

Success Coach-Student Relationship Development at the Community College: A Communicative Approach Framed by Social Penetration Theory

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Abstract

This study examines the communication strategies employed by success coaches at community colleges to engage meaningfully with students to develop and maintain a positive interpersonal relationship. Although the success coach model has been developed and researched in the education discipline, exploration of the interpersonal communication strategies success coaches or advisors have employed to develop relationships with students has been virtually nonexistent within the communication field. Using the framework of the social penetration theory, 17 success coaches across four different community colleges in the southeastern United States shared their experiences and communication strategies employed to engage students and build relationships in order to improve student outcomes. Key findings indicated that self-disclosure by the success coach was an important first step in establishing rapport and trust. Empathetic listening coupled with positive and assuring talk helped to solidify relational bonds. Proximity to students was significant in encouraging interactions. The creation and pursuit of opportunities for interaction with students was a key factor in fostering the interpersonal relationship between success coach and student.

Keywords: success coach, social penetration theory, community college, interpersonal communication, relational maintenance

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The transition to college is often met with a blend of fear and excitement. However, for the vast majority of students, completion of the degree goes unfulfilled. Access to college has increased over the last 50 years due in large part to the expansion of the community college system. However, access and attendance do not equate to an increase in graduation rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), the completion rate within 150% of normal time for first time, full time students was 33% at two-year and 62% at four-year degree granting institutions. Under ever increasing pressure to improve retention and completion rates, colleges have reevaluated many practices, including the advising model. A relatively new approach is the creation of a success coach to support and challenge students throughout their entire program by connecting students to resources, providing support and follow up, and helping with time management, study skills, and goal setting.

With an open door policy, community colleges receive the vast majority of at risk, underprepared students, which exacerbates the need for intervention (Zeidenberg, 2008). Goldrick-Rab (2010) contended that improving student success at the community college involved intervention at key times, including initial transition; experience with remedial coursework; and persistence in credit bearing coursework. Chickering (2006) stated a critical component for persistence is timely, specific, and individualized feedback on strengths and weaknesses, accompanied by specific next steps or suggestions for improvement. Success coaches may be uniquely suited to fill this gap. However, motivating a student

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to reap benefits that are more intrinsic than extrinsic can be a challenge. Exploration of the communication behaviors community college success coaches employ to develop and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships with students will contribute valuable insight toward providing impactful interventions.

Although the success coach model has been developed and researched in the education discipline, there is very little literature within the communication field that involves the interpersonal communication strategies success coaches or advisors employ to develop relationships with students. The interpersonal dynamic covered most frequently in the communication field is the teacher-student relationship (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Goodboy & Bolkan, 2009; Sabee & Wilson, 2005; Titsworth, et al., 2015; Witt, et al., 2004) or the student-student relationship (Smith & Peterson, 2007; Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Mazer, 2009). The mentor-mentee relationship has been studied in the workplace (Phillips & Adams, 2018). It has also been studied in graduate programs, largely from the mentee's perspective, with faculty serving in the mentor capacity (Harris & Lee, 2018; Kalbfleisch, 2002; Mansson & Myers, 2012; Waldeck, 2018). Academic support functions, such as advising, were limited and featured faculty advisors (Leach & Wang, 2015). No research appears to have been conducted in the communication field that considers student support service staff, such as professional academic advisors or success coaches, and their relationship with students. Further, the majority of the studies were conducted at four-year or graduate level institutions. A vast amount of research demonstrates that relationships between students and college representatives are a reliable predictor of student success (Habley et al., 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The success coach-student relationship, particularly in the community college setting, is an important, yet under researched, area. The purpose of this study is to connect interpersonal communication theory with academic student support practices. Specifically, this study will extend the interpersonal communication framework of social penetration theory and social exchange to the relationship building practices of a success coach within the community college setting to advance the role of communication on student learning and success outcomes.

Literature Review

Relationships have been a hallmark of interpersonal communication studies since the 1960s. Although there is a wealth of literature regarding interpersonal communication and student development, the two fields have remained isolated. Student development literature has explored advisor/coach-student relationships but this context has been overlooked within the communication literature. Goldman and Myers (2017) remarked on this disparity:

While informative and useful to many, these efforts frequently overlook an early foundation of the field—student development. Specifically, instructional communication scholars have arguably failed to recognize the importance of the *developmental* processes that students experience in their education, particularly during college. (p. 485)

As such, this review will provide a discussion of the communication framework to be applied to this study as well as a definition of success coaching supported through current student development practices.

