

Supporting Pandemic Recovery Through the Tennessee Coaching Project

TBR | The College System of Tennessee

The Tennessee Coaching Project is a pilot effort to help students deemed academically underprepared succeed in their first year of college. Following pandemic declines in student success, especially for students enrolled in corequisite learning support courses, coaching provides these students with additional support navigating college. The pilot project launched in fall 2022 and included a second cohort of students in fall 2023 to enhance the support that colleges provide to underprepared students. The project is designed to extend additional support to students in corequisite learning support courses by assigning coaches (called First Steps coaches) to help students navigate coursework, connect with campus resources, and explore majors and careers. We at TBR randomly selected approximately 600 students placed in corequisite learning support courses each fall for the first two years of the project. Each First Steps coach was randomly assigned a caseload of 100–150 students to coach throughout each student's first year of college. We evaluated the impact of the Tennessee Coaching Project through quantitative research comparing outcomes of students assigned a coach and those not and through qualitative research leveraging interviews with students, coaches, and professional staff advisors.

Findings from this pilot's first two years indicate that coaching increases students' gateway math and writing course success, postsecondary credit accumulation, and persistence in college. Students and coaches

TBR–The College System of Tennessee has partnered with two community colleges to enhance corequisite learning support through individualized coaching in students' first year. After the second full year of the project's implementation, results indicate that the program effectively improves students' postsecondary outcomes.

attributed this to the coaching model's facilitation of deeper relationships between coaches and students, which ultimately helps students build connections on campus and better navigate college processes. Coaches use a comprehensive curriculum and ongoing training to develop these relationships with students.

This brief provides an overview of the Tennessee Coaching Project. The brief outlines the motivation for and logistics of the project, describes the research designs for the project's evaluation, presents key findings from the first two years of implementation, and summarizes related publications and what's next for the project.

The Tennessee Coaching Project: What's the Motivation?

The Tennessee Coaching Project aims to provide additional support for students often less likely to persist in college: students underprepared for college coursework. These students account for more than half of the students at Tennessee community colleges. Over the past decade, Tennessee community colleges have implemented meaningful innovations such as [corequisite learning support](#) to help underprepared students. However, many underprepared students still struggle to persist and complete a postsecondary credential. Success rates declined even more with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Tennessee Coaching Project aims to help these students succeed through a new model of student coaching.

Traditionally, underprepared students were required to navigate a series of prerequisite remedial courses before enrolling in college-level, credit-bearing coursework. In 2015, TBR became the first college system in the nation to adopt a corequisite learning support model at scale for all students at all colleges.

This model helps accelerate student progress ([Logue et al., 2016](#); [Ran & Yin, 2022](#); [TBR, 2021](#)). Unlike traditional prerequisite models of remediation, the corequisite model allows students to enroll in college-level, credit-bearing courses in their first term. Alongside these college-level courses, students enroll in paired corequisite learning support courses that provide just-in-time support for the paired college-level class.

In the corequisite learning support model, more students than before accessed and completed college-level introductory courses, often known as gateway courses. The proportion of underprepared students completing gateway math or writing courses by the end of their first year [doubled](#) after the introduction of corequisite learning support.

However, many students still struggle in their first year. While gateway course success improved after the introduction of corequisite learning support, student persistence did not improve. Equity gaps in success also persisted even after corequisite learning support was adopted. Many underprepared students still struggled to earn credit and persist beyond their first year. The COVID-19 pandemic [exacerbated these](#)

challenges, and students' momentum toward success slowed. For example, [gateway math completion rates](#) for corequisite learning support students fell 10 percentage points from 2019 to 2020 (48% to 38%), and gateway writing completion rates fell 13 percentage points over the same period (63% to 50%).

The Tennessee Coaching Project: How Does It Work?

The Tennessee Coaching Project was launched in fall 2022 and continued in fall 2023 to enhance the corequisite learning support model at two TBR community colleges: Jackson State Community College and Northeast State Community College. The project was designed to extend support for students by assigning coaches (called First Steps coaches) to help students navigate coursework, connect with resources, and explore careers.

