, “It is separate from coaching because a lot of the time coaching, I mean, you’re not really mentoring the student as the coach, if we’re just, if this is just the only role.” She clarified that as a black woman who works as a predominantly white institution, she takes a multitude of roles, as she often finds herself mentoring students with similar identities. Connie also shared, “I view my role as mentor, a cheerleader. I view it as, as, as teacher and role model. In some cases, counselor just in terms of asking the right questions to try to get to the root of issues.” She went on to say, “Success coaches and mentoring have a ton of overlap because if you’re, if you’re successfully coaching, you are also mentoring. If you are mentoring, you are also sometimes coaching.” However, another coach, Jenny made a clear distinction between coaching and the role of mentoring and teaching. She shared,

A mentor is someone who’s still supportive, but more of, let me take you under my wing, right. And show you how to do something instead of teaching you how to do it on your own. So I think without all the training, I would be more in the role of a teacher and not helping someone learn it, learn that skillset. And in some ways, that’s enabling also.

Jenny stated confidently that mentoring, coaching, and teaching are different. She also connected this back to how she was trained. Participants likely have different perspectives on their role as a coach based on their training. However, it was unclear if this was solely because of training or some other experience, professional development opportunity, or belief.

People varied in perspectives about coaching and the relationship between mentoring, advising, or teaching. With the exception of Connie’s response, all
participants were in agreement that they were not counselors, even those who were trained in counseling. During her first meetings, Grace would review the coaching agreement. She explained, “That it is not counseling, it is not therapy, it is not mentoring. It is not consulting. . . . So it has a list of what coaching is not.” Grace wanted the student to be clear about what she was not. Gina, who was going through a counseling program shared,

And so, you know, I’ll even say sometimes you know, this is not counseling, this is coaching. The difference being that, you know, there are some subjects and some things that I, that aren’t fair to you to open up. I’m more than willing and happy to talk about tough stuff like, you know, and then I’ll give examples like divorce or breaking it with a partner or maybe a trauma you’ve experienced but this, this isn’t counseling.

Gina explained that she was willing to “go there” with students, but this meant that she was willing to have difficult conversations without treating a student from a counseling perspective. Kara also shared how students would need more support than she was able to provide. During this time, she would refer students to their counseling center on campus.

Grace shared,

It’s important that I am aware of my training and the limitations of my training. And the damage that could be done if I assumed a role or assumed counseling or therapy as a part of coaching, which it is not. And I know my limitations and when I see that a student needs a service beyond my training, that is when we make a phone call.

Grace has a certification through one of the larger governing bodies and was the only one to specifically talk about the potential damage if a coach did not understand these boundaries. While participants were clear that they were not counselors, it was unclear as to how they draw these boundaries with their students (from counseling and other roles), and if training gives them the confidence to know when to do so.
Participants also felt they were not advisors as well, though this was not as clear when compared to counseling. For example, Amanda explicitly stated in the interview, as well as with students “And with coaching, I want them to immediately recognize what coaching is. And like reinforce that I am your coach, I am not your advisor.” However, Michelle also shared how she started out as an advisor. She went through coach training and explained how she “incorporated everything that I learned through the coaching training in all of my advising sessions.” Now that she has the role of a coach, she explained how her practice has changed over time. Michelle stated “I think that I used to, when I was a new coach, I would try to use a tool from the book way too often. And that’s where it sorta got, it was very hit and miss.” In this scenario, Michelle started to lean less on knowing which tool she was going to share and more on trusting herself as a coach, though she was quick to clarify she was always growing. Tucker explained how he was both a coach and advisor, but for different students. Sometimes, however, these roles still blurred. Majority of participants explicitly stated to their students and in interviews that they were not advisors. However, in Michelle’s case, she incorporated coaching into her advising, but it looked different than how she coaches now.

These varying perspectives alone are not bad in and of themselves because coaching can and does look different across the country. However, when conducting research or even referring students on campus, clarity is needed to really understand how coaches can help students and what their approach is when doing so. Identity confusion made it challenging to collaborate with other student support services on campus, even though coaches prioritize connecting students to campus resources. Role confusions is
similar to that of an earlier study to understand the roles and responsibilities of academic coaches in higher education (Sepulveda, 2017).

Participants expressed being proactive and helping to educate those on their campus who have a misunderstanding about what they do as a coach. For example, Jordan introduced herself to all the academic advisors on campus to explain her role and how they might work together. Participants talked about building relationships across campus as crucial to offering better support to their students. They referred to a variety of services included tutoring, financial aid, faculty, and even food pantries. Part of their coaching practices was to articulate how these offices could support students and figure out what was getting in the way of a student using them.

**Interplay Between Coach, Student, and Institution**

Participants talked about the balance between the coaching field and their role on campus. For example, most of the time, the student is able to come up with answers themselves. But sometimes, the student gets stuck or is looking for new ideas or ways to approach their life in a different way. Based on the perspectives of participants, coaching in higher education is a delicate blend of both of these - while they are heavily reliant on coaching beliefs and tools that are used in the broader field, they also have to navigate the goals of the institution or their job title of helping students. Mallory described this as a skill of knowing when to hold back even if you knew the correct information that a student needed. Knowing when to hold back provides space for the student to come up with the answer on their own. Coaches could take the various factors that came into play regarding skilled intuition to help a student move forward when they did not know where to start.
C. E. Robinson (2015) found the number one reason that academic and success coaching programs were created was to increase retention. While participants viewed this as part of their role, they also expressed how the student or human came first. Gina explained,

So I think, I think my work helps retention at the university level because it is someone that they can go to, a point person who they know, hopefully has their back and is interested in them and is coaching them. And so I think that sense of belongingness. And having someone you know, on staff to have your back is important.

Gina indicated that retaining a student was not an immediate goal of coaching. However, retention could be a result of coaching because it helps increase a students’ sense of belonging and the student has a relationship with a staff member. Research shows that sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012) and knowing a staff member on campus increases retention (Schreiner et al., 2011). Randy also saw his role as a way to increase belongingness.

Lauren also shared an example of when she met with a student who wanted to drop out of college. Lauren explained,

Last semester, it ended up being that that student withdrew from all of his classes in the fall, changed majors and will be starting this spring in sports management with the right classes to fit his passion. And he’s a lot more excited about it. We went from at the beginning of our conversation, the first time I met with him of, he was ready to drop out, never go to school again, never continue. To at the end of that two-hour conversation. He was a lot more positive, a lot more excited, a lot more . . . I can do this.

Lauren explicitly talked about the students’ plan to leave and helped the student to see that they could reframe dropping out of college to taking time off and returning whenever they were ready. This interaction helped the student see options to return to the institution
and possibilities with their major. Lauren was able to balance both the goals of the student, as well as the institution.

**Coaching Outcomes**

In first interviews, participants would hint at what they hoped students would leave with, after working with their coach. As I tried to better understand their role on campus and how they support students in higher education, I had to dive deeper. In the second interview, I explicitly asked participants what they hoped students would gain by working with a coach. Interestingly, only one participant, Michelle, even mentioned retention, and this was only as a side comment and not the main outcome she hoped for. Common outcomes included not being alone, belief in their capabilities, confidence and competence, and ownership.

**Student is not alone.** Participants wanted their students to leave coaching meetings with a sense that they were not alone on this college journey. Gina explained how she “has their back” and Grace wanted students to feel valued. Participants shared how their door was always open, even after their coaching interaction was complete. Michelle and Connie also explained the importance of encouraging the use of other resources on campus in addition to the continued access to them. They wanted students to feel like that when they do get stuck, they are not alone. This finding aligns with self-determination theory and the concept of relatedness and sense of belonging (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002; Strayhorn, 2012).

**Student is capable, confidence, competent.** Another outcome that participants wanted students to have because of their interaction was the belief that they are capable. This finding aligns well with competence in self-determination theory (R. M. Ryan &
Deci, 2002; Spence & Oades, 2011). Participants worked with students to increase their belief in self as they made progress externally toward their goals. Coaching practices help students develop skills, make their own decisions, and develop a growth mindset. Carlos described how he wants students to believe that they are their own experts, giving them the confidence to make decisions and change. Gina shared “I want them to have hope that they can be successful and I want them to walk away with like tangible skills that they can implement to be their best academic self.” Jordan described, “My main hope always is, is that when they leave from here that they understand that they do have the capacity to do better.” Coaches wanted students to feel like they could actually do this on their own, that they have built up the skills they need to be successful, whatever that looks like for them. Michelle, Randy, and Lauren also mentioned aspects of wanting their students to feel fully capable in their abilities.

Part of capabilities is building up skills in a variety of academic areas and building self-awareness of their own resourcefulness as students and people. Jordan explained how she wants to help students deepen their metacognition and Grace talked about becoming a better critical thinker. Tucker wanted students to have “a better understanding of themselves.” Participants not only had this inherent belief that their students were capable, they helped students see they were capable themselves by building skills, acknowledging strengths, developing a growth mindset, and having greater self-awareness.

Michelle, Lauren, Mallory, Jenny, and Grace talked about confidence and competence explicitly as an outcome for their work with students. These coaches wanted students to have the confidence that they can do this, and to lean on the growth and
insights that they have had together. Jenny described how she wants students to have “awareness that they are able to move forward, make decisions on their own and be successful with whatever that is for them.” Mallory explained, “I really want them to pick up the resilience piece and the competence piece and, I want them to think that they are, that they are powerful.” Mallory believed students were powerful—but she also wanted students to see this in themselves after working with her. Participants were able to build this confidence in their practice because they consistently worked toward having students come up with answers themselves.

Make it your own. Outcomes also emerged related to the student becoming more self-sufficient and autonomous in their life. This finding aligns with LaRocca’s (2015) study in how coaches helped students develop a sense of autonomy and self-determination theory (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000). Serena explained,

But I’m hoping that they’re taking what we talk about and make it their own. That’s like the biggest sign of success because if they’re not making it their own and they’re just doing it the way that I want them to do it, they’re not going to stick with it. But if they make it their own and they have an ownership of it, then they’re going to stick to it longer.

Serena was referring to the skills she helps students develop. If she simply tells the student they have to do things her way, the student has little to no autonomy. By making the strategy or tool their own, the coach encouraged ownership. Grace shared,

I hope for me, I want my students, actually all people to walk away knowing that they have control over their lives. And to know that they are individuals and that they can make decisions that will compliment who they are.

Participants wanted students to leave coaching with a sense of control and ownership in their lives, and that they can make their own decisions that align with who they are, and
who they want to become, which aligns with the broader field of coaching (Salter, 2015; Thomson, 2012; van Nieuwerburgh, & Tong, 2013).

**Summary of Findings**

The six major themes discussed in the findings section included: (a) Coaching Beliefs; (b) Coaching Skills; (c) Coaching Meetings in Higher Education, (d) Coaching Practice Over Time; (e) Training, Growth, And Development as a Coach; and (f) The Coaching Role in Higher Education. Findings shed light on how coaches in higher education perceive their coaching practice. In the discussion section, I addressed each of the research questions in detail, related findings to self-determination theory, and incorporated greater insight into what findings mean for the emerging profession.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Findings shed light on the perceived practices of trained four-year coaches in higher education. Six major components made up these coaching practices: coaching beliefs that permeate every aspect of the coaching interaction, coaching skills, coaching meetings, coaching progression over time, continuous training, growth, and development, and how the role is situated on campus. In the following discussion, I used findings to address each of the research questions. The overall research question was:

Q1 How do trained college and university coaches perceive their coaching practices?

The following sub-questions were:

Q1a What specific strategies do coaches perceive they use to help students define their goals in first meetings, and over several meetings?

Q1b What do coaches perceive they do in first meetings, and over several meetings to help college students reach their goals?

Q1c What role do coaches perceive they have in retention?

Q1d How do coaches perceive they fit into the undergraduate student support system on their campus?

I begin by addressing the sub-questions first, then revisit the overarching research question. Before I address each question, I also revisit self-determination theory and refer to the major components, relatedness, autonomy, and competence throughout, to understand coaching practices in higher education. I also discuss the significance of the
parallel process of the student and coach development. I conclude this section by summarizing the overall research question and offering ideas for future research to build upon coaching practices in higher education.