Social Penetration Theory

The primary relational development theory identified to inform this study was the theory of social penetration (Altman & Taylor, 1973) which considers the breadth and depth of self-disclosure based on a cost-reward evaluation. Social penetration theory is an established explanation of how closeness develops in relationships through communication behavior and interaction (Griffin et al., 2015). It is based on the social exchange theory whereby people weigh the benefits and risks of social relationships. Social penetration theory is grounded in the system theory approach (Allensworth, 1996). In this light, relationships are small systems that are established, maintained, and changed through interaction. Self-disclosure passes through four stages in the social penetration process, including orientation (first meeting conversations around hobbies, likes/dislikes), exploratory affective exchange (layer peeled away for deeper sharing of personality), full affective exchange (deeper intimate exchange), and stable exchange (all layers peeled away characterized by continuous openness) (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Although not listed initially in the stages of social penetration, Altman and Taylor also proffer a chapter

discussing the withdrawal from sharing in the termination of a relationship as *depenetration*. However, they caution, “the social penetration process, no matter how many stages it contains, is probably never complete, nor does it necessarily always proceed in a smooth fashion” (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p.141). The three aspects of social penetration theory that guided the research are as follows: the depth and breadth of exchange in relationship development, the social exchange process of relationship maintenance, and the ecology of interpersonal interactions.

Developing Relationships--Depth and Breadth of Penetration. In social penetration theory, the depth of penetration is the degree of penetration from the superficial to the intimate. Altman and Taylor (1973) used the analogy of an onion wherein personality structure has layers, from the superficial outermost skin to deeper levels of more private beliefs and feelings about the self, others, and the world (p. 17). This is considered the *depth dimension*.

In addition to the depth dimension, Altman and Taylor (1973) described the breadth of penetration as the variety of topical areas, such as family, sex, religion, hobbies, and so forth (p. 29). Through interactions, the degree of disclosure (depth) and the range of disclosure (breadth) is altered. Although the research indicated openness through disclosure takes time, the success coach, unlike peers or instructors, has a greater challenge for exchange due to irregular interaction opportunities.

Maintaining Relationships--Social Exchange and Relational Maintenance. Social penetration theory further posited a framework to understand the role of communication in the maintenance of interpersonal relationships through social exchange. Altman and Taylor (1973) built social penetration theory on Thibaut and Kelley’s (1959) theory of interdependence and cost-rewards. Social penetration theory defined *rewards* as pleasures and gratifications and *costs* as any factor that inhibits interaction or behaviors. Thus, social penetration was predicated on the assumption that participants evaluate relationships in a relatively rational manner and remain in a relationship as long as the rewards outweigh the costs. A more recent study found that trust was developed between partners in which actors independently provide benefit to each other without knowing what returns they will receive (Molm et al., 2000).

Another study based on the developmental

framework of social exchange was Stafford and Canary’s (1991) research on the relational maintenance behaviors of romantic couples. They studied the communication behaviors that positively impacted liking, commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction. They discovered the following five interpersonal actions that contributed to long term relational satisfaction: *positivity*—upbeat conversation, *openness*—self disclosure, *assurance*—encouraging talk, *networking*—spending time together with others, and *sharing tasks*—working together on tasks. Stafford and Canary focused their study on romantic couples due to the deep, intimate nature of the relationship. Exploration of those behaviors could be expanded to provide insight toward understanding how the success coach maintains their interpersonal relationship with a student.

The Ecology of Interpersonal Relationships. As a system theory, Altman and Taylor (1973) posited that social penetration occurred simultaneously at different levels of social interaction in what they termed the “ecology of interpersonal relationships” (p. 104). Drawing on the biological use of the term to describe interactions among organisms in their environment, this perspective considered three levels of interaction functioning as a system, including verbal exchange, nonverbal exchange, and use of the physical environment. This study applied these three elements of the interpersonal communication ecology to the analyses of success coach communication behaviors.

As Altman & Taylor (1973) discussed, verbal exchange refers to conversation, topics, and depth and breadth of self-disclosure. For example, talk is typified in the orientation stage as superficial, simple, and usually inconsequential. During the exploratory affective stage, individuals express personal attitudes about public topics. During the affective stage, talk is about more private and personal matters. The stable stage is typified by open sharing of personal core beliefs and an ability to predict the emotional reactions of the other person. Stafford and Canary (1991) further highlighted aspects of verbal exchange that help maintain relations, including positivity, openness, and assurance.

Nonverbal exchange in the social penetration process includes use of the body to convey meaning and messages. Nonverbal behaviors provide affect or emotional displays, act as emblems or a substitute for words, act as illustrators or a complement for words, act as regulators which impact pace of the

interaction, and act as personal adapters or idiosyncratic coping behaviors (Ekman & Friesen, 1981). Nonverbal behaviors include use of body, such as posture and positions, gestures, head movements, and facial expressions like smiling, eye contact, and so forth. The frequency of nonverbal displays and efficiency of understanding should increase as the social penetration process develops (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Aspects of social distance and proximity Altman and Taylor addressed more completely in their description of the physical environment.