Coaches work with students during their first year of college and are randomly assigned smaller-than-average caseloads of 100–150 students. To be eligible for coaching, students must have graduated from high school in the last five years and been placed into a corequisite learning support in at least one subject (students can be placed in up to three courses for math, reading, and writing). Each fall, approximately 600 students were randomly selected for coaching. Both cohorts have now completed their full year of coaching.

Coaches use a prescribed curriculum with students and serve as their primary academic advisor. The coaching curriculum guides coaches' outreach to students and includes structured meetings each semester as well as a robust text message and email outreach plan. During the first semester of coaching, coaches engage their students with an introductory meeting, during which they discuss the purpose of corequisite learning support, share information about the campus resources, and complete a goal-setting activity. In the second meeting, students are invited to participate in career exploration through the guided use of career interest tools. For the third meeting, students address challenges they have faced throughout the fall semester, make a plan to persist to the spring, and prepare for spring course registration.

In the spring, coaches and students review fall goals and challenges, review campus resources, and set new goals for the semester. At midterm, coaches take a pulse check to see how their students are progressing and continue discussions from the fall on career goals. In the sixth meeting, coaches and students discuss how they have progressed during the semester, make an academic plan that maps out their coursework through graduation, and prepare for students' transition from working with coaches to seeing other professional or faculty advisors.

Coaches participate in extensive training throughout the academic year, culminating in an annual Coaching Summit each summer. When hired, coaches participate in

a multi-day onboarding. Training includes information on the project's goals, a discussion of corequisite learning support, and a review of coach responsibilities. Coaches also engage in additional professional development throughout the project, including training on using labor market data to inform career exploration activities with students.

Research Design

To determine the impact of the Tennessee Coaching Project on students' postsecondary success, we leveraged both student-level college data and individual interviews conducted with First Steps coaches, professional staff advisors at each college, and students who were randomly assigned to a coach and those who were not.

The Experiment

Because we randomly assigned corequisite learning support students to coaching or standard advising with a faculty or professional staff advisor, we are able to compare the outcomes of these two student groups. The differences between their average outcomes represent the impact of coaching on their course success and persistence. To randomly assign students to coaching (the treatment group) or standard advising (the control group), we relied on student lists provided to us at the beginning of each fall semester by our two partner colleges. Then, we randomly assigned students to the treatment or control group at each college separately.

The students we randomly assigned to treatment and control groups come from two cohorts: those who first enrolled in fall 2022 and those who first enrolled in fall 2023. We will randomly assign a third cohort of students to the treatment and control group at each college in fall 2024.

Interviews and Audio Diaries

In addition to using student-level data, we collaborated with Jackson State Community College and Northeast State Community College to conduct interviews and collect audio diaries to better understand the experiences of coaches, professional staff advisors, and corequisite learning support students who were eligible for the Tennessee Coaching Project (including students who were selected for coaching and students who were not selected).

We conducted 33 thirty-minute interviews with corequisite learning support students, five hour-long interviews with First Steps coaches, and five hour-long interviews with professional staff advisors. We also collected monthly five-to-ten-minute-long coach audio reflections for four months. We transcribed the audio recordings, cleaned them for accuracy, and then organized the text by theme. We derived findings from these data by identifying consistent themes across interviews and audio diaries.

Year 1 Results:

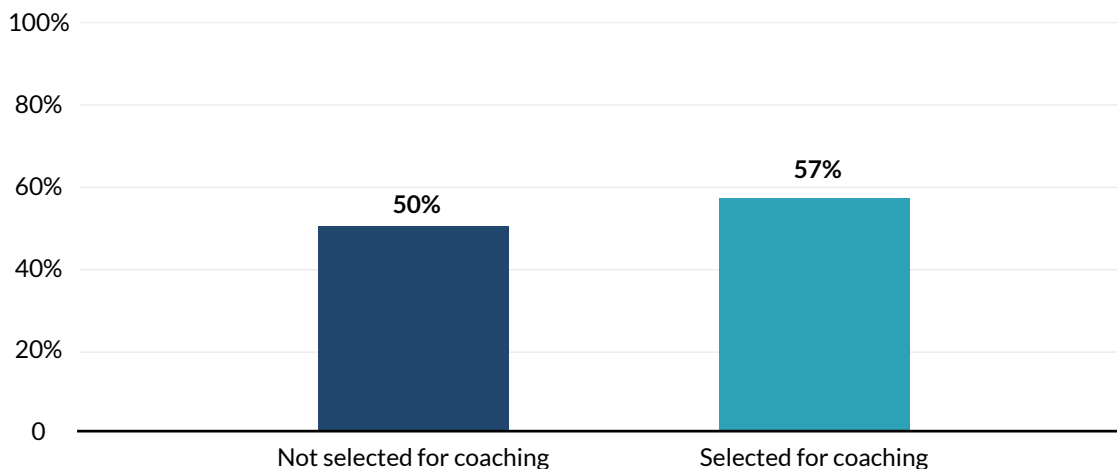
Treatment Versus Control Group Students

Findings from the first year of coaching indicate positive effects of the Tennessee Coaching Project on student gateway course completion, credit accumulation, and persistence to the next semester. These positive impacts following the pandemic result from the deep relationships that students make with their coaches and the help coaches provide in navigating college processes and connecting students to resources and services. We are continuing to track student outcomes from years 2 and 3.

Students Selected for Coaching Pass Gateway Courses at Higher Rates

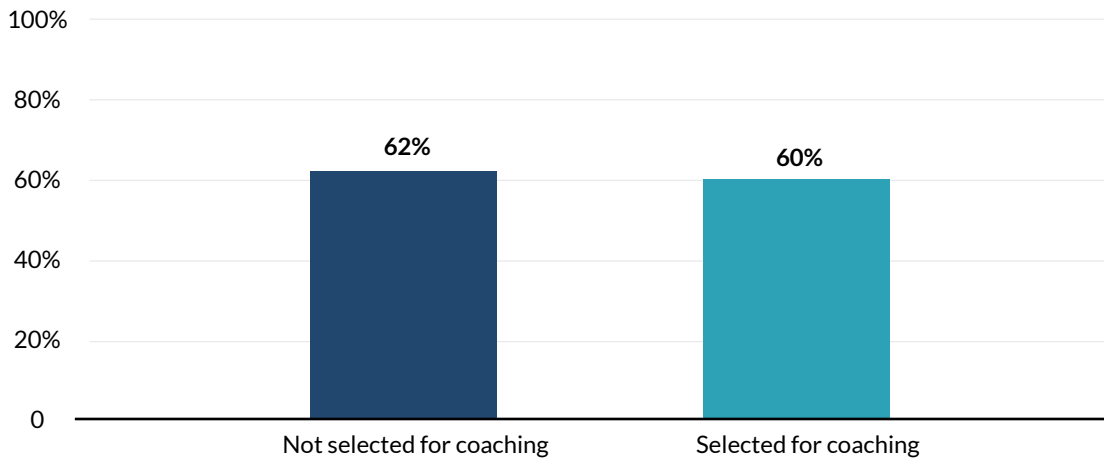
In their first semester, corequisite learning support students who were assigned to a coach completed their gateway math course at rates 4 to 7 percentage points higher than those who were not selected. Among those who began in fall 2022, 57% of selected students passed gateway math, compared to just 50% of those not selected.

Figure 1. Percent of Students Who Passed Gateway Math in First Semester



Students assigned a coach in fall 2022 were not more likely to complete their gateway writing courses¹ than those not assigned a coach. Of students assigned a coach, 60% passed their gateway writing course in the first semester, compared to 62% of students who were not assigned a coach. However, results from year 2 of the project suggest more positive impacts of coaching on gateway writing completion. Please see the full First Steps brief for more details.