**Coaching for Self-Determination in Higher Education**

Self-determination theory informed this narrative research study. Self-determination theory showed up in interviews as part of the coaching process and in the outcomes coaches hope for students. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of each of these components and revisit these elements throughout this section.

Self-determination has three major components: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) explained relatedness in the educational context as, “People tend to internalize and accept as their own the values and practices of those to whom they feel, or want to feel, connected, and from contexts in which they experience a sense of belonging” (p. 139). Relatedness was prioritized in every meeting and was foundational to coaching practices. As stated in the literature review, competence relates to confidence and what an individual believes about themselves, including their capabilities to achieve a goal or develop a skill (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002). Michelle, Lauren, Mallory, Jenny, and Grace explicitly shared confidence as an outcome they strove for when meeting with students. Participants helped students develop competence over time by achieving meaningful goals, developing skills, addressing challenges experienced by students, building on previous research (Parker & Boutelle, 2009). Spence and Oades (2011) found autonomy provided clients with a voice, encouraged clients ownership in their decision making and development, and helped determine what is important to discuss in a meeting. Coaching practices in higher education in the current
study align with previous findings how students must set the agenda and have choice throughout coaching interactions (Salter, 2015; Spence & Oades, 2011; Thomson, 2012; van Nieuwerburgh & Tong, 2013). Each of these elements will be referred to when addressing the research questions.

In addition to the components of relatedness, competence, and autonomy are motivation, introjection, integration, and internalization. As mentioned in Chapter III, an increase in autonomy can fuel motivation and influence whether people achieve their goals (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002). As coaches encourage students to identify and work toward their own goals, motivation is likely to increase, along with effort the students are willing to put in. Students move from introjection, where they work toward goals they do not actually want for themselves to integration, where the students’ goals are their own. The process moving from introjection to integration is called internalization (Deci et al., 1994). Over time, coaches perceived students were able to internalize what they wanted to accomplish in college and in life. Similar to Gabriel et al. (2014) findings, coaches facilitated this integration and internalization process by encouraging students to pursue goals they wanted. As autonomy increases, so do students’ competence, motivations, academic performance, and overall well-being (Gabriel et al. 2014).

Additionally, the three psychological needs of self-determination theory (relatedness, competence, autonomy) are considered as essential to optimal functioning, growth, integration, motivation, social development, and personal well-being (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students are more likely to thrive when these three psychological needs are satisfied. Schreiner (2010) discussed the concept of thriving in college happens when students are engaged in their learning, when they have academic determination, can
view their circumstance from a positive perspective, have a sense of social connectedness, and are connected and engaged in their community and world. Coaches facilitated this individually, as the concept of thriving and student success was different for each student (Schreiner, 2013; Seligman, 2011). Similar to the broader field of coaching, coaches in higher education perceived they supported self-determination and thriving within their students (Grant et al., 2009; R. J. Jones et al., 2016; Theeboom, et al., 2014). In the following section, I discussed how coaches help students identify and reach their goals.

**How Coaches Help Students Identify and Reach Goals**

Participants used several strategies to help students identify and reach goals. This section addresses the first two sub-research questions: “What specific strategies do success coaches perceive they use to help students define their goals in first meetings, and over several meetings?” and “What do success coaches perceive they do in first meetings, and over several meetings to help college students reach their goals?” Goals were embedded in the coaching practice and participants prioritized goal identification in the first meeting and while setting the agenda. Participants explicitly asked students what their goals were, both in college and in life, and then revisited these goals throughout their coaching relationship. Participants asked students about their goals in different ways such as how they wanted to grow, how they wanted to develop, or want they wanted to accomplish. Setting clear and explicit goals helped coaches maintain focus throughout their time working with students. Coaches also implied setting clear goals was likely helpful for students, as they often are unsure about what they are working towards, or why they are in college.
Participants not only identified goals initially, but they also understood that goals could change overtime. Changing goals was inherent in the coaching process, which highlights the necessity of multiple meetings. Participants shared stories about how students’ goals completely changed or were slightly modified overtime. This reimagining of goals was attributed to the relationship, reflection, self-awareness and increased autonomy. As students developed deeper and stronger relationships with coaches, they could be more honest about what their goals were. Students would feel more comfortable sharing their dreams, as opposed to their parents’ dreams (or other influential factors). This underscores how important the relationship is to the coaching process, along with the process of internalization (Deci et al., 1994). Coaches helped students think and reflect critically about their goals and conveyed choice to enhance internalization. Additionally, as students reflected over time, they could change or modify their goals as they gained clarity, built confidence, realized they had choices, and became more self-determined individuals.

Reaching one’s potential is part of the broader coaching literature (Whitmore, 2017). In higher education, coaches strive to help students see what they are capable of and believe that students are more capable than they know. Coaching skills were used in all aspects of the coaching practice such as reflection questions and relationship building to facilitate possibility. Incorporating skills were necessary to help students identify and reach their goals.

Another coaching strategy used to help students identify and reach their goals was getting to the root or underlying issue. When participants could help students to recognize what the underlying cause of the surface level goal or challenge was, they would get to
the deeper, more meaningful goal. Once coaches got to the underlying challenge, they could more forward and address barriers to overcome the issue. Students had both external barriers--such as food insecurity or financial barriers; and internal barriers--such as confidence and time management. As students built up confidence, they felt more competent. While coaches could address the surface level challenges, participants believed it was the underlying issue that would ultimately make the biggest difference for students. Getting to this underlying or root issue took time and trust. When multiple challenges were present, coaches would reflect and search for themes among topics to determine if there was one underlying challenge.

**Authenticity**

Authenticity emerged throughout interviews as a way to build the coach-student relationship. By being authentic, coaches felt as though it gave them permission to challenge students when they were not fully committing to a next step or when students were trying to answer a question without giving it a lot of thought. To be clear, authenticity did not mean that coaches self-disclose everything on their mind. When coaches did self-disclose, it was for a purpose. They wanted students to feel a sense of connection by realizing they, too were humans. Coaches could not participate in a meeting and be fake because being real with their students was an act of mutual respect.

Being authentic also minimized power dynamics that students can experience with professionals who work at a college. Authenticity was a way to break down the power dynamic that can contradict collaboration and partnering with students, which is foundational to coaching (ICF, 2020b). Ultimately, when coaches are able to be authentic, students are likely to feel comfortable being their authentic selves. Students are
more willing to open up and be vulnerable in the coaching process. Authenticity among coaches in higher education should be explored further.

**The Compelling Coach: Getting Students to Buy In**

The compelling coach is able to get students to buy in to the coaching process. Buy in was presented as both necessary and a challenge for participants. Identifying and reaching goals is less likely to happen if students do not return for a second (or third or fourth) meeting. I anticipate student buy in is likely a differentiating factor between coaching in higher education and the broader field of coaching. Historically, coaching has been offered to students for free on most campuses and students choose whether they participated (C. E. Robinson, 2015). Because participation is voluntary, coaches must convey what coaching is to students in a compelling way to get them to return for a second meeting. Participants relied on relationship building, explaining their role, providing ideas of what topics they could talk about, and offering mini coaching sessions in the first meeting to show the value of coaching. Michelle, Lauren, and Mallory talked about how relaying the value of coaching was essential. Providing value was a way to get students interested in coaching initially, but a priority in every meeting.

The combination of providing value, explaining their role, and prioritizing the relationship in the first meeting, if strong, was likely to lead to another coaching meeting. However, if one or even two of these pieces (relationship, buy in, mini-coaching sessions or providing value, and understanding the coach role) was missing, I believe students are likely to return for a second meeting. For example, students can develop a strong relationship with coaches but not quite understand what coaching is and schedule another meeting. Students could understand how coaching would benefit them (they are ready for
help), but they are not yet willing to open up to coaches, and still schedule another meeting. This implied the alternative. If students leave the first meeting skeptical of the coaching process and do not build a relationship with coaches, they would likely not show up to the second meeting. Relatedness was a priority—if students connected with coaches, they were more likely to return to additional meetings. Participants believed that the stronger their relationship with students, the more progress they could make together. In his concept map, Tucker talked about walking just behind students, as opposed to leading students to a pre-determined destination. Tucker showed that he trusted students to make decisions that are best for them.

The importance of the coaching relationship cannot be overstated. Relatedness emerged throughout interviews when participants talked about retention and sense of belonging. Participants wanted their students to know they belonged at the institution and were not alone on their journey. Coaches were a part of the students’ community and helped students build community with other students and with other resources across campus. These findings align with prior research in the broader field on the importance of the relationship in a coaching context (Spence & Oades, 2011).

These three factors were also present throughout participants’ time working with students. Participants had to remind students of their role (e.g., when participants reminded students that it was their goal, not the coach), continue to provide value (e.g., help students make and see their progress), and build the relationship. Coaches in higher education have the challenge to sell a free (for students) service to students, taking up valuable time in already busy schedules. Additionally, students may not always know what they need or want. And sometimes, students do not actually want coaching support.
Findings show it is both essential and a challenge to create a compelling narrative to encourage student engagement in coaching. More research could be done to understand these factors and what might encourage students to initially engage and remain engaged in the coaching process. If students choose not to attend one or several meetings, they would not be able to identify and reach goals using the coaching process.

**The Conversational Framework for Coaches in Higher Education**

Commonalities emerged in relation to the conversational framework of participants. While many participants could not name the meeting progression, I was able to create six phases from their stories to develop a conversational framework. van Nieuwerburgh (2017) described the conversational process as “the heart of coaching” (p. 75). The Conversational Framework for Coaches in Higher Education is made up six phases: (a) Connection, (b) Accountability, (c) Topic or Agenda, (d) Exploration, (e) Growth and Insight, and (f) Action or Next Steps. Phases found in this study aligned with some aspects of other coaching models, such as the GROW model (Whitmore, 2017). Similarities were not surprising given how participants mentioned these models when they shared how they were trained or what they had learned through their professional development.

**Six phases of a coaching meeting in higher education.** In this section, I explain each of the six phases of a meeting: (a) Connection, (b) Accountability, (c) Today’s Topic or Agenda, (d) Exploration, (e) Growth and Insight, and (f) Action or Next Steps. As mentioned in findings, the flow and progression of the individual meeting varied among participants. I brought in the sequences of action from participants’ narratives to understand this progression and create a systematic process of the coaching conversation.
(Lindström & Isaksson, 2017) specifically for coaches in higher education. Two main differences emerged specifically relating to the topic or agenda and the exploration phase. Some participants talked about how they immediately helped students set the topic or agenda for the conversation after following up from the previous meeting. They then explored more after setting the agenda. Other participants explored more with students first, and then helped them identify the topic or agenda. It was unclear to the logic of either, but there is some evidence to suggest this is dependent on the type of training. I incorporated both perspectives into the conversational framework presented here. I share a visual in Figure 1 to explain the six phases of a coaching meeting.

![Conversational framework for coaches in higher education](image)

*Figure 1. Conversational framework for coaches in higher education*
**Connection.** During interviews, I asked participants to share what they do at the beginning, middle, and end of each meeting. Connection came up as a major component in the beginning of each meeting. The purpose of the connection phase helped students to feel more comfortable and valued as a human. Participants shared stories in how they would talk about anything from the weather to noticing changes in hair color when students first walked into their office. Grace shared a story about how she asked her student if their younger sibling was going to attend sibling weekend. Grace remembered small details, like the student having a younger sibling. Lindsey explained, “You know, so I just try to like, you know, be a human being.” She prioritized the human first, then talked more about the student as the meeting progressed. During this time, participants also asked generally about how students were doing since they last met. Some of what is brought up during this time is relevant to the future agenda(s), while other times, it can seem like just catching up. Students had time to share new insights, challenges, or successes they have had, which flows into the next phase of the conversational framework.

**Accountability.** Follow-up and accountability were used interchangeably in findings and align with the broader field of coaching (D. T. Hall et al. 1999) and prior research on coaching in higher education (Blankenship, 2017). Participants shared examples following up with students who were trying out new strategies or even going to counseling. The purpose of accountability was for coaches to revisit goals or next steps that were set in the previous meeting. Carlos shared the following as an example:
So catching up on what we talked about in the previous session. So that, that element of accountability that I think a coach needs to give a student. Catching up on what they said that they wanted to work on, what they wanted to accomplish. So let’s say that we built a study schedule for them. Just kinda bringing it back up. Hey, how, how has this been going? What’s worked, what hasn’t worked? So I think definitely following back up sometimes. I’ll do that first or a lot of times.