Altman and Taylor (1973) viewed the physical setting or environment from two perspectives—the pure physical factors, such as lighting or temperature, and the social impact of proximity and interaction. Werner et al. (1992) concluded the environment was an integral part of the relationship process. How the environment is used, modified, and the meanings associated with a place or object should be a consideration. There are also temporal qualities such duration, pace, and coordination of events that impact social relationships (Werner et al., 1992). This study endeavored to discover the unique aspect of the success coach-student relationship as applied to its novel setting.

The lasting impact of the social penetration theory was it focused scholars on relationship development as a communication process (Littlejohn et al., 2017). The theory has been extended to understand relationship development in a variety of contexts. A recent study of disclosure and relationship building was explored through the use of social media (Pennington, 2015). Another study looked at how the theory predicted relationship development by relationship type, such as for lesbian, gay, or bisexual people (Manning, 2019) or to explore the influence of self-disclosure in student-teacher relationships (Avila, 2019). This study endeavored to extend the theory into the context of disclosure and relational reward management from the perspective of a success coach where the reciprocity of exchange is constrained by time and interaction opportunities.

Success Coaching

Over the last 20 years, the academic success coach has emerged in higher education (Robinson, 2015). The positive effects of student coaching were chronicled in a study conducted by Bettinger and Baker (2014) where they found a 14% increase in persistence after 24 months. Exit interviews con-

ducted with students at one university revealed a strong sentiment toward the interaction and support received from the success coach (Neuhauser & Weber, 2011). In response, many colleges have adopted various adaptations of a coaching model with varying degrees of purpose, design, and infrastructure (Robinson, 2015). A challenge to this unwieldy proliferation is distinguishing the role from other student development services which may confuse students or be seen as another gatekeeper for the student to navigate.

Robinson (2015) explored the concept of success coaching to add clarity to the field but found that due to the disparity of needs at differing institutions, coaching was difficult to define. A success coach may wear additional hats at his or her institution that differ from person to person and institution to institution. As such, Robinson distinguished coaching from other roles in more general terms of asking reflective questions, sharing effective strategies, co-creating a plan, and helping navigate resources to develop skills and improve performance. For most institutions, the mission of the success coach is to provide comprehensive help by connecting students to the appropriate resource (Farrell, 2007). For the purposes of this study, a success coach endeavors to accomplish this defined purpose but, as a participant put more succinctly, “a success coach is like having a personal cheerleader, coach, friend, advocate, and educational expert rolled all into one.” Thus, in collaboration with faculty, staff, and community partners, a success coach provides mentoring, individualized support, and advocacy.

A unique paradox to relationship building for a success coach is that they have to build a meaningful interpersonal relationship with constraints on time and frequency of interaction. By contrast, instructors have repetitive interaction and exposure to their students. Success coaches need to hone their interpersonal skills to develop relationships that are meaningful but accomplished purposely in order to achieve successful student outcomes.

Accordingly, two overarching research questions drove the study. They are as follows:

RQ 1: What communication strategies do success coaches employ to develop meaningful interpersonal relationships with students in order to impact successful student outcomes?

RQ 2: What are the inherent rewards and costs in maintaining the interpersonal relationship with the student?

Methodology

A qualitative research method was employed to discover the relationship building practices and experiences of a success coach. In depth interviews were used to focus on the perspective of the success coach toward developing a productive, interpersonal relationship with a student. The goal of in depth interviews is to gain knowledge based on substantive descriptions from the perspective of the selected individuals (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This method provides a means to gather information and understanding from individuals on a focused topic from both the participants' perceptions and experience (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Interviews examined the communication strategies each success coach employed to develop and maintain productive interpersonal relationships that positively impacted student outcomes.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was employed to select information rich cases based on group characteristics. The purposeful group characteristic sampling strategy employed was typical case sampling, in order to select cases that highlight frequently occurring experiences (Patton, 2015). Each participant served in a success coach capacity at a community college. Four community colleges in the southeastern United States were selected and equally distributed between rural and urban areas. Two male and 15 female success coaches were identified and selected to participate.

Data Collection and Analysis

After obtaining permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), in depth, in person, semi structured interviews were conducted utilizing an interview guide with 17 success coaches. This technique allowed for responsive interviewing and naturalistic inquiry while ensuring the same basic lines of inquiry were maintained (Patton, 2015). The central line of questioning revolved around communication strategies employed to build trust and develop a supportive relationship. In addition, each participant was observed in their working environment and five student interactions were witnessed.

