





personal **BEST**

Academic coaching helps students achieve their goals.

By Jenny Hannah Moore

Two years ago, during Christmas break, Veronica Dominguez received a thin, inconspicuous letter from UTSA. The letter informed her that her GPA had fallen below a 2.0 and that she had been placed on academic probation. Unless she could raise her grades by the following semester, it warned, she would face academic dismissal. “I was honestly shocked. I thought the letter was to inform me that I had made the honor roll. I just started crying because all of my self-assurance just vanished,” she remembers.

Dominguez had done well in high school, rarely needing to study. But college proved more challenging. As a first-semester freshman, Dominguez was struggling. “I was 18 years old, and I needed help to study for my classes. That was a hard concept for me to grasp,” she says.

Beyond that, Dominguez was emotionally stressed, embarrassed and confused over where to go for help. The stigma of her probationary status prevented her from asking her old high school classmates for help. “I did not want them to know what a failure I had become. And I couldn’t ask my new classmates, who all managed to make A’s and B’s even with their new party habits,” she explains.

After some initial advising from her academic counselor, Dominguez was referred to the academic coaching program at the Tomás Rivera Center for Student Success (TRCSS). It was a good move. She received one-on-one coaching sessions with a learning specialist who gave her individualized instruction in study skills and time management. Referrals also were available for any other problems that might be getting in the way of her studies.

She would see her coach once or twice a week, but they also communicated through e-mail for additional advice. For Dominguez, who teetered on a GPA of 1.2, academic coaching was what she needed to become the kind of student she is now: a confident junior majoring in early childhood education with a solid 3.0 GPA.



Academic coaches meet with students in one-on-one coaching sessions. Pictured above is Karen Roth, associate director for the TRCSS downtown.

A Pioneer in the Field

The TRCSS, a division of Academic Affairs focused on improving the academic skills and retention of students, has offices at both the 1604 and Downtown campuses. It is available to all registered UTSA students. Services are categorized under three headings: learning assistance, advising and retention, and seminars and outreach. Academic coaching and tutoring fall together under learning assistance but differ at the level of training and services offered. A tutor is another UTSA student who has been trained for this task. An academic coach is a counselor with a master's degree.

The TRCSS began its academic coaching program in fall 2003 under the direction of Patricia Glenn, the program's founder. In the beginning, Glenn—who was executive director of the TRCSS and was recently promoted to associate dean of retention and graduation—saw a need to establish a program of assistance for students who wanted help with study skills and time management. She envisioned a place where students would get the time, attention and high-quality help they needed with time management, strategies in note taking, reading, test taking, test preparation and memory boosting.

The academic coaching program has grown under the learning assistance team, which is made up of Karen Roth, associate director for the downtown center, and academic coaches Stella Abuabara and Kathy Wilkins. Sherry Castillo is the assistant director of learning assistance.

Although academic coaching is now a popular service in many institutions of higher learning, one thing is strikingly different about UTSA's program: it's free. "Students pay [student service and learning resources] fees and several university programs are funded to support students' academic and other support needs," says Leticia Duncan-Brosnan, director of the TRCSS. That means that while students at other schools are paying upwards of \$100 per coaching session, UTSA's students receive this help at no additional cost.

"In addition," Roth says, "we provide other services for free that many other institutions charge students for. The online study skills program, Learning and Study Skills Inventory, is a nationally recognized program that helps students assess and develop their personal study habits. Some institutions charge students to take the assessment and access the online help, but the TRCSS makes it available for students [and faculty] for free."

Free tutoring and instruction are also available online for reading, writing and science. Other schools charge students \$35 each semester for the same learning program. "I really feel the coaching program is a vital resource to students," Roth says. "UTSA is a pioneer in this field."

The incentive for the university to offer these services at no cost, aside from its desire to help and support students, is this: coaching programs point reliably to a more skilled student body with a higher GPA, which means higher graduation rates, says Roth.

One-on-One Coaching

UTSA employs four full-time academic coaches. Wilkins and Abuabara work at the 1604 Campus, Roth works at the Downtown Campus, and Melissa Thomas, program coordinator for graduate learning assistance, provides academic coaching for graduate students at both campuses.

The coaches, also referred to as educational specialists, meet with students up to one hour biweekly or once a month, depending on their needs. "There is no limit on the amount of sessions as long as they remain a registered UTSA student," Castillo says. In addition to one-on-one coaching, coaches teach study skills workshops, provide tailored in-class presentations and teach a study skills-based freshman seminar.

"Academic coaches work individually with a student, help the student to assess their strengths and needs, and devise a personalized plan of action," Castillo says. "Essentially they help students to use their notes more effectively, understand and remember more of what they read, prepare better for tests, develop better time-management habits and enhance study skills."

Timing can affect the number of students who use the services of the TRCSS. While every day is variable, coaches see more students in the fall, especially during October and November, fewer students in the spring, and almost none during the summer.