Coaches bring up what students committed to as a way to support accountability and for students to gauge their own progress. Coaches asked students: “What worked?” and “What hasn’t worked?” while following up. They used the skill of reflection to elicit insight from students’ perspectives so they could build upon what they were working on or change direction. Follow up was a way to connect because coaches remembered what students were working on. Participants were clear, however, that the accountability piece was not about coaches, but about the students. For example, during data collection, no negative repercussions were mentioned if students did not follow through on their action or next step. This accountability puts the ownership back on students, aligning with autonomy in self-determination (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Topic or agenda.** While participants approached agenda setting in various ways, one thing was clear--students were highly encouraged to pick the topic or agenda to focus on. The logic behind student choice is that students would be more likely to follow through and stay motivated to reach their goals (Spence & Oades, 2011). For example, imagine a student walks in the office and the coach tells the student they are going to work on time management. That student may not want or need to work on time management. Additionally, multiple topics can come up during the connection, follow up, or exploration phases. If students have multiple topics to discuss, coaches can give insight as to the timing of the semester and help them prioritize. In this instance, the
agenda would be co-created to help students when they were not sure what is most important in the institutional context.

Niemiec and Ryan (2009) referred to autonomy in the educational settings as having choice on the students’ own volition. This was present in the way participants strongly expressed their support for students to set the agenda or topic in each meeting. However, it was clear that some students needed a bit of direction first, before moving on to complete autonomy. Therefore, coaches varied in how much autonomy was given to students in the beginning of their coaching relationship. Some participants started out a bit more directive, while others were non-directive. Participants wanted to put the ownership back on students in small ways. Participants put the ownership back on students by reminding them that it is their goals, their action, and their timeline to move forward. As autonomy grew, so did the trust between students and coaches.

The phrase expect the unexpected comes to mind as participants shared the need to be ready for however students showed up. This is an example of the belief to meet students where they are and the skill of being comfortable with the uncomfortable. Mallory was also very clear that coaches do not set the agenda--students do, which is an example of how coaches meet students where they are and also encourage autonomy (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000). Mallory shared,

I think it’s really important to clarify that I don’t ever choose the topic. Goes against all the life coaching. The student chooses the topic and that’s why we have the question, what do you want to discuss today? What do you want to work on today?

Mallory, along with most participants, had strong beliefs that students need to choose the topic. Tucker agreed when he described,
I want to meet you where you are, is what I tell them. By allowing you to set the agenda, I am meeting you where you are. As opposed to me deciding hey, this is what we are going to talk about today. Now I always have a Plan B.

While participants clarified multiple times that students should pick the topic, it was unrealistic for them to rely on students to always come prepared with a topic every meeting. Particularly at the beginning of the relationship, students could have a difficult time coming up with a topic to discuss, or simply understanding the role of a coach. Participants labeled this experience as having a Plan B. Having a Plan B included having potential topics in mind that students might need to consider based on the timing of the semester or prior goals that were set by students in previous meetings. Gina used this strategy when students were stuck.

    Well, I think identifying goals really comes down to like if you know, if a student is like, I have no idea. Like I just, I’m just not doing well. Okay. We can roll with that. And that’s when I kind of bring into the session, okay, well these are four areas that I have seen folks struggle with and then learn new strategies or in these areas and do well.

This gave the student an opportunity to choose (encouraging autonomy) within several areas, what might be most helpful for them. The Plan B concept is also an opportunity to try new tools with students. Other participants talked about having activities from their toolbox to help students pick a topic. Plan B was an important part of the conversational framework so students would gain value from each meeting, regardless if students had a topic or agenda in mind or not. As students become more familiar with the coaching process, they are more likely to bring in topics or areas they want to grow in. This is likely to rely heavily on setting clear expectations at the beginning of coaching and reiterating the role of a coach throughout the relationship.
Participants talked about how they helped students pick a topic when students felt stuck or uncertain about how to move forward. Jordan explained “I will do a lot more to like draw the student out by asking questions if they really feel like they just don’t know what they want to talk about, to try to hone in on an area.” Some participants talked about this as a way to explore where students are at, while others talked about how they only asked these questions when students had multiple things going on and had a difficult time prioritizing on their own. For example, Sara shared,

But a lot of times there’s multiple things. They’re like, okay, you know, and we kind of figure out what to prioritize first. So if it’s like, I have a chem test and a physics test and I’m fighting with my roommate. I’m like, okay, what’s, you know, what would be the biggest thing that we can talk about? And sometimes it’s like, no, I just need to figure out how to like be focused and motivated.

In this scenario, Sara explained how she helped a student pick a topic, not by the coach picking the topic, but helping the student reflect on options she is hearing. The scenario is also an example of a coaching skill, as coaches try to understand what the underlying concern is, which would make the most difference for students. Participants used clarifying questions to help students reflect and assess where they are at, and determine what would be most helpful during the meeting.

Participants talked about the agenda as including anything from a general topic (i.e., time management) to a very specific goal for the meeting (I want to leave the meeting with a new study technique I can implement for my Sociology course). Goal setting aligned with the broader field of coaching as well (Grant, 2003; Grant et al., 2009). While it was important to note students setting the agenda represented most of the participants interviewed, two participants had a slightly different take on who sets the agenda setting. Serena and Gina talked about having a pre-picked topic. However, asking
follow-up questions in the second interview provided clarification. In the first interview, Serena explained how she reviewed seven topics for academic success within the first three appointments. She shared,

Typically, the first three appointments are those seven things at least for me. After those first three appointments, then we are starting to talk about review, we are talking about goals, and goal setting, and I know it sounds a little backward to do goal setting in the middle, to the end of the semester. But really there’s such a need to start a base for the student to do things differently than what they . . . than doing previously.

The logic was justified from her perspective because of the student population she worked with. Serena worked with students who were at risk of academic suspension, where they had little time to make change. Serena started out with pre-determined topics to make sure students had a solid foundation of academic skills at the beginning of the semester. Once students had a foundation, she was able to broaden her work to be more inclusive of goals more broadly.

I grappled with this finding and continue to try and make sense of participant perspectives. From one perspective, if coaches have a pre-determined topic to discuss, is this coaching? Teaching? Something else? Mallory clearly stated her beliefs when she explained having a pre-determined topic goes against the core of life coaching. At the same time, pre-determining a topic first can be seen as one way to meet students where they are, depending on the students’ self-awareness. In Serena’s situation, students have a lot of pressure to perform well academically. As long as the pre-determined topics are: (a) thoughtful, (b) purposeful, (c) eventually leads to autonomous goal setting and topic selection, and (d) coaches are prepared to be flexible when students wants to discuss something else, can it be coaching? Interestingly, both Serena and Gina worked mostly
with students on academic probation and participated in the same training. It is likely their coaching approach is based on student population or training.

Without a profession, any guidelines, or best practices for coaches to ascribe, I do not believe a decision can be made in this regard. Who even gets to decide? Ultimately, the institution and the individual coach must think critically about the role of a coach on campus, their coaching practice, and the outcomes they wish to see because of their work with students. Who sets the agenda in a coaching meeting is just one of the factors to consider as individual coaches and coaching programs seek clarity regarding the role of a coach.

**Exploration.** Exploration refers to the process of exploring, assessing, and understanding what is happening from the perspective of students. Coaches used questions to help students explore possibilities, challenges, motivations, and ultimately reflect on what would help them most. Rebecca explained how she approaches exploration. She shared that she asks, “Like what is going on with a student that is getting in the way of them being their best selves both academically and personally? Cause often those two things, you know, kind of are, are very much intertwined.” The coach in this scenario wanted the student to think about what they would need to do if they were being their best. The student imagined what their best self would look like, and then made decisions based on this vision. Exploring helped coaches and students see how academics were connected to other areas. In this narrative, Amanda shared how the GROW model is used to explore once they have a goal they are working toward.

So kind of set the agenda, and then asking them, Why is this important to you? And then also, what outcome do you want from this meeting? What do you hope to gain from this meeting after we talk about this? And so, from there, the reality stage of what’s occurring that might be inhibiting your progress or what are you
currently doing? You know, just kind of getting an understanding about the situation. And from there, moving from the options stage, brainstorming what could they do to help move forward. If they don’t know any resources, I’ll give resources.

This example displays how questions are used to help coaches and students explore together, while also making progress. Amanda also used questions to explore why this topic or agenda was important to students, which aligns self-determination (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002). Exploring the motivations for pursuing the agenda was a priority after setting the agenda or topic, particularly when the agenda was set closer to the beginning of the meeting.

**Agenda before or after exploration?** One approach to the conversation prioritized setting the agenda as soon as possible in the meeting and the rest of the conversation was dependent on this agenda. Coaches then helped students explore, and ideally helped them figure out on their own (whenever possible) how they can move forward. While the conversation may diverge, coaches helped students stay focused on their agenda throughout the meeting. Having students set the agenda quickly was a priority because it allowed more space to explore and get to the deeper, underlying challenges. Participants also talked about exploration after students set the agenda to go deeper. Rachel talked about how she approached her meetings in the following quote:

> So the next step would be like, once the topic has been identified would be uncovering. So like say the issue is that they want to become like more organized. Then it’s asking those, to like ideal state. Like if you were to have like a really good system in place, what does that look like for you?

Rachel used exploration after setting the agenda as a way to explore what might be possible for students. This phase gave space for students to explore and reflect about the agenda in a deeper way. Alternatively, if the agenda is set later in the meeting, how might
the coach have time to explore the underlying challenges experienced by the student?
Would they have enough time?

The second approach encourages exploration before setting the topic or agenda. Exploration helped students prioritize what is most important to discuss before moving too quickly to a topic or agenda. Some were clear that one (exploration or setting agenda) was before the other, but in some stories they shared, exploration could be used both before and after setting the agenda. If participants talked about exploration first, it was usually seen as a way to get a sense of how students were doing in a variety of areas. Gina shared,

And so really I see my role as an academic coach, as assessing holistically a student for what is going on in personal life, in school, skills like study skills, time management you know, other things that may be going on, issues with professors, health, mental health, like, in a holistic way.

Exploration before setting the agenda was perceived as a helpful way to prioritize and get a sense of where students were at, and meet students where they are at. How might coaches get a sense of where students are at if they move straight into the agenda? Jenny explained,

And then asking them what’s coming up for the week and helping them, if it’s a need, you know, what, what is their schedule going to look like? What are they prioritizing? So we go through a review of the last week, what’s important now and what are going to be some strategies moving forward? What are their goals and what are their roadblocks?

Exploring on the front end of the meeting gave coaches a sense of what would be most helpful to discuss in meetings. This exploration phase also helped students to reflect on their week, what was coming up, pick up on key words or themes, and continue to build the relationship.
When discussing both approaches, participants talked about their way as if it just made sense. While a key difference among participants, it is not yet known which approach works best with students, in what circumstances, why they chose one way over another, or if they realize another way even exists. It is also not known if this would make a difference in the outcome participants are seeking from their coaching practice. Either way, there were strong beliefs that students choose the topic no matter when the agenda or topic is chosen, supporting the autonomy of students (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Coaches need to critically think and reflect on what they do, why they do what they do, when they do it, and how they can do it better. Coaches in higher education cannot make assumptions about what works and what does not work, as they do in their interactions with students. After the exploration or agenda setting phase, growth and insight are prioritized.

Growth and insight. The growth and insight phase refers to the time in a meeting where growth, learning, and insight are happening the most. While growth and insight are likely to happen throughout a meeting, they are particularly relevant and a priority during this phase. The phase will vary drastically depending on students and the agenda or topic that is selected. Jordan described,

And then the middle of the session will just be a time for self-reflection and where we’re learning from one another. So again, I’ll ask the student questions to kind of get a sense of, you know, what strategies they’re using thus far to plan for their time.