Interview data were audio recorded, and the transcription totaled 337 pages. The interviews

ranged between 45 to 90 minutes. Each interview transcript was inductively analyzed using open coding to detect descriptive accounts and search for recurring themes and concepts (Benaquisto, 2008). After subsequent review of the transcriptions and observation field notes, patterns were synthesized as they applied to the theoretical framework. Theoretical coding helped make sense of participants' responses in terms of the larger conceptual categories relative to aspects of the social penetration theory of relationship development and maintenance.

Validity and Reflexivity

To verify accuracy of findings, data were collected to discover convergence of themes through the triangulation of interviews and observations (Creswell, 2014). The use of a peer debriefing was employed, as an associate dean from the Institutional Effectiveness department reviewed the study. Use of a peer debriefer to review and ask questions about the study adds validity to the account (Creswell, 2014).

Findings

The findings provided insight into the communication strategies employed by success coaches to develop and maintain student relationships framed by the social penetration theory. Key components of the communication practices for relationship building and maintenance overlapped among participants regardless of institution, level of experience, or other duties.

Relationship Development

For participants, the strategies described to develop meaningful relationships with students were anchored in the goal of establishing trust and rapport through openness, a welcoming environment, and seeking to understand students' lives through questions and empathetic listening. The patterns for relationship development were evidenced within the ecology of interpersonal communication described by Altman and Taylor (1973) including verbal elements, nonverbal elements, and the environment including the communication channel. Observed strategies for each element are recapped on Table 1.

Table 1*Patterns of Communication for Relationship Development*

Communication Component	Observed Strategy
Verbal	Initiate contact Provide purposeful self-disclosure; encourage student self-disclosure Positivity and assuring talk Ask questions and empathetically listen
Nonverbal	Be welcoming: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • warm smile • eye contact • soft, positive, upbeat tone Interpret and respond to student body language
Physical Environment/Channel	Reduce barriers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no computer between coach and student • remove diplomas • open door • provide candy • decorate with conversation starters Increase frequency of interaction Meet them where they are (classroom, event, lounge, café) Ideal channel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • face-to-face preferred • phone is second option • email best suited for general information

The patterns of behavior in each aspect of the interpersonal ecology aided in addressing the first research question: What communication strategies do success coaches employ to develop meaningful interpersonal relationships with students in order to impact successful student outcomes?

Verbal. In terms of the verbal component, common patterns to develop the student relationship emerged among all participants that included the following: initiate contact, provide purposeful disclosure and encourage student disclosure, use positivity and assuring talk, and seek understanding by asking questions and listening with empathy. A repeated mantra from participants was that the success coach needed to reach out to the student to initiate the relationship. Initiation frequently took the form of in person meetings predicated on the need to register for classes. As the relationship progressed, students would reciprocate and seek interaction, but the bulk of responsibility to engage rested with the success coach charged with monitoring student progress.

Participants expressed the importance and the challenge of success coaches quickly establishing the

supporting nature of a relationship in order to be most effective. Making the student feel comfortable so they could open up was expressed as vital to the process. The common strategy to achieve this goal was to offer relevant disclosure to the student. All participants indicated they disclosed personal information to the student to make a connection and gain trust quickly. Coach 4 summed up the need for disclosure by stating, “You have to be an open book as well with them. And so that for me, opening up to them has allowed me to gain trust.” Coach 13 tells stories about her experiences to find a point of connection. Coach 1 indicated sharing his story allowed him to relate to the student’s struggle and express understanding. In addition, the depth of the connection made was impacted through self-disclosure. Coach 1 commented, “There is a deeper connection when you lead off. So, a lot of times I let students know that I suffer from this severe dyslexia and that I couldn’t read until I was like 13.” For participants, the choice to disclose was purposeful in order to make a connection or put the student at ease. Thus the choice to disclose personal and private information was a measured process. For example, Coach

8 shared the challenge of being a child in the foster care system. She stated, “And with a lot of students I actually even went a step further and shared with them I was a foster kid ...whatever I can share that will make them understand that they can do this.” Coach 4 shared the struggles of being a teenage mother:

I have a couple students who are teenage moms. So that has been a challenge, but I was a teenage mom.... people don't expect you to be successful. I encountered a lot of people who were not very positive as I journeyed. But I've made it my mission to be that for somebody else. So, when I realized who those students were, you know, I shared that with them.

