

## When coaching takes over advising to rescue students in higher education

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### ABSTRACT

Freedom and responsibility are two existential questions that face most students for the first time in their life in higher education. Even though parents, educators, and policymakers think undergraduate students are adult enough to be responsible for their own life in college, many students find it very challenging to manage. Back in high school, teachers and parents planned their week learning and supervised their spare time. In college that responsibility suddenly shifts to them, and they are expected to achieve by themselves their own learning and development. Consequently, many students drop out of college, and many others struggle to stay. That is why academic advising and lately academic coaching have emerged as a crucial aid for students to complete college. They also have proved to be effective ways for students to explore themselves and their future. Therefore, this paper aims firstly to review some of the most influential academic advising models over the last four decades. Secondly, it aims to overview the turmoil of academic advising in Moroccan higher education. Finally, the paper attempts to make some proposals for the regulation of the academic advising/coaching industry in Morocco.

**Keywords:** college retention college dropout developmental advising intrusive advising  
Strength-based advising academic coaching AD/HD coaching

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Once at the university, everybody expects students to be responsible and autonomous to manage their new experience. However, “the first problem of the application of the self-responsibility of life style to a campus is that the recipients of services are primarily late adolescents with low orientation to adult responsibilities” (Earl, 1987, para.2). They certainly need help. Unfortunately, the booming of enrollments in universities has made it very difficult for staff, advisors, and teachers to provide all the students with the attention they need. While some students cope with their new life style, many others find the new social and academic environments in college “somewhat foreign – if not unfriendly- and challenging to navigate” (Kul et al., 2005, preface, para.2). Much worse, some students may suffer a “transfer shock”, which usually has a huge impact on their performance, retention, or overall experience. As a result, many students quit college, and many others struggle to stay (Hills, 1965).

Over the last four decades, colleges worldwide have witnessed a rise in students’ attendance rates and huge efforts were made to retain them. However, despite the retention strategies developed by administrators, teachers, and policymakers, college completion has not kept pace. For example, the US recently lost its world leadership in terms of percentage of the population having the bachelor’s degree (Bettinger, 2011, p.1, para.1). Part of this decline is due to the fact that students take more time to complete their college degrees (Turner, 2004), and their success is subject to “a complex set of processes that occur throughout the semester” (Flaga, 2006, p.4, para.2).

To help students stay successfully in college, educational stakeholders have shifted their focus from access to higher education to completion (Kolenovic et al., 2012). Therefore, besides conferences, edited journals, national surveys of student engagement, institutions devised all kinds of consulting, mentoring, advising programs. More recently, coaching programs have become the key to success in guiding the students through their academic transition. What’s more, some consulting firms have made of advising/coaching a business opportunity, and have specialized in selling the “secret” to increase the rates of student retention in institutions (Tinto, 2006, p.5, para.2).

In an attempt to delve into the academic advising issue, this paper firstly reviews the most successfully applied academic advising models especially in American higher education. A focus will be made on the prescriptive model, the developmental model, the intrusive model, the strength-based model, and coaching as the most recent model. Secondly, this paper overviews the concept and challenges of academic advising issue in higher education in Morocco. Finally, this paper shows how coaching is taking over advising in Moroccan higher education proving once again the lack of a real advising strategy to rescue college students.

## 2. THE FAMOUS ACADEMIC ADVISING MODELS

According to Tinto (2005), when the issue of students’ retention was first tackled in higher education four decades ago, it was considered through the “lens of psychology”. There was a belief that students who completed college had some individual attributes that made them intrinsically motivated and successful. Those who left college, on the other hand, were not motivated and were unable to understand the benefits of their college graduation. Ironically, unsuccessful students though normally “victim” were blamed for their own failure, not the institution (p.1, para.1).