Before pulling out strategies from the toolbox, participants worked to help students think about the decision, choices, or habits that they were hoping to develop. The practice of skilled intuition must be a priority in the growth and insight phase to determine if coaches should ask more questions, dive deeper, share a strategy or skill, or something else.
In this phase, coaches helped students move through resistance to change, brainstorm, create a vision or ideal state of their life, gain insight into what they are capable of, develop self-awareness, learn new skills or strategies to implement, and explore what might be getting in the way. Gina explained how she helped students work through resistance in order to create new habits. Randy also shared,

First and foremost we outline, we, we set goals. So part of reaching your full potential is identifying and understanding what you’re capable of. So I think by helping them set goals and see the path or see where they want to be.

Like the broader field, Randy wanted students to see themselves as resourceful and capable of moving forward toward their goal or agenda (Moen & Allgood, 2009). Growth and insight about themselves as students, was the goal of this phase.

Addressing barriers that get in the way of progress was also part of this phase. By naming the barrier, participants helped students gain insight into what might be getting in the way. Participants were then able to help students brainstorm how they could continue to work around or move through these barriers. Jenny explained how she would ask,

Now what might get in the way of you achieving that? Very direct, very specific. And then if they kind of give me that quizzical look I’ll say, because when we’re confronted with roadblocks, which could happen all the time, if we don’t have a plan, they can stop us in our tracks. But if we’ve already come up with a plan and identified it, we’re more likely to push through. So that’s why there’s that educational piece as to why I’m asking.

Jenny was direct, transparent, and helped students gain insight into challenges that they can predict. By proactively considering what challenges students might face, it is implied that they would be more likely to overcome these challenges when addressed in a coaching meeting.

**Skilled intuition.** Skilled intuition was a key finding to bring an understanding in how participants navigate goal identification, achievement, and autonomy. Skilled
intuition refers to a coaching skill that combines intuition with perception factors that help coaches discern what they do in meetings and when they choose to do them. In this study, perception factors included knowing your student, readiness to move forward, student needs more support, knowing your toolbox, observations, exploring possibilities, and diving deeper. Coaches need to be aware of the concept of skilled intuition particularly in the growth and insight phase of the conversational framework. Skilled intuition is similar to findings from J. A. Robinsons’ (2019) study, where community college success coaches used both theory and wisdom to inform their coaching practices. However, skilled intuition uncovers the factors coaches take into consideration specifically when they encounter a moment of decision in a meeting. While coaches can lean on their own intuition, skilled intuition combines the intuition of coaches with trainable components or factors to develop intuition.

Coaching in the broader field suggests that clients need to come up with the answer themselves (Kimsey-House et al., 2011; Spence & Oades, 2011). Clients are the expert of their life, and coaches are not expected to be an expert. Similar beliefs emerged for coaches in higher education with a crucial caveat. Participants strongly believed students are the expert of their own life--however, findings showed a unique difference because participants worked for their institution, as well as for students. This seemingly contradicts the strict coaching philosophy in the broader field that clients are expected to come up with the answers. Participants in this study worked with students who were referred by staff on campus, self-referred by the student, in a specific program to provide more support, and students who were considered to be less likely to stay at the college and graduate for a variety of reasons. Participants trusted and wanted students to come up
with the answer themselves and actually tried to make that happen during meetings. However, if students are in crisis, stuck, or unsure about how to move forward, participants had to balance their knowledge about the institution and student success with their role as coaches.

Coaches used skilled intuition to determine what they do in these situations and how to move forward. Perception factors included knowing your student, readiness to move forward, student needs more support, knowing your toolbox, observations, exploring possibilities, and diving deeper. Being an effective coach is about knowing when to hold back, but also recognizing when students need more support. Based upon stories shared by participants, some coaches leaned heavily on providing answers more quickly than others. The variation is likely due to the type of training, coach awareness, or experience working as a coach, however, no clear patterns emerged.

Skilled intuition explained why coaches had to describe their role and set expectations in first meetings with students. They not only explained what their role is because students are often unaware of this type of support service, but they also wanted students to know that coaching is a process. Expectations were important to help students understand how coaching can help them identify and reach goals. If students believed coaches were going to tell them what to do, how to do it, and when to do it, they would likely get frustrated when coaches tried to help them come up with answers on their own.

Should I use my toolbox? As mentioned in the coaching skills section, participants used factors to decide whether to pull anything out of their toolbox, a factor within skilled intuition. Participants varied in being able to articulate why and when they chose to do certain things in a meeting and often relied on intuition instead of skilled
intuition. As participants gained more experience coaching, they seemed to lean less on their toolbox of strategies. Leaning less on coaching tools is likely the result of confidence in the coaches’ themselves, along with trusting students more.

Coaches perceived a variety of coaching tools they knew were either beneficial for themselves, have been helpful for prior students, or were research based. Some coaching tools that were mentioned included Bloom’s taxonomy, time management strategies, studying skills, metacognition, study cycle, growth mindset, office hours, note-taking, and reading strategies. The toolbox also included the wheel of life, a coaching strategy used to encourage self-assessment in a variety of areas in the lives of students. Some participants acknowledged that they try to have multiple strategies for each topic to provide students with autonomy to pick the one that might work best for them. For example, participants talked about having a paper and computer version of the same strategy so students could have more autonomy and still lead the meeting. Coaching tools are not used in every meeting. However, when coaching tools are used, they are likely used in the growth and insight phase of the conversational framework.

Other items in the toolbox included knowing about resources on campus and helping students gain access to these resources when appropriate. Some participants did their best to use their toolbox as a last resort, while others chose to implement these tools every meeting. It was difficult to differentiate if this choice was due to the experiences of coaches, training, experience, or simply meeting students where they are at. Jenny described how she was able to,

Provide the space for them to brainstorm. If they do get stuck on something, we will offer suggestions and then help them maybe individualize the suggestions. Understanding that for me, using a paper planner may be helpful, but for you, it may not.
Jenny explained how she relied first on the ideas of students, then offered suggestions or ideas as needed. Participants used other activities in their office such as handouts, visuals, role-playing (e.g., office hours), wipe off boards, and sticky notes to actively engage students in the learning process. Pinterest is a tool used to organize websites and resources by interests, in a visual way. Mallory shared how she used Pinterest in a student meeting to help the student be more active in her learning. Participants were creative and continued to learn new strategies or tools to implement in their meetings and ultimately better support students.

**Next steps.** Next steps refer to the process where students create and commit to an action plan, wrapping up the coaching conversation. Next steps or action planning is the last phase of the conversation framework. Participants described this as an action plan, action steps, next steps, a challenge, one step forward, or action oriented. Having an action plan aligns with prior research that coaches use action plans as part of the process when coaching students with learning disabilities (Mitchell & Gansemer-Topf, 2016). While tools, strategies, techniques, and insights happened throughout coaching meetings, it is the implementation and what happens in between meetings that is crucial to students making progress. Participants talked about creating this next step in the form of setting deadlines, smart goals, writing steps down, or simply discussing what students will do next. The timeline could be for when they return to their living space (e.g., I will do this tonight) or what they will commit to doing before the next meeting. In one scenario, Tanya explicitly asked a student, “What are tangible steps that you need to take? So, not only is it, this is the goal that I’ve set, but you know, what are some action steps that I need to take in order to be successful?” The student, again, owns what the next step is.
However, Connie did share how she would give the student a challenge as opposed to the student coming up with to the next step.

**Fluidity in the Conversational Framework**

Lindström and Isaksson (2017) described how to pull in sequences of action from narrative storytelling. To develop the conversational framework, I took into account stories from participants and the language they used. While I do believe a conversational framework for coaches in higher education will de-mystify what coaching practices look like, the coaching process happens a bit more fluid than a direct line, as shown in the Figure 1 earlier, and in prior research (Grant, 2011). Amanda described the balance between having a structure when using the GROW model and being in the moment with students.

Sometimes you will have this one goal that they’ll talk about. And then through reality, actually the real goal comes up, the real thing that needs to be addressed. So that’s why it’s a fluid model. It’s not just like, here’s step one, step two. But like, there’s fluidity. Because through that reality stage, things come up that are actually more important to address for the student.

In this example, Amanda may have to explore more, or dive deeper into the underlying concern with the student. At the same time, Jenny explained how helpful it was to have a structure to use in her coaching practice. Jenny explained “I think it’s just important that there is, there’s a formula that we use, but it’s very, it’s not standardized per se.

Personality does come into a coaching session and I think that’s important also.” A conversational framework (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017) and the phases found in this study are likely helpful for coaches because it brings intentionality and flexible steps to move a conversation along. The six phases have some overlap from prior models (Santoro & Keenan, 2015) and research (Sepulveda, 2017).
Additionally, between the first and second interviews, I asked participants to create a concept or mind map to draw out what they do in their meetings with students, or how the coaching process unfolds over time. Concept maps highlighted the complexity and fluidity of a meeting. For example, Connie reflected,

That was an interesting process for me. Because there are a lot of things that you typically . . . You do, but you don’t always think about how you do them or why you do them or everything that goes into those decisions. And so actually sitting down and, and mapping it all out, really put into perspective number one, how complicated the process can be.

Connie’s concept map highlighted how one decision, either by the coach or the student, may lead to a different outcome or experience. This emerged in other concept maps as well. Jenny found it challenging to compartmentalize what was happening in her coaching practice, also highlighting the importance of fluidity. The coaching process is not a direct path, but one to be mindful and intentional about, as it likely impacts the student experience. Regardless, the students themselves and their decisions were at the center, or a central feature of each of the concept maps.

Throughout the six phases of the coaching conversational framework, participants weave in the coaching skills discussed in findings. Relationship and rapport building were paramount in each phase. Connecting with students at the beginning of a meeting and revisiting and revising goals that were mentioned in previous meetings helped students feel like coaches listened and cared about what they were working toward. Participants used skilled intuition during the growth and insight phase. Throughout every phase of the coaching meeting, participants used questions and reflection to give the student voice and make it a priority to encourage students to lead the conversation.
Coaches can move through these phases to facilitate growth and intentionality in their own coaching practice. Moving through these phases differentiate a good conversation from a coaching conversation. For example, spending 45 minutes in the Connection phase may leave students and staff feeling as if they had a really great conversation. However, the difference between a good conversation and a coaching conversation is the intentionality behind a conversational framework. Coaching skills and strategies were woven throughout each meeting and over time to take a student through each phase. Small steps were taken to reach goals within meetings (growth and insight phase) and between meetings (action steps) to move students forward. Though participants believed they were intentional in their meetings, many were not able to name what they were doing that was intentional. Participants would explain what they did in meetings with a blanket statement and relying on their intuition - *it depends on the student and where the student is at*. I had to ask more specific questions like: “What do you do when a student first walks in the door?”, “What do you do in the middle of the meeting?” and “How do you end your meetings?” to really make sense of what was happening.

The conversational framework presented in this study is a combination of common terminology used by participants and language I developed to make sense of the data. Based on these findings, two potential reasons might explain why coaches had a difficult time describing what they do in meetings. First, perhaps few coaches are aware of or do not have training on a conversational framework. The second reason might be that participants have engaged in coaching for several years and no longer lean on a conversational framework. Creating language to explain the coaching conversation from
a higher education perspective provides terminology to build upon how coaches communicate and practice their work, specifically in the conversational framework.

Throughout each meeting, coaches developed skills with students, related to time management, study strategies, and meeting with professors. As students developed skills to be successful in the classroom, they could translate these skills outside of the classroom. As students developed and tried new things, coaches helped them reflect on what was working, what was getting in the way, and how they could continue to move forward. Participants used the coaching process over time to scaffold learning. Skills and confidence build on one another as students make small changes over time. This aligns with competence in self-determination theory because as students build confidence and skills, they are likely to believe in themselves and what they are capable of (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002). The “aha” and “light bulb” moments shared by participants are examples of students coming to their own realizations and insights while they engaged in coaching. Coaches believed over time, students would see progress and feel more competence about themselves and their capabilities, as found in prior research on self-determination and coaching (Parker & Boutelle, 2009; R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2002).

**Pacing of Meeting**

One of the roles of coaches is to facilitate the six phases of the conversational framework and keep students on task with the agenda or topic (Bresser & Wilson, 2016). Coaches act as pacers to help students move forward towards their goals while also providing the space to reflect, think, and learn about themselves. Participants met with students for a variety of time frames (30-, 45-, or 60-minute appointments) and it was
difficult to determine if this was because of training, because of their program model, or some other reason.