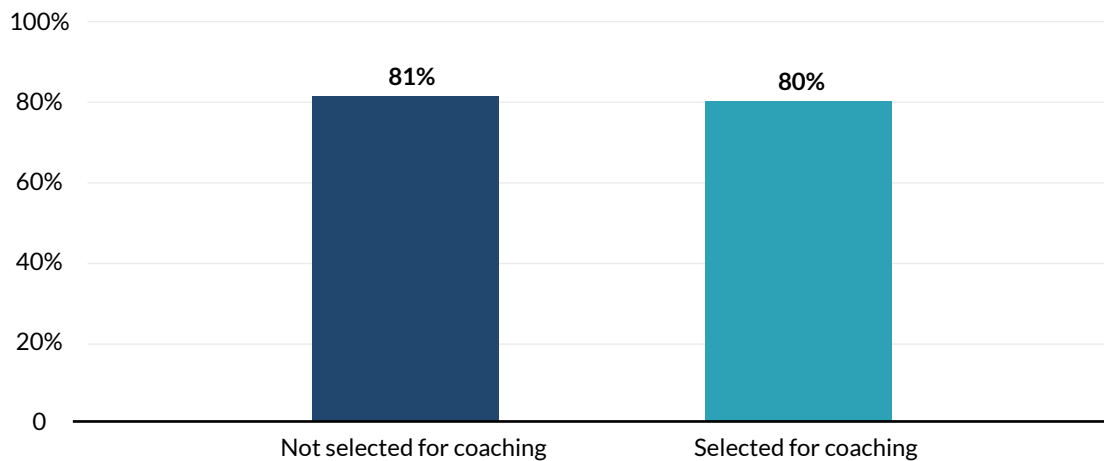
Figure 2. Percent of Students Who Passed Gateway Writing in First Semester



Students Selected for Coaching Are Just as Likely to Earn College Credit

Corequisite learning support students selected for coaching in fall 2022 earned college credit² in their first semester at nearly the same rate as students who were not selected. While this year 1 result does not show an impact of coaching on earning college credit, year 2 results for this outcome are more promising. Please see the full [First Steps brief](#) for more details.

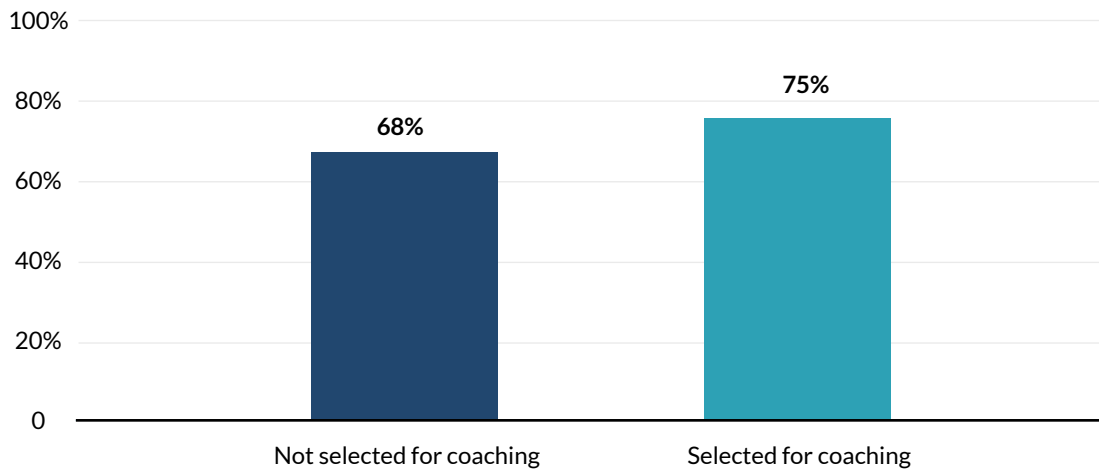
Figure 3. Percent of Students Who Earned Any Credit Hours in First Semester



Students Selected for Coaching Are More Likely to Persist

Among corequisite learning support students who began in fall 2022, those assigned to a coach were 7 percentage points more likely to reenroll in spring 2023.³ While 68% of students who were not assigned a coach returned in the following semester, 75% of students selected for coaching returned.