Because integration was for a long time considered a separate issue completely independent of the life in the institution, colleges neglected its impact on the students’ retention (Tinto, 2006, p.2, para.5). Instead, anytime educators were challenged by students dropout or difficulty, they adopted the “add-a-course”

strategy (Parker, 1993, p.4, para.5). As a result, freshmen seminars, tutoring and mentoring programs, as well as courses in cultural diversity have sprung up in higher education. Although this strategy seemed successful in appearance and welcome in many universities, it was used in many respects, however, as a type of “educational vaccine” (Tinto, 2002, p.6, para.3).

Hopefully, from early 1970s the students’ retention notion was no longer viewed as a separate stand-alone issue unrelated to the academic and social life of the institution. William Spady (1970) and later Tinto (1975) made it part of a broader system, part of the relationship between individuals and society. Thus, the notion of integration was recognized for the first time as an important component in higher education. Tinto argued that students’ retention or dropout is quite strongly predicted by their degree of academic integration, social integration and institutional commitment. The decision to stay or to leave college cannot be incumbent to the students alone, but to the whole environment of the institution where they belong (pp.104-114).

Though largely examined for its limitations (Draper, 2008), Tinto’s model has become a classic in higher education. Many models have since then been grounded in his notion of integration and its influence on student retention and completion (Tinto, 1993). He argued that students who remain enrolled in college feel that they are involved in the learning process (Tinto, 2002, p.3, para.2). They believe they have a social and academic bond with the institution. They make connections, build relationships with their peers, with other students, with the faculty and staff members. He showed that “students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that involve them as valued members of the institution. The frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students is an important independent predictor of student persistence” (Tinto, 2002, p.3, para.1).

Since the seventies, there has been a growing awareness of college integration impact on students’ college completion. This resulted in educators and policymakers focusing their efforts on developing appropriate strategies to improve the retention rates of students. One of the most interesting devised strategies is academic advising, which has become the key to completion in higher education. Hence, the prescriptive, the developmental and the intrusive advising models have been considered the foundation of academic advising and have been widely adopted in colleges since then (Heisserer & Parette, 2002, para.8).

### **2.1. The prescriptive advising model**

The prescriptive advising model was first coined by Crookston (1972). It is characterized by an authoritarian relationship between the advisor and the student. The prescriptive advisor believes that “students naturally dislike work, which makes it necessary to control, direct, or issue incentives that will encourage students to produce” (p.6, para.6). Like a doctor, the advisor makes a “diagnosis”, prescribes a specific treatment for the student to swallow. This model focuses on the performance outcome and ignores completely the students’ motivation. Consequently, students are not involved in the process of advising, which deprives them of their freedom and responsibility in making their own decisions.

### **2.2. The developmental advising model**

Since the mid-seventies, the developmental model started dominating the field of education. Advisors first sought to understand what students were facing and helped them to create an environment that allowed them to progress through their own development. Interestingly, developmental advisors use the students’ existing life challenges or conflicts. What’s more, “the advisor is fully aware of the responsibilities delegated to him as advisor and those expected from the student, both of which he makes clear to the student” (Crookston, 1972, p.8, para.2). Consequently, this responsibility sharing with the advisor, promotes initiative and growth in the student.

In contrast to the prescriptive advisor, the developmental advisor believes that students naturally find satisfaction in work accomplishment. They are committed to their own development and have goals to achieve (p.6, para.6). Besides, the advisor establishes a caring relationship with the students and encourages them to delve into their own resources. Thus, they become aware of their own values, their personal attributes and needs. Consequently, the students develop by themselves a greater independence, decision-making, and problem solving skills (Gardiner, 1994).

### **2.3 The intrusive model**

The developmental and the prescriptive models have greatly inspired the advocates of the intrusive model also known as the proactive model. It was first coined by Walter Earl (1987) in his famous article "Intrusive Advising for Freshmen", and described as "action oriented by involving and motivating students to seek help when needed" (p.24). This concept was developed basically to rescue at-risk students by identifying their problems and suggesting solutions to overcome them (Backhus, 1989). It is based on the assumption that students will not take the initiative to seek help, but would need assigned advisors to intrude their life and offer assistance to them.