Multiple Meetings--Coaching Takes Time

It is the consistency of purposeful individual meetings that help facilitate growth and development of students. As participants build stronger relationships over time, they were able to help students see themes and patterns they might not see themselves. Students would gain a stronger sense of self-awareness, insight, and rely less on coaches over their time working together. Multiple meetings align with the theory of self-determination because as students build competence and autonomy over time, they are likely to become less dependent.

Participants developed competence in their students by highlighting how much they changed over several meetings. When students had a hard time reflecting, coaches may share observed strengths or point out positive action students have taken. Jordan shared,

I really feel like the major thing is helping the students to see themselves progress. Right? I really find that when we set goals and actually practice using the strategies in the session, then a student feels a lot more confident because a lot of times they come in and they just are really defeated and they just think, you know, I just really, I just don’t understand biology.

Jordan’s comment indicates that building competence takes time. Throughout the coaching process students try out new strategies within and in between meetings. Simultaneously, coaches help students see their progress. As confidence builds, students start to believe they are capable and in control of their college journey. Taking small steps towards these larger goals makes it less overwhelming for students and also helps them see progress. Coaches are alongside students, challenging them to take the best next
step. The growth, development, and ultimately retention of students was supported by the accumulation of meetings. Participants believed one meeting could support students, however, there was a stronger belief that students who met several times experienced the most growth. The belief that multiple meetings is likely to support retention efforts aligns with prior research (Capstick et al., 2019; Sepulveda et al., 2020).

Relatedness, competence, and autonomy each influence the other when incorporated in coaching practices in higher education. This highlights the importance of multiple meetings to facilitate the development and growth of students. As participants coached their students over time, they believed students felt more capable and competent in their studies and in life. As students became more confident, they also became more autonomous. At the beginning of the coaching process, participants shared how many students struggled with autonomy, specifically in choosing their own path, their own goals, or even choosing their own agenda during meetings. Some students asked coaches what they should or need to do, as opposed to making their own decisions. Over time, students become more comfortable with coaching and the expectations that have been set. As students choose goals and work towards them, this build confidence and encourages choice, aligning with the internalization in self-determination theory (Deci et al., 1994). Participants trusted these subtle, small shifts would happen over time throughout coaching and lead to change. Change included new perspectives, skills, habits, and small accomplishments.

**Relationship with Coaching, Student Support and Retention**

In this section, I address the following sub-research questions: “What role do success coaches perceive they have in retention?” and “How do success coaches perceive...
they fit into the undergraduate student support system on their campus?” I discussed role confusion and the need for clarity in the field, navigating the interplay between coach and institution, and how coaches help students bring awareness and increase access to resources on campus. Each of these addresses the research questions related to retention and how coaches perceived their role on campus.

**Role Confusion**

Participants had a difficult time explaining their role in the interviews and at their institution. At the same time, many were explicitly clear they were not doing the same role as others on campus. Some were still negotiating their role on campus and even for themselves. The unique role of a coach has to be clear for students, staff, and upper administration if the role is to further expand or even continue. However, practically speaking, the coach role is likely to depend more on the institution context--specifically in how the idea came about and what resources have since emerged to support the position. If trained, four-year coaches in this study had a difficult time articulating their role and what they do, it is no wonder why confusion remains within this emerging profession (Sepulveda, 2017). At the time of C. E. Robinsons’ (2015) study, no framework was used by half of coaches who completed the survey. Given no national organization exists to support coaches, it is not surprising that confusion is present.

Additionally, the identity of a coach had to be made clear to strengthen research, improve practice, and improve the day to day experience of coaches. For example, consider a scenario where a research study is conducted to determine if coaching has an impact on the retention of students who participated. It will not be the title itself that makes coaching effective. It will likely be due to the quality of these coaching
interactions. How can administrators know what quality coaching is, if coaches themselves find it challenging to explain what they do on campus? As funding sources diminish, administrators will be forced to make challenging decisions about what works, what does not work, and as a result, which services should continue on campus.

Coaches in higher education need to have some strategies to support students in developing time management or study skills, as I believe this does help explain their role on campus and with students. However, this becomes problematic when coaches are perceived to solely teach skills. Coaches can become frustrated in their role when their work is minimized to teaching, when they do not believe they are teaching, with the exception of when a student is stuck or in crisis. At the same time, staff outside of coaching are frustrated because they believe coaches are duplicating or taking their job. A stance must be taken to clarify the role of coaches in higher education. My hope is that findings from this study will help the emerging profession move in that direction.

Ethically, coaches will need to know and have strong boundaries relating to overlap in services, particularly counseling. Participants were very clear during interviews and with their students - they were not counselors and would not provide counseling services. Participants often referred students to counseling on campus. However, only five participants talked explicitly about the ethical boundaries at play. Coaches are often willing to ‘go there,’ as stated by Gina, which she explained as being willing to have difficult conversations without crossing these boundaries. However, Gina was going through counselor training and is likely to know the boundaries between counseling and coaching. Every participant in this study had some type of coach-specific training, but it was unclear what was covered in each training regarding these boundaries.
This may be in part because many coach trainings available happen outside of the context of higher education. Regardless, it is unclear what the boundaries are between counseling and coaching, even though participants have strong beliefs about them.

**Is Coaching Redundant?**

Based on findings from this study, the role coaches play in higher education is different than other roles on campus. Coaches help students develop, grow, and change, and work with students over time to take small steps toward their goals. While other staff on campus may help students identify and reach goals, the way coaches approach their practices is unique. These goals are broad and vary depending on the student, student population, and the students’ self-awareness. At the same time, coaches implement skills, strategies, tools, and techniques throughout meetings to help a student learn things that they are not aware of yet (i.e., how to study because they have never had to study prior to college). While they first strive to get students to come up with answers themselves and use skills to facilitate autonomy, they are aware that some students need a bit of direction if and when they are lost, confused, stuck, or in crisis.

Subtle variations of trusting students were present among participants. For example, two coaches, Serena and Gina, shared how they often start out more directive, which might imply they trust the student slightly less than having the student start out picking the topic. In a second interview, Serena made it clear that the student still has autonomy in how they move forward, but the student is less likely to pick the topic when they first start working with her. As they continue to work together, mutual trust builds, and at the same time, the student builds up confidence and self-awareness to make decisions on what is most important to them and how they want to move forward.
Regardless, participants talked about the importance of helping students make decisions on their own and trusting that their students know best. While these beliefs are likely not unique to coaching, it is the beliefs along with the consistent use of strategies, tools, skills, and techniques that are intentionally used throughout several meetings that make the coaching role unique on campus.

While a distinctive role, participants are just one piece of the student support puzzle. While identity confusion exists, coaching seems to meet a need that was not being met previously, as it has grown significantly over the past decade (C. E. Robinson, 2015). While some coaches use a variety of models, it is an informed practice misunderstood by some coaches and institutions. Many coaches had a difficult time describing or naming what they did with students because of their belief that every student is different. As a result, I leaned heavily on the commonalities they shared from the stories they told. While coaching is a unique emerging profession to support undergraduate students, I hope these findings shed light on the various aspects of coaching practices in higher education.

**Navigating Relationships with Institution and Student**

Navigating the relationship between the coach, student, and institution can be tricky in this role, specifically in regards to retention. Participants consistently talked about putting the human or student first. I would also have argued that, if you asked most folks who worked at a college, they would likely have agreed with this statement. In practice, participants observed too much emphasis was placed on retention numbers. While not directly stated, there seemed to be an allegiance to the student over the institution. At the same time, participants believed focusing on the human or student was
ultimately better for the institution and retention. The more participants focused on the student, the higher the retention rate. Lauren shared an example of this during her second interview when she talked about helping a student reframe dropping out of school by challenging the students’ language and perspective. The student thought differently about what was possible, took a semester off, and eventually returned to the same institution.

Institutions should proceed with caution as they try to scale coaching, such as integrating coaching techniques, tools, skills, or beliefs into other roles. Making these changes may diminish the impact of coaching altogether by removing the opportunity for a collaborative and individualized relationship.

In addition to this broader interplay, participants also had to navigate what they know, while staying true to coaching beliefs and the self-determination of students. For example, if the coach knows the answer to a question, should they give the answer to the student? If one is a coach according to the broader field of coaching, technically, no. Coaches experienced some inner conflict, navigating what they knew would help students, but also helping them get to the answer themselves in order to build autonomy and competence. Participants leaned heavily on skilled intuition that emerged from the data. Participants had to balance knowing when to hold back, knowing when students need some direction, and at the same time, maintaining autonomy with students.

Participants shared stories and examples in how this showed up in their coaching practice. Perhaps a student wants to improve their time management and does not know where to start. Coaches would provide two or three different strategy options to continue autonomy while also sharing their expertise or experience when appropriate. These
experiences explain why skilled intuition is so critical for coaching practices in higher education.

Having a strong toolbox was helpful when coaches used this skilled intuition. Knowing and adding to one’s toolbox was important because of the unique situation and context of coaches. While coaches strive to hold on to the coaching beliefs in the broader field, they also have a job to do—to help students to stay, graduate, reach their goals, and hopefully thrive in college and life. Participants prioritized their coaching practice and stayed true to their beliefs, but also recognized the need to integrate dates, deadlines, and other ‘must know’ resources because of who they work for. If a student is failing a class, it would be ethical to explore options and share the deadline to drop the course as a professional in higher education. Sharing information could also be seen as contradictory to coaching in the broader field. Coaches in higher education navigate this interplay carefully and artfully. The interplay between coach and institution should be considered as a component of training and socialization of coaches in higher education.

Coaching has improved student retention in a handful of studies (Barnhart & LeMaster, 2013; Bettinger & Baker, 2014; Capstick et al., 2019; Sepulveda et al., 2020). However, participants also talked about the other outcomes they hoped students would gain or experience from their coaching interactions. Findings showed participants wanted students to feel a sense of belonging on campus and to know that they are not alone (Strayhorn, 2012). They also wanted students to feel capable, competent, and have a sense of ownership in the coaching process and in their life. While some participants mentioned the retention of students, this was not seen as a main priority, but a result
because of the strong coaching relationship and development that happened while working with a coach.

**Resource Awareness and Access**

Participants helped students become aware of resources on campus to help students reach their goals. They discussed collaboration and referring students to resources that they often had no idea existed, were uncertain about how to navigate, or were nervous about trying out. Based on these findings, having coaches on a college campus is likely to improve access to resources, as many students are aware of resources on campus but often do not utilize them. Coaches help students explore what is holding them back or what barriers are in the way of their success, including why they are not using a resource on campus. Building on self-determination theory as students develop skills, competence, and autonomy with coaches, they are more likely to see the benefit and actually ask for help. Helping students get connected to resources on campus was a key aspect of coaching practices.

**The Parallel Process of Development**

As students grow and develop over time, a parallel process of growth is also happening within coaches. Participants overwhelming described the importance of their own growth and were quick to explain how they were constantly developing as coaches and people. Throughout interviews, coaches talked about how they would reflect on their practice, asking themselves what they have done well and what they could improve upon, just as they do with their students. In this section, I discuss the awareness and socialization of coaches, the progression of coach development, and how diversity showed up in the data.
Coach Awareness and Socialization

Participants had common language to discuss some aspects of their coaching practice. However, common language was not translated in how they explained their role to campus partners. Participants articulated similarities in their beliefs (i.e., meeting students where they are at; students as experts), naming strategies (i.e., powerful questioning, active listening), and the ways in which they discussed tools they used (i.e., toolbox). I anticipate similarities in language were likely because they all had some sort of coach-specific training. Belief statements such as ‘the student is the expert’ were used consistently. However, naming their approach to working with students varied drastically. Participants shared stories about how they were intentional with strategies they used during meetings, but many were not able to actually name what they were doing in meetings explicitly. For example, Rachel shared how she used a specific model, the GROW model, to help move students forward (Whitmore, 2017). Very few participants were able to name how they moved the conversation forward and take students from Point A to Point B because of the logic that every student is different. van Nieuwerburgh (2017) stated two key points regarding the conversational framework: “(1) A coaching conversation must follow a process, (2) The purpose of coaching is to support goal-setting and attainment” (p. 76). Perhaps participants are not learning a conversational framework during their training, perhaps they do not believe it is useful in meetings, perhaps they cannot articulate the framework they use, or something else entirely. Regardless, more research can be done to explore the conversational framework for coaches in higher education that are most effective in the outcomes that they seek,
such as sense of belonging, confidence, belief in capabilities, self-determination, retention, and graduation.