In their effort to measure outcomes, TRCSS tallies which student populations use the coaching service most regularly. Records show that more female students, around 61 percent, made coaching appointments than male students, about 39 percent. The majority of students using the service are freshmen, with sophomores as the next-largest



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some seek personal support in their academics, others seek validation of their study strategies. Others simply feel overwhelmed by the amount of work that college demands.

“Some students are already failing classes and they want to know if we can help them turn things around,” Wilkins says. “We work with them to figure out their options and determine what changes they are willing to make. As academic coaches, we work with them on developing more effective study skills. We also refer them to tutors, supplemental instruction or their professors.”

Academic coaches do more than teach academic skills. With advanced degrees in counseling, they are also trained to listen, counsel and make referrals concerning roommate situations, anxiety, relationship problems and family issues.

“Our academic coaches set boundaries on what they can and cannot help students with. Our focus is [on] academics and study skills. Therefore, we refer students to other services on campus if other issues surface during coaching sessions,” Castillo says. Since a variety of factors may be impeding student learning, referrals are frequently made to subject tutors, the counseling center, career counseling, financial aid and the health center.

Coaches also help students learn to prioritize. “Some students are overextending themselves with many activities on their time,” Abuabara says. “For example, one might be working full time and taking a full load of classes, which is 12 hours. We help them understand that 12 hours of classes implies at least 24 hours of independent study time if the student wishes to do well. They are already putting in 36 hours on studying, and if they are employed for 30 or 40 hours weekly, they have the right to feel overwhelmed. With these students, we work on time management.”

If You Think Nobody Cares, Think Again

When Erin Freeman, an art major, signed up for a coach during her freshman year, she was having difficulty with time management. Her tutor, Abuabara, gave her a worksheet resembling a day planner, in which each hour of the day was allotted a blank space. Abuabara helped Freeman map out a schedule to designate time blocks for all of her activities, from the most basic task of waking up to when to study for her most challenging class. In essence, Freeman was taught to “visualize” her day, which then allowed her to organize her time differently.

Freeman says the coaching program taught her discipline. “Stella made the subject matter interesting. She made me want to try harder and made me want to work,” she says. As a result, Freeman’s grades improved.

group. Abuabara and Wilkins do hold appointments with older students, but more than 80 percent of the students are younger than 23 years old.

Each student requires careful assessment to determine specific problems and solutions, the coaches say. While

And her one-on-one coaching and tutoring have given her the confidence to attempt personally challenging courses such as marketing, a course she would otherwise have considered too difficult.

The motto of the coaching program is, “If you think nobody cares, think again.” It sends a message to all students having trouble that there is help available. Students just need to get themselves in the door. Still, it’s not always easy to ask for help.

Dominguez remembers how hard it was to walk into the TRCSS. “On my first visit with my coach, Stella, I felt very nervous and shameful,” she recalls. “I was almost tempted to leave while I was waiting. I was convinced that I didn’t need anyone’s help and I could do it on my own. I’m glad now that they called my name.”

Dominguez credits the academic coaching program with helping her to become a stronger student. “I remember I was having a hard time with [my] politics class. My coach showed me a helpful technique for taking notes. She also taught me how to use my planner efficiently. At the time I was using a weekly planner. I lived by the week, and on the weekends I would play and neglect my studies for the week ahead. By switching to the monthly version, I could see that I had a test in three weeks or that a project was due in four days,” she says.

Like Freeman, Dominguez’s coach also suggested she complete a time management chart. “After filling it out, I saw how I was neglecting my studies,” Dominguez says. “I didn’t realize how often I watched TV or went shopping. Those are all fun things, but they left no time for school. By becoming better organized with my notes and planners, I soon felt the effect and saw a reduction in my stress levels.”

Dominguez says the thing she liked most about her coaching sessions was that they taught her how to face the “real world.”

“Everything isn’t going to go my way [but] that doesn’t give me a reason to give up,” she says. “Often I thought about quitting school and just getting a real job. That is what college is for, right? To get a job? Or so I used to think. Now I see what benefits I have reaped by staying in school.”

Reaching Out

All new students receive a flyer from the TRCSS letting them know of available resources to assist them on their individual academic paths. “We’re always looking for more students,” Roth says.

Academic coaches and the TRCSS adhere to student confidentiality practices. Dominguez and Freeman say they want to let more students know the benefits of making an appointment with an academic coach and other services at the TRCSS. “I would recommend academic coaching because the program helps you to become a better student,” Freeman says. “They do not judge you or try to make you feel ashamed of yourself. They are there to help. You get the one-on-one attention you need.”

Other students agree. Each student who uses the coaching service—about 120 students per semester—is given an evaluation form and asked to rate the program. The results: 83 percent rated academic coaching as “excellent” and 14 percent as “good.”

“It’s good to know that help is out there,” says Freeman. ★