Indeed, the intrusive model is "a process of identifying students at crisis points and giving them the message, 'You have this problem; here is a help-service.'" (Earl, 1987, para.5). It is proactive because it deals with problems as they emerge. Intrusive advisors do not wait for students to seek assistance. They use the good components of prescriptive advising, those of developmental advising, and those of the intrusive model to come up with a direct response to identified academic crisis with a specific program of action. Though heavily criticized for its limitations and challenges (Tennant, 2013, p. 27), the intrusive advising has enhanced students' academic skills, increased their retention and proved to be an effective way of advising (Thomas & Minton, 2004).

### **2.4. Models' shortcoming**

While supporting to some extent the developmental model in the way advisors contribute to the students' growth, Schreiner & Anderson (2005) deduced that advising in all models in higher education has focused heavily on the students' weaknesses. It was based on the belief that, "deficit remediation is the most effective strategy for enabling students to successfully complete a college degree (p.2, para.3)". Educators built programs and services around the students' areas of weaknesses without taking into consideration their real needs (p.2). This resulted in a "vicious cycle of low expectations" both on the part of students and educators (p.3, para.2). Consequently, with their focus on deficit-based remediation, those models did not succeed in engaging students in their learning process and ultimately realizing their academic achievements (p.4, para.1).

### **2.5. The strength-based advising model**

Schreiner and Anderson (2005) devised a new model, the strengths-based advising, and with it they advocated a new paradigm shift in higher education. "This paradigm shift entails a move away from the prevailing philosophy of deficit remediation and toward one in which assessment, affirmation, and application of students' strengths pave the path to long-term success (p.18, para.3)". The strengths-based advising is grounded in the findings of the research conducted by the Gallup Organization (Clifton & Harter, 2003). The research demonstrates that people who focus on their weaknesses in order to improve, only reach average performance. Those who focus on their existing talents and strengths reach levels of excellence. Weaknesses are of course recognized and dealt with, but when students exercise their strength, it becomes integrated and they become stronger. Therefore, "identified talents can be used the way a composer chooses the available notes of music to create a beautiful song. Teachers, mentors, and parents may accelerate the development of individuals by basing their expectations for a person on his or her talents" (p.4, para.1).

Strengths-based advising is grounded in the assumption that students are not “tabula rasa”, they have a history and a wealth of talents they bring along to the academic environment. “These talents, defined as naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied (Clifton & Harter, 2003, p.1, para.1). This becomes clear in how students perceive the world, process information, and interact with people. When students combine their knowledge with skills acquired in the learning process, they develop their talents into strengths and consequently, they develop “the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity” (Clifton & Anderson, 2002, p. 8).

Once the students become aware of their strengths and have identified their talent, they feel motivated and their educational experience becomes a more natural process. Advisors help them manage their time, invest their energy in knowledge and skills necessary for their college achievement. Most importantly, advisors help students build their confidence, and develop new personal and intellectual interests in relation with their life goals (p.15, para. 3). In this respect, the strengths-based approach promotes excellence and provides a new lens through which to view the students, the advising activity and the broader college experience (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).

## **2.6. The coaching advising model**

While the strength-based model is congruent in some ways with the developmental model adopted since the seventies, it is heavily congruent with the academic coaching model that has been prevailing in higher education for the last decade. To retain students, many colleges have found out “the secret” (Tinto, 2006). Policymakers and educators design and implement academic coaching programs as a major part of college experience. For those students who need a “nudge” to complete their higher education successfully (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), academic coaching is an effective one (Bettinger, 2011, p.5,para. 2). Furthermore, the coaching model has proved to be beneficial for the students suffering from the Attention Deficit Hyper Activity Disorder (AD/HD), and it is indeed described as the “perfect match for the AD/HD brain” (Quinn et al., 2000, p.14, para.1).

In the Unites States of America, the biggest consumer of coaching, many of the nation’s leading colleges use students coaching to enrich their college experience and boost their outcomes (for example, Academic coaching Manual. 2013). Centers for students’ success and personal development have become an inherent component in the university life. Some universities have even outsourced this service to specialized providers of coaching and charge students additional fees.