Participants found training to be particularly useful in certain aspects of their work. Training encouraged participants to talk and teach less. Because of their training, participants leaned more on structure, frameworks, and were able to think more about how and when to implement skills, tools, and strategies (e.g., skilled intuition). Participants went from using closed-ended questions to open-ended questions and were more reflective because of training. Advice-giving was limited or absent altogether from their coaching approach after training. Participants believed their approach was ultimately better for students than what they used prior to training. While coaches believed they previously supported students in positive ways, training elicited more growth for students in their coaching practice.

A few participants were a bit more critical about their training. Serena explained her training as hit or miss, and Connie leaned more heavily on what she learned in her graduate programs and experience instead of her coach training. Though she valued continual growth, she felt coaching was a bit more intuitive. The continuous development of coaches combined with experience and reflection is as important as the initial training. Based on the diverse perspectives of participants in their reflection on coach-specific training, the usefulness of trainings varied drastically and should be taken into consideration as coaches seek opportunities for professional development.

**Coaches Do Not Know What They Do Not Know**

In higher education, the common phrase of “they do not know what they do not know” is used to describe a phenomenon when students just do not know something yet.
This phrase assumes students would not take action or do something because they simply do not know about it. For example, a student may not seek out support for disability services on campus because they do not even know there is someone on campus who could support them in this way. While this phrase commonly refers to students, I observed this in the data, but from the coaches’ perspectives.

Training opened up a lot of opportunities for coaches to feel confident in their coaching practice. It also helped participants see there was much more to learn. One unique perspective came up from Tucker who shared, “I want people to know that there is a coach in everybody. That everybody is essentially coaching. And that… Just because I have this training, or that training, doesn’t make me any better than anybody else.”

What Tucker and other participants are not aware of is how much they have learned or how much they have grown as a coach. Tucker provided depth and thoughtfulness in his answers that were different than other participants. Whether this was based on training, experience, or something else is up for debate. He was able to name what he was doing and share specifics about his coaching practice. Tucker’s comment made me question if coaches do not know what they do not know. The potential for coaching may be in everyone. However, the necessary strategies, skills, frameworks, tools, practices, techniques and intentionality behind what coaches do, does not simply manifest by taking on a coach role. Because there are minimal opportunities to participate in coach-training and they vary in quality and cost, it makes sense as to why the coaching role is so confusing, even for those who have coach-specific training.

Carlos also shared how he made stronger connections with students after years of coaching experience. While training was the starting point, the experiences he has gained
coaching students and his curiosity has been invaluable when improving his practice.

Carlos completed training years before, but he attributed making these strong connections to his experience working in the field. By engaging in reflective experiences, coaches are able to improve their coaching practice over time, similarly to how coaches approach student meetings. Carlos did not realize this was a skill until much later in his time as a coach. Findings indicate training alone does not make an effective coach. The awareness, reflection, willingness to learn, experience coaching, training, and the ownership coaches’ themselves take on make them an effective coach. When coaches had training, they were able to think critically about their own practice. As coaches developed, they relied less on tools (such as time management) and more on their students as experts. As they progressed in coaching, they were also more organic and fluid in their approach. Coaches became more authentic because they believed to their core students would make more progress and show up as themselves if they (the coaches) showed up authentically.

**The Progression of Coach Development**

In this section, I share how coaches are progressing in their development. I describe the evolution of a coach in higher education using the narrative storytelling process. I then connect findings to the narrative to explain the evolution and development of a coach.

**The Evolution of a Coach--A Narrative**

Imagine a student affairs professional is offered a position as a coach and is charged with starting a new coaching program to increase retention for a group of students. Excellent! However, they are given very few tools, staff, or resources for training and otherwise. The coach does their best--they research schools and talk to folks
doing similar work. One thing is consistent--colleagues talk about helping students
develop skills like time management, organization, test preparation and study skills. The
new coach researches strategies around those topics and they start to work with students -
because they have to. Students have arrived on campus.

The coach begins working with students and they continue to learn and grow on
their own. They want to learn more because they really do care about their students.
Some of the strategies they incorporate in their coaching meetings seem to work. But
other times, they feel like something is missing. Then, they attend a conference. Or a free
one-hour webinar. They talk to a colleague who sends more resources. And the door
opens up about coaching in the broader field. They start questioning what they do, why
they do what they do, and how they do it. Are they really coaching their students? The
resources they read are not specific to education, but something is intriguing about all the
resources available in the broader field of coaching. They crave more. They do even more
research. They are overwhelmed. There are several resources about coaching but none of
it seems to be specific to coaching in higher education.

As they continue their work with students, the coach starts to see progress with
their students. Students are thinking differently about how they approach their classes and
are learning how to better manage their time. The coach starts to see other aspects of life
that come up in a coaching meeting. They know there is more to a students’ life than the
classroom but are not quite sure how to pull these other factors into their meetings. They
continue to do what they can and try to incorporate what they are learning. Now, it is the
end of the semester and they must write up a report to upper-level administrators. They
are charged with assessing their program to justify its’ existence.
Two major themes come up in this narrative. First, the coach begins their journey with few resources or support for coaching in higher education and in the broader field. The coach stumbled upon resources accidently through a colleague. They did not know what they did not know. In the recruitment process for the current study, several coaches wanted to participate, but had no coach-specific training. How might the findings change if I had included coaches who did not have training? Having coach-specific training has no bearing on what these coaches are capable of, however, training might help with awareness, language, strategy, and intentionality.

Second, this narrative highlights the reliance on teaching skills in the beginning of a coach’s journey in higher education. Initially, participants relied heavily on areas such as time management and study skills when they started their coaching journey. Educators inherently want to help others and one way to do this is by teaching. While coaching certainly can include the teaching of skills, this is done artfully and intentionally using skilled intuition, after the coach tries to get the student to come up with the answer themselves. Teaching skills alone is not coaching. Participants who were more directive at the beginning of their coach journey, became less directive over time. As they learned more about coaching, participated in training, and gained experience, they focused on skills less and the way they approached their practice changed. Over time, what does it mean to develop as a coach? Participants who have been in a coaching role (not in higher education overall) for 3+ years leaned more heavily on the art piece of the coaching practice. They had a strong awareness of frameworks, skills, and techniques, but felt more comfortable breaking the rules and playing within these elements.
Diversity and Meeting Students Where They Are

Only a handful of participants talked about their coaching practice in relation to supporting diverse students. These participants worked with students with disabilities, international students, and students from minority backgrounds. According to participants, the same process and skills could be used regardless of the student population (e.g., conversational framework). However, considerations and the time it takes might look different. Coaches need to consider the language they use, the pacing of student autonomy (may need to be a bit more directive with students based on cultural background), and awareness of different experiences. However, the common belief among participants were to ‘meet students where they are at,’ which arguably could be seen as one way to take various identities, backgrounds, and experiences of students into consideration. No explicit connection emerged from the data and further research should be conducted to explore student identity and coaching in higher education. To move the profession forward, coaching practices will have to move beyond what coaches do in their practice and focus more on how this work may or may not support students from diverse backgrounds.

Implications

The Art and Science of Coaching Practices in Higher Education

Art and Science of Coaching refers to the intentionality, purpose, and mindfulness of coaching as a practice. There is a structure, logic, and a systematic process involved. At the same time, there is also art, creativity, play, flexibility, and being in the present moment to move a client forward (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017). In higher education,
coaching practices look similar. In this section, I summarize the findings and discussion section to address the overarching research question: How do trained college and university success coaches perceive their coaching practices?

Coaching beliefs permeate every aspect of coaching. Coaching skills are woven within and throughout meetings, and the conversational framework for coaches in higher education provides a flexible structure to ensure students make progress towards action, goals, insight, and self-determination. As coaching happens in a progression over time, students gain deeper insight and learn more about themselves, what works, what does not work, and what they want out of college and life. Coaches critically reflect on their coaching conversations often and want to improve their coaching practice. However, as coaches gain experience and participate in training, they may be less likely to lean on a conversational framework and be more willing to engage in this fluidity or perhaps they do not have a conversational framework at all. This logic might explain why participants in this study had a difficult time naming the intentionality behind the meeting. However, it also contradicts van Nieuwerburgh’s (2017) perspective in that “a coaching conversation must follow a process” (p. 76). Either common language has not yet been developed or adopted by coaches in higher education, or these coaches rely less on a framework for their meetings.

Coaches continue to grow and develop through training, research, experiences, conversations, and reflection. A coach’s role on campus played a factor in what they did with students, their student population coached, how they were viewed at the institution, and how much training they received. Findings showed it was not one of these components that explained coaching practices in higher education. It was the interplay
and combination of beliefs, skills, tools, training, meeting structure or conversational framework, coach awareness, coach development, experience, frequency of meetings, and the role a coach had on campus that made up coaching practices in higher education from the perspectives of trained, 4-year coaches.

Findings explained coaching practices in higher education as more than powerful questions or teaching skills to students. While participants certainly incorporated questions and skill building in their work, this was only part of their role and practice. Based on these findings, the term coaching was used in a variety of contexts. In the following section, I offer a brief description of each to provide common terminology:

**Coaching skills**--Coaching skills refers to the purposeful, mindful, and intentional actions implemented by the coach. Coaching skills can be developed over time. Findings showed coaching skills included active listening, authenticity, practicing non-judgment, building relationships, asking powerful questions to elicit reflection, underlying concerns, being comfortable with the uncomfortable, knowing what to do when, knowing your toolbox, observations, exploring possibilities, diving deeper, building students up, and micro and macro level thinking. While a crucial piece of the coaching practice, skills were not the sole component they relied on. Additionally, other student support services on campus may use some of these coaching skills in their work with students, *without actually coaching a student.*

**Coaching tools**--Coaching tools referred to the strategies or activities participants incorporated in their practice that are tangible. Examples included tools to
better manage time, Bloom’s taxonomy, study skills, tools to come up with an agenda or topic, or metacognitive strategies. Virtually anyone who works with students can also incorporate tools. Coaching tools also includes how one incorporates tools with students (e.g., getting students to come up with ideas and answers themselves, and when they are stuck, offering multiple ways to improve time management, having the student pick which one they believe would work best to try, trying it out, and revisiting that goal), among other aspects of the coaching practice. Coaches build up their toolbox and create new activities to elicit growth, reflection, insight, ‘aha moments,’ or develop new skills. Coaches are strategic and mindful about why they are bringing in a tool, what tools they offer, and when it is they offer them.

*Conversational framework for coaching in higher education*—This refers to the intentionality behind a coaching meeting (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017) for college students that included the six phases: (a) Connection, (b) Accountability, (c) Today’s Topic or Agenda, (d) Exploration, (e) Growth and Insight, and (f) Action or Next Steps. In findings, Carlos explicitly stated there is a difference between a really good conversation with a student and a coaching conversation. This refers to the conversational framework for coaches in higher education or other conversational frameworks such as the GROW model (Whitmore, 2017). The conversational framework provides a systematic and intentional structure to expose the progression of a coaching meeting from beginning to end.
Additionally, fluidity and pacing are components to be mindful of within the conversational framework.

*Coaching beliefs*—In this study, coaching beliefs referred to the following: being human-centered, student-centered, the student should set the agenda or topic to discuss in a meeting, the coach must meet the student where they are at, the student is capable, the student is the expert, and learning is a process. Other professionals across campus may have similar core beliefs or philosophies about their work. However, in coaching practices, these beliefs are consistently enacted and explicitly stated to remind students on a consistent basis.

*Coach development*—This term referred to the intentionality of one to develop their coaching practice, as it relates to how they coach. While higher education professionals could certainly grow in managing their time, better supporting students from diverse backgrounds, and numerous other areas, coach development is specific to the improvement of the one on one interaction between the student and coach. Coaches develop *by reflecting on their practice*. This includes how they implement coaching skills such as powerful questions, or how they introduce a tool. For example, after a meeting a coach might ask themselves, was this tool the right choice? Should I have asked more questions before showing the student a new strategy?