Figure 4. Percent of Students Who Persisted From Fall 2022 to Spring 2023



All the results discussed so far vary by college. For example, students who began coaching in fall 2022 at Northeast State Community College were 8 percentage points more likely to return in the following semester than those who were not selected for coaching; students who began coaching at Jackson State Community College were 6 percentage points more likely to return the next semester. Additionally, while persistence rates from fall 2022 to spring 2023 were 7 percentage points higher for students assigned a coach, these same students persisted at the same rates to the following fall semester (fall 2023)⁴ as their non-coached peers. In other words, 45% of both students who were and students who were not selected for coaching persisted from fall 2022 to fall 2023.

Overall, the findings demonstrate the positive impact that coaching has on corequisite learning support student outcomes.

Additional Year 1 Results: Engagement With Coaches

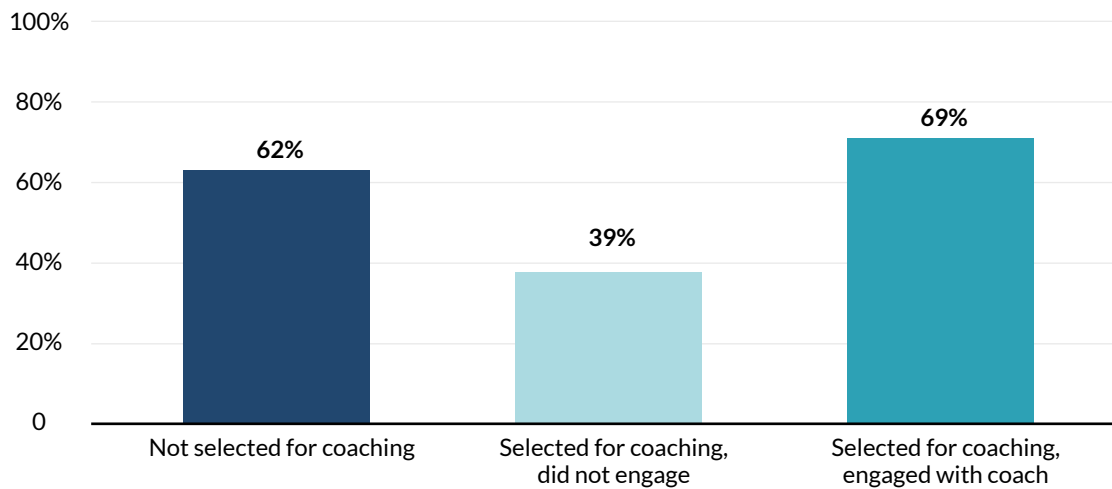
To better understand the impact of coaching *for those who engaged with their coach*, we split the treatment group into two categories to show outcomes for corequisite learning support students who engaged with their assigned coach (the “engaged” treatment group) separately from outcomes for students who were selected for coaching but did not engage with their coach (the “disengaged” treatment group). Engaging with a coach simply means that a student interacted at least once with their coach (whether through a text message, phone call, or scheduled meeting). Seventy-four percent of students who were randomly assigned to coaching in fall 2022 engaged with their coach.

Across all outcomes and for both cohorts, students in the engaged treatment group had the highest success rates.

Students Selected for Coaching Who Engage Are Most Likely to Pass Gateway Courses