Participants reported that students reciprocated with sharing and self-disclosure. The breadth and depth of topics students disclosed frequently moved readily from Altman and Taylor's (1973) orientation stage to the affective stage typified by private and personal matters. Success coaches reported that students shared many of their challenges and struggles such as financial issues, family dynamics, marital problems, and drug or alcohol dependency. Coach 5 encouraged the breadth of disclosure by stating, “I've had students like I said with mental health issues or depression, anxiety...I mean we're real open and honest about stuff.” The depth of such disclosure was often a product of greater frequency of interaction. Coach 3 described such a conversation: “We just went deeper and deeper and deeper. So, when she started to be more honest, I went deeper, she went deeper... But I remember when she first came in, I couldn't have had that conversation with her.” Notably, for the struggling student, a topic more difficult to address was that of his or her strengths. Coach 2 explained students are aware of their shortcomings but engaging in a conversation about their strengths poses a challenge. “But when I've talked with them about what their strengths are, what they're doing well. That is kind of almost hard.”

The nature of the encounters, no matter the topic, reflected Stafford and Canary's (1991) relational maintenance strategies of positivity and assuring talk. All participants shared that even if they are reaching out to a student regarding a grade alert, they keep it positive by not scolding and instead focusing the conversation on how the student is doing and how they can help. As Coach 11 stated, “You have to be an upbeat kind of person willing to help

and knowing that everybody has a chance.” The success coaches maintained that even when following up with a student on poor academic performance, they kept the conversation positive and reinforced the idea that they are there to help and that the student can be successful. Coach 11 expressed the importance of keeping the talk positive by discussing strengths or options versus “concentrating on what they're not doing.” Coach 12 similarly stressed the importance of being assuring and not just getting on them about grades. Coach 8 summed up this positive messaging by telling the student, “This is what I do. I'm your cheerleader. I'm your coach. I'm the person that has your back.”

Participants indicated that the ability to ask questions and empathetically listen promoted a trusting bond and deeper understanding of student needs. Initially students might not say what they are really feeling, and the coach needs the ability to pick up on that and keep asking questions. If a student is more reserved, the coach will continue to ask questions. As Coach 10 stated, “You just keep picking to get them to open up.” Coach 9 reinforced the importance of questions to find a point of connection by saying, “You kind of open with questions. Prying, prying, prying. And then you'll connect somewhere in there.” The act of asking questions was supported with empathetic listening to understand a student's needs holistically. Coach 12 stated listening to the student was essential to learn about all the conditions the student was juggling and to consider these issues as a whole. Success coaches agreed empathetic listening helped to solidify relational bonds. Coach 7 stated:

I had a student that would come in once a week to let me know she's still here, because she is fighting the demon of drugs. And she would come in, and I'd give her water. We'd sit at my table. She would vent. And I would just let her vent because sometimes they just want someone to listen to them.

Nonverbal. Key findings in exploring the nonverbal strategies of a success coach focused primarily on creating a feeling of warmth and welcome and being responsive to students' nonverbal cues, especially body language. The elements of nonverbal communication that the success coaches most commonly expressed utilizing included facial expressions, eye contact, and paralanguage. The success coaches concurred that a warm smile and eye contact mattered.

As Coach 1 stated, “Make eye contact and you know, it’s kind of like, ‘Oh, I’ll talk to a friend now.’” All the coaches expressed the importance of greeting the student with a smile. This welcoming behavior reinforced the positivity and invitation to share. Success coaches often have to share negative news or interact with a student who is upset. In terms of paralanguage or the vocal effects that accompany verbal communication, participants repeated the importance of a soft, upbeat tone. As Coach 11 explained, “They can hear how you care in your voice.” Coach 2 expressed that, in addition to thinking about the wording of a message, she actively works on the tone of her voice. The ability to calmly and patiently express ideas was evidenced consistently in every participant interview. Participants used a tone that was soft and often low so you would feel comfortable and intimate. Participants expressed the importance of positive nonverbal messages to set the tone of the relationship and anchor its supportive nature. Affirming the importance of being approachable and welcoming, Coach 6 repeated the old adage “a smile is worth 1,000 words sometimes.”

Coaches expressed not only the importance of practicing encouraging nonverbal behavior but also the ability to pick up on messages being sent by the student. As Coach 9 observed, “Picking up on the body language of other people...if you don’t know how to interpret that, then I think that it can hinder the relationship.” Often it came in the form of detecting if the student was holding back by reading body language and proximity signals. According to Coach 3, reserved students sat with legs or arms crossed. Coach 10 discussed how students avoided eye contact, especially in cases where another person such as a parent was present. According to the participants, it was not uncommon for parents to dominate the conversation, and the coach had to work to draw the student out. The coach would direct eye contact toward the student and lean in toward the student. Coach 3 relayed how a student gradually showed increased ease and trust with her as the coach. She stated, “He started sitting close to the mom. He shifted more in his chair, and he was sitting closer to me by the end of the conversation.”