*Coach*—This term was used to explain the main role of a professional on campus or position title. The “coach” on campus can be called success coach,
academic coach, student success coach, online student success coach, academic success coach, or academic life coach, as was the case with the participants in this study. One may also not have this position title, but coaching is their main, or part of their main role. In this study, examples were Success Coach and Academic Program Coordinator, Student Engagement and Academic Success Coach, and Director and Assistant Director of Academic Coaching. In this study, the coach title refers to a person who incorporates a coaching practice and works with students on a consistent basis to support their growth and development. Because there is such a strong belief that learning is a process, coaching is likely to have a greater impact over several meetings. While two studies found at least four coaching meetings increased retention, more research is needed to understand the relationship between number of meetings and the variety of outcomes coaches strive for (Capstick et al., 2019; Sepulveda et al., 2020).

While any staff member can incorporate each of these separately in a variety of different roles on a college campus and beyond, it is the consistent combination of coaching as the main role, incorporating coaching skills, using coaching tools, having coaching conversations, coaching beliefs, and reflections on the practice that make the coaching practice a unique student support service. The components of coaching practices in higher education work in synchronicity to support students. Based on findings, it was not enough for a coach to lean solely on one of these, such as a skill (powerful questions), a tool (time management strategy), or a belief (student is the
expert). My sense is that the more of these integrated in a coaching program, the more likely one is to witness positive outcomes.

Skilled intuition was a surprising finding that emerged which might be unique to coaching in higher education because of the necessity for coaches to share knowledge as appropriate. As I started to collect data, I found myself trying to understand the science behind the intuition. Participants seemed to rely on a process or framework (sometimes explicitly stated, sometimes not), as well as their intuition. Specifically, I wanted to understand why coaches do what they do and how they know or decide what to do next. Perception factors emerged as a way to understand how they do this in practice. These included knowing your student, readiness to move forward, student needs more support, knowing your toolbox, observations, exploring possibilities, and diving deeper. Skilled intuition takes coach awareness, practice, and development and I believe this is likely easier as coaches gain more experience working as a coach. How might coaches in higher education who do not have training develop skilled intuition?

Asking great questions is a hallmark skill for coaches in higher education and in the broader field of coaching. But asking great questions is not the only thing that makes a coach, a coach. Findings showed that several components make up coaching practices, such as taking students through the conversational framework, as well as how coaches support students over time. Findings align with “the three elements of effective coaching” including “coaching skills, coaching process, and coaching way of being” (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017, p. 14). Several coaching skills emerged as important to coaching practices in higher education. The coaching process emerged in the form of the conversational framework and how coaching progresses over time. Coaching way of
Coaching in higher education is similar to the broader field of coaching, at least from the perspective of participants in this study. Perhaps the coaches interviewed have a lot of experience, strong training, or have engaged in literature about coaching in the broader field.

Creating a “coach” position without the proper resources or training limits the potential impact of coaching in higher education. Additionally, when we convolute what coaching is by merging or modifying what it is, what are the implications? How might different approaches change the student experience or outcomes? Schreiner’s et al. (2011) study found the intentional behaviors by faculty and staff who helped support students to stay at their institution included listening more than talking to the student, asking several questions, help students take small steps toward their goals, encourage involvement, connect what they are doing at the institution to who they are, and believing that the student can succeed. These findings are similar to what coaches strive to do in every meeting, and over time with students. The relationship building, development, and growth between a coach and a student takes time. Because the learning process and coaching takes time, the frequency of meetings are likely to impact outcomes such as retention and student success. Practically, coaching could merge with other student support services such as advising. Even though two participants spoke about how they are coaches and advisors (though one mentioned they coach different students than they advise), they still believed that coaching was different, as did the rest of participants in this study. *Coaching and academic advising are different.* While coaching skills,
techniques or tools may help support an advisor in their work, the role of coaching is not
the same as advising.

**Training and Perception of Coaching Practices**

I anticipated participants would have drastic differences in perceptions related to their coaching practice because of the type of training or certification they had as coaches. While certified coaches used similar language to describe some skills, coaching strategies, or tools, some of what they used in their practice did not come from their coach-specific training, but through other professional development opportunities or readings. Similarities still emerged because the coaches in this study desired to develop and grow. Even if coaches did not have access to training, participants were reading research, attending webinars, doing professional development with colleagues, leaning on their education or prior experience in higher education, and reflecting on their own practice to grow. Coaches are looking for more affordable coach-specific trainings to develop their practice.

Participants varied in education (bachelor’s, master’s, doctorate and counseling, education, etc.), years of experience in higher education, years of experience as a coach, type of coach-specific training, and how they continually developed. While I hoped to see clear trends in the relationship between training and how participants perceived their coaching practice, I could not find any. This was the most surprising finding. Perhaps I did not ask the right questions, there were only subtle differences in how these coaches perceive their coaching practice, or something else. Additionally, this was not the focus on this study. Subtle differences were apparent in a participant being more prescriptive, or in the way a coach talked about the usefulness of training. However, it was difficult to
determine if this was due to training, personal philosophy, years of experience as a coach, educational background, or something else.

**Need for Further Professionalization**

The potential coaching has to impact the field of higher education is limited without professionalization. While similarities were present in the data, there were also differences in how coaches approached their practice. Not all coaching programs are created equal and the impact coaching has is likely to vary greatly. Coaches varied in how intentional and thoughtful they were in their approach. Some coaches shared how, why, and when they used strategies with students. Other coaches may have shared strategies without the intentionality behind the strategy. Differences are likely because of training, experience, educational background, research, or something else. Even so, coach-specific training varies drastically in approach, quality, cost, and time invested, and is rarely specific to the higher education context. Additionally, the perception coaches have about their practice and their actual work with students may be different. Best practices and standards would benefit coaches across the country and world who do not have access to training at their individual institutions.

Findings showed a clear need for growth opportunities related to coaching practices in higher education. While participants were grateful for their training experiences, *they also craved more*. As it currently stands, limited support and guidance is available to help coaches who specifically work in higher education to improve their coaching practice. As a result, coaches must look for opportunities that are “similar enough” to coaching, such as advising or mentoring. However, incorporating powerful questions or active listening are not the same as a coaching practice, as data from this
study suggests. The need for professional development is clearly not being met to support coaches. Professionalization could provide opportunities to create a community of coaches and professionally develop their coaching practice to better support students.

Staff in higher education are likely to remain confused about what coaching is until professionalization happens. Professionalization would send a clear message to differentiate coaching as a unique approach to work with students and provide common language for coaches to describe their work. To propel coaching in higher education as a profession, the following will be needed: community, high-quality accessible and affordable training, standards, best practices, reflective experiences, assessment, and research.

**Future Research**

Numerous approaches could be taken to further explore coaching practices in higher education. After conducting this study, the following question resonated most: What works best? Exploring best practices would be a challenge given the variety of aspects that make up trained, 4-year coaching practices in higher education (beliefs, skills, conversational framework, progression over time, training and growth, and their role). For example, what types of skills or techniques are most effective in helping students grow, develop, and graduate from college? Does the length of a meeting matter? While each coach may have their own style in how they show up, is there a way to measure a consistent approach and determine the effectiveness of that approach?

I hypothesized the coaching practices found in this study likely have an impact on the overall success of a coaching program. How do each of these coaching practices impact the level of success a coaching program has? Are there elements that facilitate
greater change among students? Are certain factors more likely to improve the retention and graduation of students? Is there an approach where coaches can focus on building the autonomy, competence, and relatedness of students, and at the same time, improve retention and graduation?

It would also be interesting to conduct this same study with a different population. For example, how might academic advisors perceive their advising practices? How might trained coaches at the community college perceive their practices? I hypothesized that training was an important component to the findings from this study. One way to explore this further would be to understand how 4-year coaches, who have no coach-specific training perceive their practices.

Each skill, belief, framework, and role could be explored deeper to understand coaching practices in higher education. Additionally, understanding the conversational framework of coaching in higher education would be helpful, as it is currently missing from the literature. Research could determine what conversational frameworks work best, and with what student populations. What framework(s) improve retention, support student learning or help students reach their goals?

I would recommend researchers interested in the investigation or exploration related to coaching in higher education use the findings to explicitly state the coaching practices referred to in each study. Additionally, when examining a single coaching program, I recommend researchers are explicit in how coaches are trained, what conversational framework they use in meetings, the frequency they meet with students, expectations of the coach and student, and common skills or tools they use. Findings are
stronger and more applicable when the researchers can be more explicit when conducting research in this area.

**Summary of Chapter IV**

In the discussion section, I addressed each research question in detail and built upon self-determination theory. I then summarized the overarching researching question *How do trained college and university coaches perceive their coaching practices?* By exploring the narratives of trained, four-year coaches in higher education, I was able to shed light on how participants perceive their coaching practices. Findings provide more clarity to coaching practices as this unique identity forms on campuses across the country. I concluded this section by sharing insights from the findings and discussion to address further research opportunities to build upon this study.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Findings showed that several components make up coaching practices of trained, four-year coaches in higher education. Major themes included: (a) Coaching Beliefs; (b) Coaching Skills; (c) Conversational Framework for Coaches in Higher Education; (d) Coaching Progression Over Time; (d) Training, Growth, and Development as a Coach; and (f) Coaching Role in Higher Education. The combination of each of these have made up coaching practices in higher education. While coaching is an emerging profession within higher education, and in the broader field, I believed findings expose how coaches navigate their interactions with students.

Coaching in higher education was found to align similarly to the broader coaching field. Relationships are a priority in both, and the coaching skills and beliefs are similar. While a conversational framework was not explicit in interviews, I was able to create a conversational framework for coaches in higher education based on findings, strategies, and techniques shared in the stories participants. Nuanced differences did emerge between the two fields. For example, coaches in higher education had to engage students in the coaching process differently than coaches in the broader field. Coaches in higher education must get buy in and build a strong relationship with the student in the first meeting, or the student is likely to disengage because the service is available for free on campus.
Coaches in higher education uniquely have to balance their role as an educator in student support, along with their identity as a coach. Coaches can lean on the skilled intuition that surfaced in this study to help students develop skills, and at the same time support the self-determination of students. Quality training, further research, and a professional network would greatly benefit coaching in higher education as an emerging profession and ultimately better support students in academics, their goals, and to thrive in college and life.
REFERENCES


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Recruitment Email

I am currently an academic coach at University of Colorado at Boulder, as well as a Doctoral Candidate in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership program at the University of Northern Colorado. I am working on my dissertation research, which focuses on understanding the coaching process in meetings from trained, four-year success coaches. I would absolutely love for you to participate in the study. If you are interested, please review the sample criteria below:

1. Work at a public or private 4-year institution in the United States;
2. Must have completed formal coach-specific training--training included coaching skills, techniques, and process. An external organization, company, or consultant came in for this training.
3. Have the position title of coach (academic success coach, college success coach, academic coach, college life coach, graduation coach, or some other title with coach that does not relate to athletics);
4. Must have at least one year of experience coaching students in higher education;
5. Must work one-on-one with students;
6. Must meet with students at least four times throughout one semester; And
7. Must support students for overall student success.

If you meet the criteria and are interested in participating in the study, please fill out the following survey:

INSERT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY LINK

You will be emailed shortly after to schedule the first interview with the informed consent.

If you do not meet the criteria and you know someone who does, please forward this email to them. If you do not meet the criteria, or are not interested, but would be interested in the findings, please email me and I will send you the reference as soon as it is published.

Thank you again for your consideration, and I look forward to learning and connecting with you!