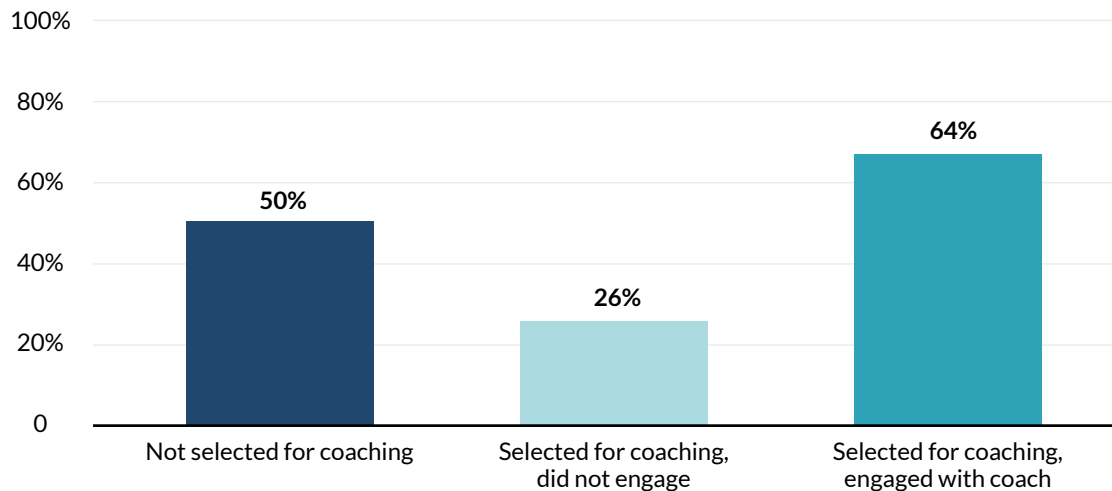
Corequisite learning support students who were selected for coaching and engaged with their coach at least once were the most likely to pass gateway writing in their first semester, compared to those who did not engage and those in the control group. Among students who began in fall 2022, 69% of those selected who engaged with their coach passed the course, compared to 62% of those who were not selected and 39% of those who were selected but did not engage.

Figure 5. Percent of Students (Including Engaged and Disengaged) Who Passed Gateway Writing in First Semester



Similarly, corequisite learning support students who were selected for coaching and engaged with their coach were most likely to pass gateway math in their first semester. Among those who began in fall 2022, 64% of those selected who engaged with their coach passed the course, compared to 50% for those who were not selected and 26% for those who were selected but did not engage.

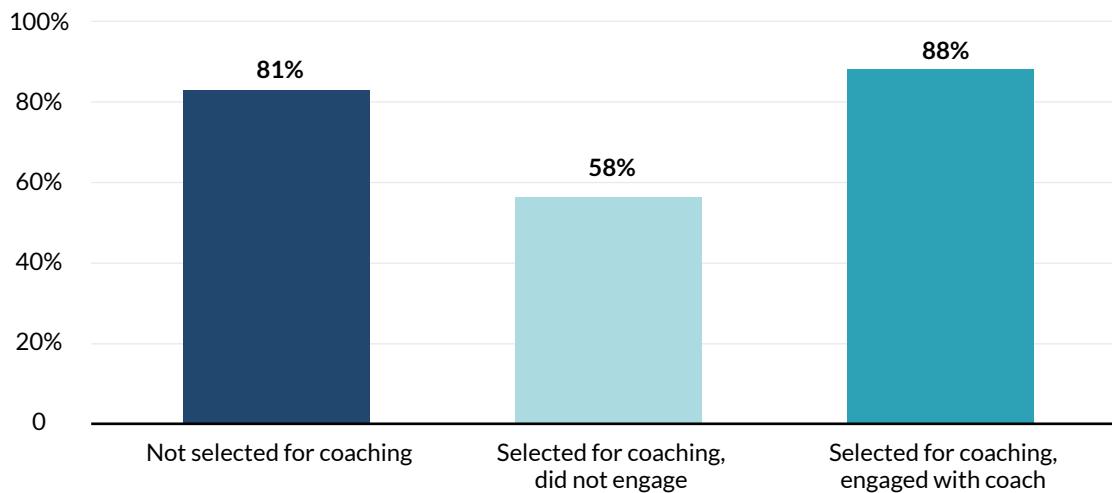
Figure 6. Percent of Students (Including Engaged and Disengaged) Who Passed Gateway Math in First Semester



Students Selected for Coaching Who Engage Are Most Likely to Earn College Credit

Corequisite learning support students who were selected for coaching and engaged at least once were also most likely to earn college credit during their first semester, compared to those who did not engage and those in the control group. Among those who began in fall 2022, 88% of students selected who engaged earned credit in their first semester, compared to 81% of those not selected and 58% of those selected who did not engage.