Environment. The importance of the environment where the interactions occur for developing and maintaining the relationship was consistently emphasized among all participants. According to Altman and Taylor (1973), elements of the environ-

ment included the physical surroundings, proximity, frequency of interaction, and the channel by which the interaction occurred. The feeling the environment evoked was set from the beginning, and although not all aspects of the environment were within success coaches’ control, there were several aspects that participants purposely endeavored to influence. Three of the four colleges visited all had a policy of personally getting up and going to meet the student and then walking them to the office. Attempts to make the décor of the office inviting were employed with pictures and student art. Candy was also a popular device for nearly every coach. No computer stood between the success coach and the student. The goal was to reduce barriers both physically and mentally. Coach 8 commented:

You meet the student. You shake hands with the student. You don’t expect them to come to you; you go to them. Make some small talk, you know. Get them comfortable. Help them to feel like this is an environment that they can be in and feel comfortable. So, things like having candy out and pictures on the walls, those kinds of things do a whole lot.

The power of décor to be an icebreaker and promote discussion was evidenced most artfully by Coach 1, whose office was covered with memorabilia from playing professional football to displays of the comic villain the Joker. When asked about the Jokers, the coach shared how he couldn’t read when he was a teenager and his mother “kept words in front of [him]” with comics.

The goal of openness and welcome was reinforced through open door policies and a less rigid stance on appointments. An open door policy was particularly effective for several coaches when their office was positioned in a common area where students congregated and readily dropped in. For example, Coach 4, whose office was in the heart of the student center, capitalized on her proximity to students naturally congregating. She explained, “I’ll leave my door open all the time. They’ll bring in their breakfast and sit and eat, and we’ll just chat.” The participants who described the strongest bonds with students typically had greater opportunity for interaction. Coach 5 relayed the story of a student to whom she grew close. She stated, “I saw her for about a year and a half solid for at least 30 minutes a day in my office. She had a home life that was really not good.”

Another common tactic in terms of the physical environment that success coaches employed to increase interaction was to seek opportunities outside the office. For example, Coach 3 made it common practice to go to locations where students would gather, including the workout room or having lunch in common areas. Coach 15 attended activities and events geared specifically to students. Coach 10 regularly visited students in the classroom instead of holding sit down office appointments. Other coaches made sure that they were around and willing to create opportunities to run into students. Coach 3 explained, "I have been known to just stand out in the hallway and wait for someone to get out of the class and pretend like I bumped into him on accident."

Channel. The communication channel refers to the mode of communication employed and preferred by the coach to effectively interact with a student. Common channels included face-to-face, mediated via phone, and written with either electronic or hard copy delivery. Unanimously, the richness of a face-to-face interaction was preferred, especially in the case of relationship maintenance. The second channel preferred by most was the phone. For some, it was policy to attempt a phone call first before emailing the student. Most incorporated a strategy of using both. A common theme for the preference of face-to-face and phone was the opportunity for a give and take conversation to occur. As Coach 1 stated, "I'm a firm believer in keeping the interpersonal relationship going. So, I always want people to hear my voice first."

General knowledge and reminders were more efficiently managed via email. However, most coaches confided they did not believe students read their emails with any reliability. In order to address that concern, Coach 8 would send personal birthday wishes via email. Coach 4 utilized an educational social media platform students used. However, most coaches avoided social media as a means of interacting with students, relying instead upon institutionally supported mediums. Use of text messaging was rare even in the cases where a software program versus a personal account could be accessed. If used, it was for scheduling an opportunity to talk either in person or on the phone.

A compelling use of the written channel one community college employed to communicate the friendly, approachable, and caring personality of the success coach was the distribution of specialized business cards. They were larger than normal cards and laid out vertically instead of horizontally to resemble trading cards. On the front was a full color picture of the success coach with his or her name. On the back was contact information and fun facts such as the following:

"I like sneaking away to paint and draw."

"I am a reality TV and cooking show junky."

"I love tattoos that have meaning."

The cards supported the communication goal of removing barriers and promoting a welcoming environment. Students embraced the gesture. The coaches at the school reported students were eagerly trading the cards with each other much like Pokémon cards. There was a perceived value for students to *collect* a coach.

Relationship Maintenance and Social Exchange

Interviews were analyzed for expressions of rewards and costs in the social exchange process of relationship maintenance. Common themes for offered rewards to the student by the success coach included care and interest, social and academic support, and a feeling of connection. Common reward themes success coaches received in maintaining the relationship with the student included taking pride in student success, and, like students, developing a feeling of connection. Expressed costs to the student centered upon forms of pressure, including nagging or tension exacerbated by bad news or family pressure. The common cost for the success coach in maintaining the student relationship was frustration from either not being able to contact the student or not being able to provide in depth care due to a large caseload. The common themes are recapped on Table 2. These themes helped to address the second research question: What are the inherent rewards and costs in maintaining the interpersonal relationship with the student?

