

Arnold Ventures Proposal

Arnold Ventures is a philanthropy dedicated to tackling some of the most pressing problems in the United States. Our mission is to improve lives by investing in evidence-based solutions that maximize opportunity and minimize injustice. Our team manages all of our philanthropy as Arnold Ventures; however, funding for approved proposals will generally come from one or more of the following entities: the Laura and John Arnold Foundation (a 501(c)(3) private foundation), Action Now Initiative (a limited liability company), and/or the Arnolds' donor-advised fund at Fidelity Charitable.

I. Administrative Details

A. Organization: University of Florida

B. Project Title: **Experimental Analysis of an Academic Coaching Intervention for Online Student Success**

C. Project Purpose: We propose a pilot randomized controlled trial (RCT) of a high-touch Online Student Success Coaching intervention to help first-year community college students who are enrolled in at least one online course. The project will test whether the Online Student Success Coaching intervention will have a positive impact on treated students' grades in online courses, their likelihood of persisting in online courses, their overall G.P.A., and their likelihood of overall persistence.

D. Funding Request

E. Project Lead(s) Name: Frank Fernandez

F. Administrative Lead

G. Project Type: Restricted

II. Project Details

A. **Project Description:** We propose a pilot randomized controlled trial (RCT) of a high-touch Online Student Success Coaching intervention to help first-year community college students who are enrolled in at least one online course. Despite increasing online enrollments in higher education (e.g., Ortagus, 2020), there are few studies that support causal inferences about improving student success in online courses, particularly among community college students (Xu & Xu, 2020). Quasi-experimental research has shown that community college students have higher odds of withdrawing from online courses relative to face-to-face offerings of the same courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2011). Additionally, studies show that racially-minoritized (Black and Hispanic) students tend to have poorer grades in online courses than similarly prepared White students (Johnson & Mejia, 2014; Xu & Jaggars, 2014). Students who take a course online also have higher odds of re-taking that course or avoiding future courses of the same subject (Hart et al., 2018).

The major challenge facing online students is the inherent reliance on self-directed learning, which harms racially minoritized and low-income students to a further extent than white and higher-income students (Ortagus, 2020; Xu & Xu, 2020). According to the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) practice guide, *Effective Advising for Postsecondary Students* (a publication of the What Works Clearinghouse), there is strong evidence to support the use of coaching in four-year college, predominantly residential

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settings (Lavallais, 2017; Oreopolous & Petronijevic, 2017; Karp et al., 2021). According to the IES practice guide (Karp et al., 2021), coaching is defined as more structured and goal-oriented than mentoring where faculty or staff take on the role of “informal role model to the student” (p. 40).

Coaches use specialized training “to help students develop new perspectives, strategies, and skills toward their personal and professional goals” (Karp et al., 2021, p. 40). We leverage the expertise of key project personnel and UF Online student success coaches to adapt best practices for student coaching for online students at HCC in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the resulting Online Student Success Coaching intervention.

Although, some research has examined coaching interventions in community college settings, the studies have tended to focus on specific groups of students, such as disabled students (Bellman et al., 2015; Richman et al., 2014). Evans et al. (2020) reported on a community college case-management intervention based on a randomized controlled trial, but the intervention focused on connecting students to off-campus social services and providing emergency financial assistance. Bettinger and Baker (2014) analyzed data from nudge contacts and brief meetings (lasting at least five minutes) for four-year and two-year college students. Yet, research has largely overlooked how a high-touch coaching intervention can support community college student success in online courses.

The partner site (Houston Community College or HCC) is an urban, Hispanic Serving Institution with approximately 10,000 first-time students each academic year. With funding from Arnold Ventures, HCC will hire three full-time online success coaches and a part-time program coordinator to provide Online Student Success Coaching for up to 1,920 students. HCC is committed to using, collecting, and analyzing administrative data to evaluate the efficacy of the coaching intervention and inform ongoing academic advising reforms.

First-year students at HCC are required to take an introduction to college course (EDUC 1300: Learning Frameworks). We will randomly assign EDUC 1300 course sections to treatment and control groups. Students in the treatment group will be assigned to meet with an online student success coach for at least one coaching session of up to 30 minutes in the first half of the semester. All students in the treatment group who receive one Online Student Success Coaching session will be eligible for follow-up sessions throughout the semester and academic year to test dosage effects. Students in the control group will not meet with coaches (“business as usual approach”). The part-time coordinator will help schedule coaching sessions, as well as manage and track coaching loads for the three online success coaches.

Online Student Success Coaching sessions will focus on helping students understand the challenges inherent in online education (i.e., self-directed learning) and receive wraparound support in learning how to be successful in online courses. Online success coaches will be trained by University of Florida (UF) Online professionals to provide transition advising, which UF uses to help students assess their readiness to succeed in online courses and to overcome the challenges of self-directed learning. UF

Online’s transition advising model is frequently used to support low-income, first-generation, and racial minority students to succeed in online courses. UF Online staff will develop training materials and provide professional development for the newly-hired HCC online success coaches over three half-days.

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Training sessions will be recorded and training materials will be archived so that HCC may use them to provide professional development after the project period. Using administrative data, HCC and UF researchers will test the effects of the Online Student Success Coaching treatment on students' grades in EDUC 1300, Fall 2022 non-EDUC 1300 online course(s), enrollment and grades in online courses in future semesters (e.g., Spring 2023, Fall 2023), grade point averages in Fall 2022 and Spring 2023, as well as likelihood of persistence to Spring 2023 and Fall 2023.

Additionally, the UF PI and Co-PI will perform rapid-cycle evaluations (Skillman et al., 2019) of how the online success coaching intervention is being implemented at the partner institution and to identify best practices for how it can be scaled at HCC and adopted at other colleges. The rapid-cycle evaluations will include Zoom interviews with the online success coaches and the part-time program coordinator, a review of coach schedules or coaching loads, and Zoom interviews with students about their experiences with the coaching intervention.

Project deliverables will report on the coaching intervention and its effects on student outcomes. First, UF researchers will regularly present findings to HCC administrators to inform strategic planning around academic advising. We will post an open-access report to the UF Institute of Higher Education webpage² to disseminate findings to a wide audience. We will also use data from the rapid-cycle evaluations to post a Brief to the Institute of Higher Education webpage that will share best practices for colleges that may be interested in adopting or adapting the intervention for their own students. In addition to disseminating findings online, we will present preliminary findings by presenting at academic conferences (e.g., American Educational Research Association, Association for the Study of Higher Education, Association for Education Finance and Policy). Finally, beyond the project period, we will publish study findings in academic journals (e.g., AERA Open, American Educational Research Association, Educational Researcher).