Figure 7. Percent of Students (Including Engaged and Disengaged) Who Earned Any Credit Hours in First Semester



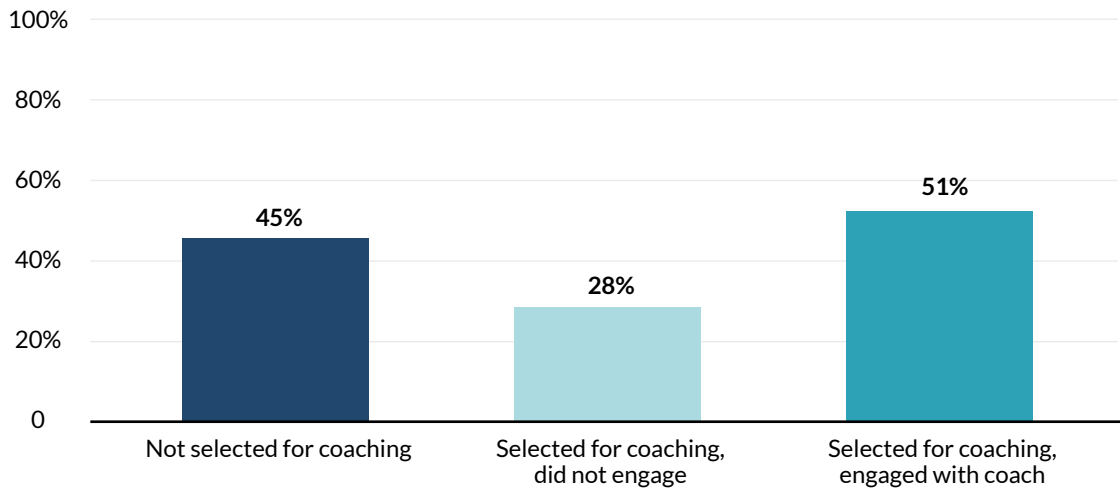
Students Selected for Coaching Who Engage Are Most Likely to Persist

Similarly, among these three comparison groups, those who were selected and engaged were most likely to persist from fall 2022 to spring 2023. In addition, although fall 2023–fall 2024 persistence rates for students selected for coaching in fall 2022 were similar to those for students not selected for coaching, results do show differences for students who were selected and engaged with their coach.

Among corequisite learning support students who began in fall 2022, 51% of students selected for coaching who engaged at least once with their coach returned in fall 2023, compared to 28% of those selected who did not engage and 45% of those not selected for coaching.

Additional details about all of the results, including those from year 2, can be found in our [full policy brief](#).

Figure 8. Percent of Students (Including Engaged and Disengaged) Who Persisted From Fall 2022 to Fall 2023



Qualitative Findings Help Explain These Results

To learn more about how coaching increases corequisite learning support students' outcomes, we conducted interviews with students, professional staff advisors, and coaches and collected audio diaries from coaches. We found that students experience three primary benefits from coaching: (1) building deeper relationships with their assigned coach, (2) developing more meaningful college connections and confidence in their ability to overcome challenges, and (3) navigating college processes more effectively. Coaches accomplish this through a holistic advising approach and by leveraging curriculum and training provided through the Tennessee Coaching Project model.

Coaching Allows Students to Build Deeper Relationships With Their Coach

First, students we talked to who were assigned a coach were generally more aware of who their coach was and felt more positive about their relationship with their coach than those assigned to a professional staff or faculty advisor. As one First Steps coach explained,

[Meetings are] never just about class registration. ... I'm so open with my students that I truly want to be there for them and meet them where they are and whatever is on their mind that day. ... Conversations run the gamut of whatever they want to talk about. Career exploration is a big one that I personally try to segue into a lot, and future planning and academic planning and planning, you know, not just the upcoming semester, but your plan for graduation.