According to the first serious study carried out on academic coaching, Stanford researchers, Bettinger & Baker (2011) presented evidence from a randomized experiment which tests the effectiveness of individualized student coaching. Their data came from Inside Track, a student coaching service that provides coaching to students from public, private and proprietary universities. The study showed that students who were assigned to a coach were more likely to persist during the treatment period, and were more likely to be attending the university one year after the coaching had ended (p.3. para.2). Besides, coaching proved to be a more cost-effective method of achieving retention and completion when compared to previously studied interventions on financial aid (Bettinger, 2011, Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

Likewise, InsideTrack president Drekmeier (2012) believes that academic coaching is extremely strong because it helps the students remain connected to what motivates them, and helps them develop a clear vision for their college experience and beyond. The main job of the coach is to help students first define their goals, then monitor their progress towards these goals. In this process, the students become clear about their needs, about their resources both internal and external, which empowers them to devise their own plans of action. For Drekmeier, this step is “extremely important in developing students’ intrinsic motivation. Once they are

aware of their goals, they find their own way to overcome the obstacles and start persisting efficiently in college” (para.1-2).

Similar to the strength-based model mentioned above, the academic coaching is a one-on-one process of helping students identify their needs and their strengths. A coach helps them develop their personal skills, academic skills, study skills, living skills, and social skills. In short, they develop the skills that are required for both college and life success. Specific to coaching though is the idea of accountability. The coach “encourages accountability and provides methods for reporting what has or has not been accomplished” (Quinn et al., 2000, Foreword, para.9). Accordingly, the students create positive reinforcement and the coach encourages them to celebrate the small wins they accomplish along the way. Drekmeier asserts “This process is energizing. It helps students understand that everything they do towards their life goals is meaningful, important, and worthwhile” (2012, para.3).

Evidence of coaching effectiveness at the university is also found in studies on ADHD students. As it is known, the latter have more difficulty than their peers engaging in their own self-regulated behavior while pursuing their goals. Therefore, any intervention that focuses on developing and enhancing important self-regulation skills is especially profitable to them. Although coaching did not necessarily improve the ADHD students’ GPA, they found it very helpful (Parker et al., 2011). The students attributed this result to the coach’s proficiency in keeping them reflecting on themselves and connecting to their goals more often in very positive and realistic ways. Most importantly, the coach’s intervention helped the students constantly regulate their feelings and behaviors more effectively while pursuing their goals (Sharon et al., 2010). At least from this standpoint, “coaching may be a better fit than traditional therapy models, and could certainly complement whatever benefits students may receive from medication treatment” (Rabiner, 2012, para.17).

### **3. ADVISING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MOROCCO**

While academic advising has known many evolutions and revolutions over the last four decades, academic advising referred to as “orientation” has been the only advice to students in Morocco. Not only is it limited to high school students, but not all schools can afford an advisor either. Orientation is used as a substitute for advising. It is indeed a confusing umbrella term with no clear visionary objectives. Unsurprisingly, the lack of motivation and most failure in higher education finds its roots back in this orientation confusion. In his sociological analysis, Boulahcen (2005) shows that there is no real school advising process in Morocco. There is only a summary procedure in which advisors decide in a few seconds the fate of students based solely on their academic scores, which everyone doubts anyway. This means that educational institutions adopt random selection criteria rather than advising, thus leaving room to intuitive methods and irrational decisions (p.32).

While being ignored for years, academic advising at the university is at the core of the educational turmoil in Morocco today. In his address to the nation on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Revolution of the King and the People” in 2013, the King of Morocco dedicated his speech to higher education deploring its current state. He put the student at the heart of the speech asking why so many young people are unable to realize their legitimate social aspirations after they have graduated from university. The king openly criticized the governments for changing plans every five years without fully implementing previous projects. He also leveled direct criticism at universities for providing obsolete subject courses becoming thus factories of unemployable graduates (Map, 2013).

