



Strategic Integration of Academic Coaches in Online Learning

Enhancing Instructional Support While Reducing Faculty Burden

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Executive Summary

Online education continues to expand at an unprecedented pace, presenting universities with a dual challenge: maintaining instructional quality while managing the increasing workload of their faculty. To meet the evolving demands of online education, institutions are partnering with [Instructional Connections](#) and their Academic Coaches—experienced professionals who deliver targeted instructional support to faculty, ensure proactive, timely communication, provide rubric-aligned formative feedback, and monitor student activity to foster engagement and drive success.

Academic Coaches have emerged as a critical component in preserving instructional integrity, enhancing student success, and enabling scalable growth. Recent research by Forman & Sanchez (2025) confirms that, when deployed strategically, Academic Coaches not only improve student outcomes but also alleviate instructional strain on faculty.

This white paper explores best practices for integrating Academic Coaches into online courses, drawing on the operational expertise of [Instructional Connections](#) and the latest evidence-based insights. It offers a leadership-focused framework designed to strengthen institutional capacity, support faculty well-being, and elevate the online learning experience.

Leadership Imperative & Strategic Rationale

As institutions expand their online offerings, university leaders face a critical challenge: how to scale instruction without compromising academic rigor, faculty well-being, or student success. The demands of digital education—larger enrollments, diverse learner needs, and heightened accountability—are stretching faculty bandwidth and institutional resources.

Academic Coaches offer a strategic solution. These qualified, experienced professionals provide targeted instructional support that directly reinforces course objectives and faculty standards. By delivering timely feedback, monitoring student progress, and initiating proactive asynchronous outreach, Academic Coaches help sustain engagement and retention while upholding instructional quality.

This model aligns with key leadership priorities:

- Ensuring academic rigor across growing online programs
- Supporting faculty retention and satisfaction
- Meeting accreditation and student success benchmarks
- Expanding instructional capacity without sacrificing quality

When deployed strategically, Academic Coaches free faculty to focus on pedagogy, innovation, and high-impact engagement. As [Forman & Sanchez \(2025\)](#) emphasize, this approach enhances instructional integrity without compromising academic standards—making it a vital tool for institutions committed to excellence in online education.

Research Highlights: Five Pillars of Effective Academic Coach Utilization

Adapted from [Forman & Sanchez \(2025\)](#)

1. Defined Roles & Scope

Academic Coaches are facilitators—not instructors. Their role centers on delivering rubric-based formative feedback, monitoring student progress, and maintaining timely, proactive communication to support engagement. Clear boundaries ensure that Academic Coaches complement faculty efforts without duplicating or replacing core instructional responsibilities, preserving the integrity of the teaching role while enhancing overall course support.

2. Faculty Partnership & Collaboration

Successful relationship hinges on mutual respect and transparent communication between Academic Coaches and Faculty. Academic Coaches thrive when they are viewed as instructional partners—aligned with faculty expectations, pedagogical goals, and course standards. Regular check-ins, clear guidance, and the use of established rubrics foster trust, consistency, and a shared commitment to instructional excellence.

3. Training & Pedagogical Alignment

Faculty must carefully brief the Academic Coaches on course pedagogy, institutional standards, faculty expectations, and LMS tools. Effective onboarding involves understanding the faculty rubrics, inter-rater reliability standards, and expectations for tone, timing, and feedback quality, ensuring consistency and adherence to academic rigor.

4. Data-Driven Support & Feedback

Academic Coaches use LMS analytics to proactively identify at-risk students, monitor engagement, and tailor outreach. Their feedback is grounded in faculty rubrics and institutional benchmarks, ensuring consistency and reliability across sections. This data-informed approach enhances responsiveness and instructional impact.

5. Scalable Protocols & Consistency

Standardized workflows—including communication cadence, documentation protocols, and feedback templates—promote consistency and instructional quality across courses and programs. Faculty can leverage LMS analytics to monitor grading patterns and ensure alignment with established standards on a routine basis. These scalable systems enable institutions to expand online offerings without compromising academic integrity or instructional rigor.

Faculty Impact

Academic coaches alleviate common pain points for online faculty:

Challenge	Academic Coach Solution
High-grading volume	Coaches provide formative feedback and rubric-based grading
Limited time for outreach	Coaches monitor student progress and initiate asynchronous contact
Repetitive administrative tasks/fatigue	Coaches handle routine inquiries, announcements, and monitoring of student activities.
Burnout risk	Coaches reduce workload, allowing faculty to focus on teaching, outcomes, innovation, and research.

Faculty report increased satisfaction, improved bandwidth for course development, and stronger student relationships when supported by academic coaches.

Implementation Framework

Instructional Connections recommends a strategic rollout:

Phase	Leadership Action	Institutional Benefit
Assessment	Identify target programs and courses with high or growing enrollment, or those with high-risk characteristics.	Maximize impact and alignment with instructional goals
Design	Define coach roles and expectations	Alignment with academic standards
Onboarding	Train coaches and faculty on collaboration protocols	Build trust and confidence
Integration	Embed coaches into course workflows	Seamless instructional support
Evaluation	Monitor KPIs and gather feedback	Continuous improvement and ROI tracking

Impact Outcomes

- Universities partnering with Instructional Connections have seen:
- Higher course completion rates
- Improved student satisfaction scores
- Reduced faculty workload in high-enrollment courses
- Reduced faculty turnover in online programs
- Enhanced accreditation readiness through documented instructional support

Key Points

- Academic Coaches provide scalable, research-backed instructional support.
- They reduce faculty workload while improving student outcomes.
- Forman & Sanchez (2025) confirm their effectiveness in online learning environments.
- [Instructional Connections](#) offers a proven implementation model.

Conclusion

Academic Coaches are not a substitute for faculty—they are a strategic enhancement. When deployed effectively, they uphold academic standards, foster student success, and support institutional scalability. [Instructional Connections](#) stands ready to partner with institutions to implement research-backed coaching models that deliver measurable impact.

Academic Coaches are a strategic asset—not a cost center. They enable universities to scale online learning responsibly, support faculty well-being, and deliver measurable gains in student success. [Instructional Connections](#) offers a proven model for integrating Academic Coaches that aligns with institutional goals and leadership priorities.

Reference:

Forman, T. M., & Sanchez, J. M. (2025). Effective utilization of academic coaches for instructional support in online courses. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 20427530241239395.

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