Table 2*Expressions of Rewards and Costs in Relationship Maintenance*

Offered Rewards (Student)	Expressed Rewards (Coach)	Costs (Student)	Costs (Coach)
Care and interest Social and academic support Feeling of connection	Pride Feeling of connection	Pressure • nagging • tension	Frustration • to reach students • to provide in depth care

Rewards. The reward that success coaches consistently expressed they offered students centered upon providing care and demonstrating a genuine interest in the student. For example, Coach 10 visited automotive students for them to show off the engine they were repairing and cosmetology students to get a haircut. Coach 9 frequented the art studio to discuss student projects. Coaches provided social and academic support by listening and connecting students to the necessary resources. For example, Coach 17 discussed closely monitoring students whom she recommended get support such as tutoring. Coach 5 regularly took students on road trips to visit other schools or attend conferences. Both the success coach and student enjoyed a mutual reward in achieving a positive bond and connection. The reward for the student from the success coach perspective was a reliable person they could count on for whatever they needed. According to Coach 13, the benefit for the student is, “knowing there is somebody there they can talk to.” Coach 9 explained that students seek a support figure. Coach 7 shared that it is not uncommon for former students to reach out randomly to ask for help.

All success coaches were eager to express not just what they worked to give the student, but what they received in return. As students achieved success markers, participants expressed the reward of celebrating that with the student. Coach 3 expressed pride in serving in the role of celebratory partner, especially when the student may not have a support system at home. She stated, “It’s just creating that rapport and being interested. Students are so proud of—So, I’m going to tear up...This stuff is very emotional—They’re so proud of what they’re doing. And sometimes at home they don’t get that.” Coach 10 swelled with pride when showing off a display of completed students’ projects adorning her office. Having worked with a student who nearly dropped out over test anxiety, Coach 9 expressed pride in

celebrating a student’s achievement by stating, “He’s actually come back here and passed some tests and been so happy he walks in here, doesn’t even want to shake my hand, wants to hug me. So that’s pretty cool.” Coach 2 expressed pride in student achievement because she loved to see students grow. Coach 6 focused on the ultimate shared celebration of graduation and said, “I want nothing more than to see [my students] walk across the stage...That’s my favorite event every single year.”

Costs. The relationship cost for the student that the success coaches discussed was a concern that the student would feel pressure. Pressure took the form of tension from conflicting news or feeling nagged. Students may be anxious or under pressure from home to complete the degree quickly against the better judgement of the coach. Coach 3 remarked on this tension by stating, “She thought I was holding her back. But I have to sleep at night...If I had put her in both of those classes, I would have tossed and turned all night long. Like I set her up for failure.” Coach 8 shared stories of tension with prenursing students who failed gateway classes repeatedly but were reluctant to consider alternate majors. Coach 4 contended that if trust has been developed students may realize the coach is “just trying to do what’s best” for them. Coaches expressed mixed views on the concern over pressuring or nagging students. Coach 14 indicated a sensitivity to frequent follow up if the student seemed irritated: “If they give me a hands off, I am not going to push myself on it.” However, Coach 17 expressed no concern about nagging. In the end, participants consistently expressed that it was the intention of care behind the communication that was most important. As Coach 6 stated, “...if I genuinely am interested in helping a student, and that is my end goal in all of it, and the reason why I do what I do, I don’t know how you perceive that as nagging.” Coach 1 emphasized that in order to avoid being perceived as a nag, the initial

meeting had to establish the personal nature of the relationship saying, “If you’re just going to be professional to professional, then that gap kind of widens in the personal aspect. So, when they run into an issue, there’s still a part of them that doesn’t feel comfortable talking to you.” Every success coach discussed focusing on employing positive communication techniques to improve student reception because they really wanted to impart that they were there to support and to advocate, no matter what the nature of the news.

Participants expressed a cost to maintaining the student relationship was frustration in terms of making contact. Phone numbers were often wrong, disconnected, or without voice mail set up. Coach 10 expressed uncertainty when to quit trying to reach out to an unresponsive student, whereas Coach 6 expressed confidence in persistent attempts to reach students. He would keep trying until the student actually told him to stop. Coach 17 discussed that many students did not respond to emails until after they met her. Another source of frustration for some participants was managing their caseload. In those cases, coaches could not connect with all the students at the personal level they preferred. The participants interviewed had caseloads ranging from 150-300 students. The coaches with the larger caseloads exhibited the most frustration. Coach 3 expressed guilt at not being able to regularly reach out to everyone. Others identified strategies of prioritization based on risk assessment and early alert notifications. Coach 16, for example, addressed all alerts first. Other coaches expressed confidence and comfort at being able to keep up with their students. Coach 1 had formerly worked at a larger university with a caseload of over 1,000. He stated that, in his current position, “I get a little deeper here because I have more time with them.”