The king condemned the lack of coordination between higher education and the job market. He openly exposed the ills afflicting university students because of the “Arabization” policy tremendous failure. The students study all major subjects in classic Arabic language in primary, middle and high schools, and suddenly switch to French language in higher education. This is extremely challenging for students and obviously a major reason for university dropout. In short, the king announced a powerful call for education overhaul and a strong urge for the Higher Council for Education to carry out its evaluation of the National Charter for Education and Training launched ten years before (Map, 2013).

Undeniably, huge efforts have been made to improve the students’ college experience. Successive governments focused on building up infrastructure, creating schools, universities, campuses, students’ resident halls, etc (Plan d’urgence, 2009-2012). They also made information technology accessible to most university students (Mansouri & Mrabet p.4, para.3). Besides the government’s grants awarded to state university students, students enrolling in private schools can underwrite bank loans thanks to the creation of the Central Guarantee Fund to fund a part or all of their enrollment and tuition fees (Sirage, 2008). These efforts are obviously huge, but not enough. Moroccan universities keep suffering the challenge of dropout, and the students keep demanding education reform (The Union of Moroccan Students to Change the Education System).

Unfortunately, there are no reliable empirical studies or exact figures on students’ dropout available so far. However, according to the national media 50 to 60% of the students in some open access universities leave studies in the first year. Many others, though completing a university degree, find it extremely hard to have a job (L’opinion, 2013).

In our opinion, the ills afflicted to university students do not come only from a lack of coordination between studies and the job market, infrastructure, finance, facilities or the “Arabization policy”. These being improved alone would not produce better fulfilled students as long as the latter are still marginalized as distinctive individuals in the educational institution. Once at the university, students are naturally immediately left to themselves. Logically, they are the university’s “raison d’être”, and should be at the core of its concern. Yet, in most if not all universities, students are lost in case of need. No one is there to advise them, and no one is there to listen to them on issues they may find critical particularly in the first year. The very few universities that schedule students’ orientation or advising session do not expand it beyond their first day of studies. Usually, what happens to students at the start of the year will set the tone for the rest of the year. Freshmen, especially those who come from small high schools with individual attention, may need more hand holding during their initial weeks. Consequently, finding themselves in unfriendly and unsecure environments, some students leave, and others struggle with their motivation to stay (Bouchkioua, 2013).

To help students overcome their difficulties, education stakeholders have introduced academic advising in the education emergency plan launched in 2009 (plan d’urgence, 2009). Therefore, in implementation of project 13 targeting students’ advising, integration and supervision in higher education (p. 39), each university tries to rescue its unsuccessful students somehow. For example, Mohammed V Souissi university in Rabat devised “a peer tutoring program” in 2009 to help freshmen against early dropout and failure. This program aims to improve the students’ integration in the social and academic environments. It is indeed a unique experience because the tutors are postgraduate students majoring in the same field of studies as the undergraduates they are tutoring (Libé, 2011). Similarly, in 2011 some volunteer professors established the first students’ advising center in Rabat. It hosts more than 300 students every day and may double at the end

and beginning of each year. Besides academic advising, the center provides psychological and social support to students, becoming thus a model for some state universities (Amrani, 2013).

Nevertheless, in the absence of a real national academic advising policy with a clear educational and social vision, some seasonal private advising programs spring into action all over the country from time to time (Centre d'Orientation pour les Etudes et les Métiers, COPEM). More recently, there has been a growing interest in academic coaching. Actually, it is today's buzzword in Morocco and the latest trend in academic advising. Indeed, it has become popular only for the last five years thanks to the media. All radio and television channels broadcast talk programs where coaches offer their "expertise". The latter do not hesitate to answer citizens' complex questions on-air and very often work out a solution for them. Obviously, this is the role of the media and it is not to blame. However, it is very dangerous in our opinion to see that what is supposed to be an entertainment on the radio and television has invaded the higher educational environment in the same way.