Having open conversations with students and the time to devote to individual students helped build strong relationships between students and their coach.

Coaching Helps Students Feel More Connected to Campus

Second, students we spoke with who were assigned a coach described feeling more connected to campus and more confident in their ability to overcome challenges than students who were not assigned a coach. As one student put it, “I know that if I ever get into trouble, I can always call [my coach] and they can point me towards the right direction.” Having a clear point person on campus for students to reach out to whenever they felt they needed assistance helped them build a stronger sense of community on campus and helped them feel cared for by their college.

Coaching Helps Students Better Navigate College Processes and Resources

Finally, students we interviewed who were assigned a coach described their coach helping them navigate college processes, connect with relevant staff across departments, and gain access to college resources and services. One student shared,

When I recently found out that I was pregnant, I came to [my coach]. I was in distress because I was trying to figure out how I could still go to school and have a child at the same time. ... [They] did go out of [their] way to make sure I had everything I needed that day.

Coaches helped connect students to the right contacts at financial aid and student services offices; frequently referred students to tutoring services; provided insight to students on how to manage their time, courses, and relationships with faculty; and even occasionally acted as liaisons between students and faculty.

Looking Ahead

In collaboration with our two partner colleges, TBR has released two policy briefs outlining findings from the first two years of the Tennessee Coaching Project:

- A [quantitative policy brief](#) provides an overview of the Tennessee Coaching Project, describes the curriculum, and explores outcomes from the first two years of the project.
- A [qualitative policy brief](#) describes the interview and audio diary collection described here and provides a deeper exploration of students’, coaches’, and advisors’ experiences with the Tennessee Coaching Project.

We have also released two briefs outlining the curriculum used to guide the coaching model and describing how coaches use labor market data to provide career guidance:

- The [First Steps Advisor Coaching Model brief](#) provides detailed information about the curriculum that the First Steps coaches use to coordinate their outreach to students and organize their meetings.

- The [Coaching with Labor Market Data brief](#) outlines how First Steps coaches use labor market data to help students navigate their career and major choices. It also provides recommendations for how best to provide career guidance to students.

In addition to serving corequisite learning support students after the onset of the pandemic, the Tennessee Coaching Project expanded in spring 2023 to launch a second coaching initiative focused on adult learners. This initiative uses a coaching curriculum tailored to adult learners to serve another population of students at risk of not completing. A [third policy brief](#) explores the outcomes so far for these adult learners.

The Tennessee Coaching Project will begin its third year of implementation in fall 2024. At the beginning of this semester, we will randomly assign our third cohort of students to a coach and will follow their outcomes through their postsecondary experience, while continuing to track outcomes for earlier cohorts.

Endnotes

- 1 Gateway courses are English 1010 and 1000-level math courses. Gateway course completion rates are calculated as the percent of first-time students who attempt and pass a gateway course by the end of their first semester, including courses completed as community college dual enrollment courses.
- 2 Earned credit reflects whether a student earned any credit hours (college-level and corequisite learning support hours) during their first semester (fall 2022 or fall 2023).
- 3 Persistence rates reflect the number of first-time freshmen who return the next semester (fall semester to spring semester).
- 4 Persistence rates reflect the number of first-time freshmen who return the following year (fall semester to fall semester).

References

Logue, A. W., Watanabe-Rose, M., & Douglas, D. (2016). Should students assessed as needing remedial mathematics take college-level quantitative courses instead? A randomized controlled trial. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38(3), 578–598. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373716649056>

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Tennessee Board of Regents. (2021). *Gaining momentum: Refining corequisite learning support to boost student success in the first year and beyond*. <https://www.tbr.edu/sites/default/files/media/2023/12/GainingMomentumNovember2021.pdf>

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For more information about the ARCC Network, visit ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/arccnetwork/

For more information on the Tennessee Coaching Project, visit www.tbr.edu/policy-strategy/tennessee-coaching-project-tcp