

3 common missteps that academic coaches should avoid

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At the medical school level, academic coaching programs are still taking shape. So it makes sense, then, that coaches are still growing into their roles.

The AMA-published text, “Coaching in Medical Education: A Faculty Handbook,” aims to provide a practical framework for medical educators who are forming medical student coaching programs. It is, in essence, a list of to-dos for coaching success.

What about the don'ts? The coaching handbook's co-editor filled in the picture regarding the biggest mistakes academic coaches make and how to avoid them.

Don't approach coaching as a mentor

The academic coaching relationship is neither supervisory nor evaluative. Coaches offer a sounding board and their interactions with students should be a safe space for reflection. The role a coach plays, then, differs from the one many instructors are accustomed to.

Nicole M. Deiorio, MD, co-edited the handbook. She is a professor of emergency medicine and the assistant dean for student affairs at Oregon Health & Science University School of Medicine.

“A lot of coaches are chosen because they have [been] great teachers or mentors or advisers, and they probably tend to default to that style of interaction when they first start meeting their students,” said Dr. Deiorio. “For our faculty, it takes a fair amount of retraining.”

Don't advocate for your coachees

Coaches aren't middlemen. Instead, a good coach should be teaching students to advocate for themselves, as they will have to do as physicians.

An example that Dr. Deiorio mentioned was an instance when a student was having an academic problem related to the student's performance and the student's struggle to navigate the system. An inexperienced coach may want to jump in and tell the student the solution to the problem, or give feedback to the administration based on what the student has reported.

As an alternative to performing outreach on behalf of the student, Dr. Deiorio recommends a coach ask the student in such a situation:

"How can [you] navigate student-support services to get what you need, or what are the feedback mechanisms that you already know about in the curriculum?"

That puts the ball back in the student's court to solve the problem.

Don't make assumptions about who will benefit

Students who are struggling can certainly gain from their experiences working with a coach, but they aren't alone. Even the strongest student has room for growth. It's incumbent upon a coach to identify areas for improvement and then work with the student to address them.

"Unless you are functioning at the level of the best attending ever, there's something that you can get out of coaching," Dr. Deiorio said. "Some students are reluctant, but a really skilled coach can draw them out."

The coaching handbook features eight chapters. Each one was written by faculty members at a school in the AMA's Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium. Topics within the text include "Building a coaching relationship with learners," "Coaching diversity and change," and "Evaluating coaching programs."