Discussion

The exploration of the interpersonal communication strategies success coaches employed to develop and maintain positive relationships with students to impact student success outcomes extended the understanding and application of the social penetration theory and social exchange. Central contributions of this study included the discovery that success coaches engaged in self-disclosure and employed communication strategies in the full commu-

nication ecology spectrum including verbal, nonverbal, and environmental.

A key finding was the importance of self-disclosure on the part of the success coach to initiate the relationship with the student. Such disclosure helped to build rapport and trust. Coaches regularly and intentionally disclosed to students to establish a connection and create a welcoming environment. In terms of the breadth and depth of disclosure, coaches were more purposeful, choosing to share personal matters to encourage the student to open up. Once the connection was made, students and coaches discussed very sensitive topics including mental health, drug dependency, financial struggles, and physical abuse. Of note, students struggled to express strengths about themselves rather than disclosing negative items of a personal nature. Further exploration of communication strategies to facilitate greater strengths based dialogue would prove valuable for the success coach charged with helping students navigate college.

This study supported the social penetration theory claim that deeper disclosure was fostered through frequent opportunities to interact. The most effective success coach-student relationships were built upon repeated opportunities to disclose. The challenge for the success coach is that the norm of interaction lacks the regularity of a teacher, classmate, or family member. As such, success coaches must proactively seek opportunities to increase the frequency of interactions. Proximity to students was key in encouraging interactions. Success coaches engaged in open door policies and more frequently left their offices to meet with students where they congregated. The creation and pursuit of opportunities for interaction with students was a key factor in fostering disclosure and maintaining the interpersonal relationship between success coach and student.

This study extended the context of Stafford and Canary’s (1991) relational maintenance behaviors from romantic couples to the academic setting and found that assuring and positive talk was critical among coaches, especially when having to share unwanted news or discussing topics such as academic performance. Positivity and openness were also encouraged nonverbally through warm smiles, barrier free eye contact, and a pleasant tone in all contexts. Success coaches agreed empathetic listening coupled with positive and assuring talk helped to solidify relational bonds.

In terms of managing the rewards and costs of the relationship, this study highlighted the reward for a student from the success coach's perspective was the expression of care and a genuine interest in the student. Both the success coach and student could enjoy a mutual reward from the student's achievement and also the social bond and connection that it fostered. For the success coaches, an emphasis on care superseded any anxiety he or she might feel toward being a nag. The central cost for maintaining the student relationship centered on frustration to connect. Smaller, more manageable caseloads could afford the coach time to invest in going deeper with each student. Increased opportunities for coaches to share strategies for reaching students and coping with such frustrations could aid in restoring commitment.

Limitations and Implications

Although all were tasked as a success coach to proactively initiate relationships that offer support, participants varied in some aspects of their additional responsibilities, such as the level and depth of program advising they do, how long they advise for, or if they advise at all. This reflected the diverse manner in which institutions are adopting the success coach model. Future study could explore cases where the model is less blended. A limitation of the study was that the lens was focused on the perspective of the success coach. Participants were not in a position to answer questions about how students perceived them, but just how they wanted to be perceived and the steps they took in order to be perceived that way. Another aspect to successful coaching that was revealed, but was not the scope of this study, involved fostering relationships with other campus personnel, especially faculty who have the most interaction opportunity with the student. A future study exploring the relationship dynamics amongst team members charged with serving students could prove fruitful.

The decision to disclose is complex, and more recent theories, such as communication privacy management theory which addresses the tension between openness and privacy (Littlejohn et al., 2017), could be a framework applied to future studies on success coach interpersonal relationships. Further, this study did not consider the implications of the

power distance inherent between the professional success coach and the student in the relationship development process. The dyadic power theory was developed to explain power and dominance communication patterns and hypothesized that people in a relationship who perceive their power differences as small or moderate have greater relational satisfaction (Littlejohn et al., 2017). Thus, an implication for future study is to provide an additional theoretical lens to the communication practices and support function of a success coach. The common theme, when asked amongst participants, was that communication was the most important skill for their role. As such, there should be more studies that specifically address the communication dynamic of success coaching and the student relationship.

The goal of this research was to develop a clearer understanding of the effective communication strategies employed by a success coach to engage meaningfully with students to develop and maintain a positive interpersonal relationship. Although the success coach model has been explored in the education discipline, this study served as an initial step in the study and application of interpersonal communication theory to inform the dynamics of the success coach-student relationship. This study extended the social penetration theory in terms of practical application for coaches in higher education charged with supporting student success. Specifically, this study provided insight toward serving the whole student at the community college level where at risk students are most prevalent. Achieving a meaningful success coach-student relationship equips the student with a sense of connection and the social and academic support to follow their plan, persist, and graduate.

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