-Alicia Sepulveda
Signature
APPENDIX B

INITIAL PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
Initial Participant Demographic Survey

Name: 

Email: 

Phone Number: 

Professional Work Title: 

Age Range: 

____ 18-24 years old  
____ 25-34 years old  
____ 35-44 years old  
____ 45-54 years old  
____ 55-64 years old  
____ 65-74 years old  
____ 75 years or older  

Gender: 

____ Female  
____ Male  
____ Gender non-confirming  
____ Transgender  
____ Prefer Not to Answer  

Race/Ethnicity: 

____ African American or Black  
____ American Indian or Alaskan Native  
____ Arab or Middle Eastern  
____ Asian or Asian American  
____ Hispanic or Latino  
____ Multiracial or Biracial  
____ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander  
____ White or Caucasian  
____ Prefer not to answer  

College/University: 

____ 2-year  
____ 4-year  
____ Public  
____ Private
Number of students at institution:

Institution Type:

Years in the field of higher education

Number of months/years serving in your current role

Higher Educational Degree Completed:

  ____ Associate’s Degree
  ____ Bachelor’s Degree
  ____ Master’s Degree
  ____ Doctoral Degree

Field of most recent degree completed (Higher Education, Social Work, etc):

Coach Credentialing Body:

  ____ International Coach Federation
  ____ Center for Credential in Education

Coach Training Organization: ______________________________

Student Population Coached (select all that apply):

  Academic Probation
  First-year
  Transfer
  First-Generation
  Students with Learning Disabilities
  Other: (Please specify)
APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

DATE: June 24, 2019
TO: Alicia Sepulveda, MSW
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB
PROJECT TITLE: [1427516-2] Coaching college students to thrive: Exploring coaching practices in higher education
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification
ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: June 24, 2019
EXPIRATION DATE: June 24, 2023

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

Alicia,

Thank you for your prompt response to the requested revisions. Best of luck with your research!

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Morse at 970-351-1910 or nicole.morse@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT
CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Coaching college students to thrive: Exploring coaching practices in higher education

Researcher: Alicia Sepulveda, University of Northern Colorado

Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Email: Alicia.sepulveda@colorado.edu

The primary purpose of this study is to understand how trained college and university academic/success coaches describe and perceive their coaching practices. You are being asked to participate in two individual interviews. The first interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will held in person, via Zoom, or via phone. During the first interview, I will ask questions about your experience working as an academic/success coach, particularly in your interactions with your students. You will also be asked to submit a mind map of your coaching practice. More details will follow after the first interview. The second interview will last approximately 30 minutes and will be used to ask any follow up questions and present initial findings. By signing this informed consent, you also give permission for the use of the demographic survey you filled out to confirm that you qualify for the study.

All interviews will be audio recorded. Data collected for this study will be kept under a password protected computer and only myself and my dissertation chair will have access. Your name will not be used in findings and a pseudonym will be used when presenting findings. I will take every precaution in order to protect your confidentiality. There are no known risks of participating in this study, however, please be aware that questions will be asked about your personal experiences in coaching students. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or would like to stop participating in the interviews, you are free to do so. Participation in this study will bring a greater understanding to the practice of trained college and university academic and success coaches across the country. There are no consequences if you do not participate in this study.
Participants will receive no compensation for their participation. The principal investigator of this study is Alicia Sepulveda. If you have any questions, concerns, or would like to be sent the findings after the study is complete, email: Alicia.sepulveda@colorado.edu. Remember your participation is voluntary and that refusal to participate will not result in any consequences or any loss of benefits. You have the right to withdrawal your participation at any point without consequences. I have read, understand, agree, and consent to the research study discussed above.

__________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Participant                     Date

__________________________________________  ____________
Signature of Principal Investigator          Date
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me about yourself and how you became a success coach?

2. How do you view your role as a coach?

3. What do you do in your first meeting with students?

4. How do you build a relationship with your students? What questions do you do ask?

5. What do you do at the beginning, middle, and end of each meeting?

6. How do you choose a topic?

7. What do you do to help a student identify and reach their goals? Share a story where you helped a student reach a goal in a meeting.

8. What do you do in your last meeting with students?

9. How do each of the coaching meetings connect?

10. What models or theories (coaching or otherwise) inform your work?

11. What techniques or strategies do you intentionally use in your meetings?

12. How do you use these strategies (reflection, powerful questioning, etc) in your meetings?

13. What do you do to help students reach their full potential?

14. How does what you do contribute to retention?

15. What do you believe you do that supports a student holistically?

16. Describe a time (if applicable) when another professional on campus was confused about their role, along with how they responded to this confusion.

17. What makes a good success coach? A bad one?
APPENDIX F

MIND MAP DIRECTIONS
Mind Map Directions

Thank you again for participating this study. For this portion of the study, I am asking that you develop a visual representation of the coaching process from your perspective. Please get creative in how you see the coaching process. You may use Canva or another platform to create a graphic through the use of technology, or a word document, colored pencils, crayons, or markers. Once it is complete, I will ask you to send a picture of your visual representation to Alicia.sepulveda@colorado.edu. Once I receive your email, I will send a follow up email to set up our second interview.

Thank you again for your participation and contribution to the field.
APPENDIX G

SAMPLE CONCEPT MAPS
Sample Concept Maps
Coaching

Where to now?

 (? ) (... ) I'm with all the way.

How students progress through Academic Coaching:

SUCCESS!
APPENDIX H

OPEN CODING
Open Coding

Action-Oriented/Action Step
Active Listening
Advice Given Thoughtfully
Agenda setting or Topic Selection
Allyship
Anchor
Asking for Permission
Assessment of Where Student is at
Authenticity/Genuineness
Autonomy
Back up Topic/Plan B Topic
Basic Coaching Protocol
Being A Great Coach
  Takes Time
Belief/Philosophy
Best Academic Self
Birds Eye View
Boundary Between Other Services on Campus
Brainstorming
Break down goals
Build on Skills Over Time
Build Resilience
Buy In - 1st meetings
Care
Career and Major Interests
Celebrate Successes/
  Acknowledge Progress
Challenge and Support
Challenge at End of Meeting
Challenging Coach
Assumptions
Challenging the Student
Change
Character Traits of Coach
Check in on Progress
Checking in With Self as Coach
Coach as Advocate on Campus
Coach as Front Line
Coach as Part of Success Team
Coach as . . . Mentor,
  Teacher, Cheerleader,
  Problem Solver
Coach Awareness
Coach Checks Assumptions
Coach Divulges Life Secrets
Coach Expansion
Coach Had Own Turnaround in Life
Coach Invested in Student
Coach is Who They Are
Coach Role - First Meetings
Coach Sets Agenda
Coach Shares Personal Connections
Coaching Agreement
Coaching Allows Flexibility for Different Student Groups
Coaching as Second Nature
Coaching Aspects in Advising
Coaching Mindset/Presence
Coaching Model
Coaching Over Time/
  Coaching Process
College Is Transformative – Belief
Comfortability/Confidence as Coach
Competence
Confidential
Confusion of Role
Connect Past Meeting with Current Meeting
Connecting School and Life Connection Throughout Meetings
Consequences
Context Over Time
Creating Strategy
Daily Practice
Data for Legitimacy
Dates/Deadlines
Design the Alliance
Direct Communication
Directive and Non-Directive
Discovery Process
Diving Deeper
Empathy
Empowering Students
Encourage Students
Everybody is a Coach
Example of Topics
Exploration
Exploring Interests
Exploring the Why
Exploring Values
Facilitator – Individual Meeting
Faculty Confusion
Failing as Part of Process
Finding Commonalities/
  Relationship Building
First Meeting Crucial
First Meeting Different
Focus in Meetings
Follow Up - Email
Follow Up/ Accountability Formula/Guide/Template but not Robotic
Funnel Down to One Topic
Future Topics
Gathering Information
Goal for Each Meeting
Goal of Coach - Facilitate
Goals Into Reality
Good Conversation vs.
  Coaching Conversation GROW Model
Growth as a Coach
Growth as a Coach = Growth as a Person
Habits
Hard Conversations/ Courage
Health a Priority
Help Student Understand for Themselves
Help Students Figure Out Who They Are
Helping Student Believe in Self
Honesty
Hope
Human-Centered/
  Humanness
Humility
Hurdles/ Obstacles/ Barriers
Hypotheticals
Identify Challenges or Barriers
Identify Goals
Impact of Coaching
Individualized/Customized 
/Depends on Student
Informed Decisions
Initial Assessment/Survey
Inner Critic
Instincts
Integration - Cultural/Social
Intentional Building Blocks/
  Scaffolding
Intentional Decision Making
Intentionality
Knowing What to do When
Knowledgeable about
Oppression
Laughter
Lean On Organic Activity
Instead of Worksheet
Learn from Experience
Learning from Other Coaches
Learning Student Story
Learnings from Coach-Specific
Training
Less Structure
Leverage the Relationship
Light Bulb Moment or
Aha Moment
Listen More Than Talk
Listen to Own Coaching
Meetings
Little Flags/ Red Flags/ Gap
Words
Long Term Goals and
Interests
of Student
Look at Bigger Picture
Macro and Micro Thinking
Making Connections/Seeing
Themes/Recognizing
Patterns
Managing Energy and
Presence
as Coach
Marketing to Student
May Offer Suggestions, Not
Demands
Meeting a Student Where
They Are At
Meeting as Meaningful/
Valuable to Student
Meeting Overview
Mental Health
Mindful of Semester, But
Not Taking Over Agenda
Miracle Question
Mis-Messaging About Role
Modification of Goals
More Than Academics
More Than College
Mutually Beneficial/
Reciprocity
Navigator Role
New Ways of Thinking/
Perspective
No Judgment
Normalize Feelings
Not About Coach
Not Giving Advice
Note-Taking of
Meeting/Revisit
Notes/Documenting
Noticing
Nuance Detail
Observations
Observing - Body Language
Observing Change in
Students
Office Set Up/Comfortable
Space
Open Communication
Open Door Policy
Open/Honest/Transparent
Optimism/Positivity
Options When Student is
Stuck
Orientation to Coaching
Outcomes
Ownership on Student, Not
Coach
Pacing of Moving a Student
Forward
Partner/
Companion/Collaboration
Between Coach and
Student
Passion/
Mission/Love/Dream Job
Past Experiences with
Current
Role as Coach
Patience
Personal Details About
Student
Plant A Seed
Point in Right Direction
Possibilities
Powerful Questions
Practical Skills
Pre-Assignment/Pre-Survey
Prioritize by Importance
Progress Over Time
Provide Space/ Student Voice
Rapport or Relationship
Building
Rapport Takes Time
Reading Between the Lines
Recognize Key Words or
Phrases
Recognizing Incongruencies
Refer Back to Goals
Reflection
Reflection as Coach/
Reflection of Practice
Relatedness
Relationship as Permission
Resource Expert Who Holds
Back
Resources - Connection/
Awareness
Retention Not Goal
Revisiting Goals
Rewarding
Role differentiation
Role Interferes with
Collaboration on Campus
Roledex/ Toolkit/ Toolbelt
Routines
Safe Space
Self-Assessment of Student
Self-Development as Coach
Set Expectations
Several Topics
Short and Long-Term Goals
Silence
Skills
Sounding Board
Starting Out at Deficit
Starting Small
Strategies/Activities to Bring
About Realizations/Insight
Strengths - Acknowledge/
Identify
Structure
Student Advocate's for
Themselves
Student as Expert of Their
Life
Student as Resourceful
Student Belongs Here
Student Building Confidence
in Self
Student Choice
Student Development
Student Insight/ Learning
About Self/ Self-
Awareness
Student Invested in Process
Student Involvement
Student Learning Style
Student Not Knowing
What Questions to Ask
Student Ownership;
Relinquish
Control
Student
Readiness/Willingness
to Change
| Student Seeing What They Are Capable Of | Student Sets the Agenda | Student-Centered | Students Finds Answers | Student-Sets Plan, Not Coach | Study Cycle | Suggest Goals to Students | Summarize | Support Graduation | Support Students | Sustainable Change/Continued | Progress | Taste of Coaching - First Meeting | Tension on Campus | The Use of “We” | Theory | Think Outside the Box as Coach | Time Investment | Tools | Tools as Last Resort | Topic Selection | Training | Training Informs Structure | Training Informs | Terminology | Transformative | Trial and Error/Failure | Trust | Underlying Issue or Challenge | Vulnerability | Walking Coaching Sessions | Wellness Check | What is Said and Unsaid | Who is Driving | Whole Student/Holistic | Why In College? | Work/Goals In Between | Meetings | Working Through Resistance |