Freshmen seminars, personal development and coaching courses have boomed. Some universities, ignoring the difference between a motivational speaker and a coach invite some "famous life coaches" to talk to students for an hour or so on academic and life skill issues. It is really amazing to see eight hundred students or so in an amphitheater, all impressed listening carefully to a coach hoping he/she waves a magic wand to make it all better. Some multinational companies have gone further and turned this opportunity into a profitable cost-effective business. The coach-speaker endorses their brand with great pomp and ceremony while at university. Not to mention some private coaching schools that offer their services to university students almost free of charge. They just give a chance to their apprentice coaches to get trained. In this respect, coaching has become again the new "secret" to the student retention (Tinto, 2006) and unfortunately another inefficient "educational vaccine" (Tinto, 2002).

Although coaching emerged as a profession in Morocco ten years ago, it still has no legal status and it is not submitted to any rules or regulations. Therefore, it is very hard to know who "should be in" and who "should be out" based on skills and knowledge" (Grant & Cavanagh (2004). Undoubtedly, universities that opened doors to such coaching initiatives either misunderstand or ignore completely the ultimate goal of academic coaching and use the life coach as another tool in a kitbag of quick fixes. If universities are hoping to fix the students' problems with this "coaching pill", then we believe that they have picked up the wrong one. Coaching guru, John Whitmore, states that the coach does not act as "a problem solver, a teacher, an advisor, an instructor, or even an expert; he or she is a sounding board, a facilitator, a counselor, an awareness raiser" (2009, Chapter 4, p.42, para.2).

The author claims that the ultimate goal of a coach is "building awareness, responsibility, and self-belief" (Chapter 1, p.18, para.9). This is exactly what our students need, but what they cannot unfortunately achieve through what we might call here "one hour university coaching show". Deep down, the core of coaching relies in the working and supportive relationship between the coach and the coachee. Coaching can be effective only when the coach adopts the appropriate strategy and the style of communication required (Chapter 1, p.9, para.1). Just like the strength-based model, the coach sees his/her coachees with a Pygmalion eye. That is, "in terms of their future potential and not of their past performance" (Chapter 1, p.17, para.2)". As Drekmeier (2012) witnessed, coaching worked because students found it "inspiring for them to connect with someone who knows who they are, who cares about them, and supports the effort they're making to succeed in college" (para.3). Ultimately, "This type of relationship empowers and motivates the student because he or she is truly "in charge" (Quinn, et al., 2000, Chapter 4, p.27. para.3).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Overall, education is a cornerstone of development, the foundation of human well being and the key to increasing economic productivity as well as social cohesion. Education is not only learning about books, but also about life. Therefore, educational institutions in general and higher education in particular bear a profound, moral responsibility to raise the awareness, increase knowledge, develop skills and values that students need in order to create a just, sustainable future life for themselves and for society altogether.

Undoubtedly, coaching, advising, tutoring, mentoring are all effective ways of raising students' awareness and maximizing college retention and success. However, if universities decide on coaching as a substitute for advising, it is the university's duty to protect students. Aguilar (2013) states that "Coaching for transformation is not possible in a vacuum- certain conditions must be established in an educational context in order for coaching to be effective "(Introduction, Section what might a transformed education system be like?, para.5). The fact that universities let any life coach or motivational speaker talk to students on complex academic issues hoping to fix them in no time could be very damaging to students and makes this discipline more controversial than ever.

Research discussed above has shown the efficacy of academic coaching at the university. Our students seem to be open and receptive to this appealing discipline. Therefore, we believe it's high time the government set laws and regulations of this industry in general and its use in education in particular. We suggest that academic coaching must first meet the requirement of a true profession. It should no more be used as a peripheral educational activity left to a coaching anarchic and lawless market. It must be central to the educational institution and should fundamentally involve policymakers, genuine academic coaches, faculty professors, administrators and students altogether.

In short, we recommend that academic coaching has to be contextualized within a serious broader educational conversation to reform. Most importantly, educational stakeholders have to be aware that "coaching cannot move from a service industry to a genuine profession without the development of a common body of empirically tested knowledge" (Grant et al., 2004, p.8, para. 3). That is why, we intend to carry out further to this reflection paper an empirical study on the impact of coaching on university students in Morocco.

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