Coaching programs can make learners happier. Know where to start.

AUG 25, 2020

Timothy M. Smith
Senior News Writer

Academic coaching can play a powerful role in development of medical students and residents—often overlapping with mentoring, counseling and advising—but has an advantage over other developmental relationships in that it is both solution-focused and inquisitive. It has one overriding goal: to help coachees become their best selves.

Following are highlights from “Developing and Evaluating a Coaching Program,” an interactive session at the recent AMA Academic Coaching Virtual Workshop, which provided core questions for academics to ask themselves and their colleagues when creating a coaching program to ensure it thrives alongside a congested curriculum.

The workshop, held in August, also focused on showing participants how to be basic academic coaches, how to develop and curate materials for training other coaches and how to apply coaching to well-being and burnout prevention.

Check out a starter’s guide to pursuing an academic coaching program.

8 key questions to ask

Asking questions is one of the central behaviors in coaching—something that distinguishes it from advising and mentoring, which focus on telling—so it’s only natural that this should be a place to start in determining what an academic coaching program can do for your learners. Following are the foundational questions to ask in the development phase.

What are your goals and desired outcomes? Think about the problem you want to solve and the needs you want to meet. These might involve improving well-being, furthering identity formation or supporting struggling learners.
Who are the key stakeholders for your program? These might include the people who would approve your budget, administrative support staff, senior learners and faculty who can promote the program and help recruit coaches.

How you will structure it? You’ll have to decide whether the coaching program will be mandatory or elective, how long it will run, what the ratio of learners to coaches will be, how learners and coaches will be paired, whether learners can change their coaches and more.

What skills will your coaches need and how will you recruit them? Consider whether coaches should be physicians—many programs choose to pair learners with non-physicians. Also note that you will need to decide who, including learners, will be part of the process of interviewing potential coaches.

What staffing and other resources will you need? You might need administrative support or even a dean. And what about funding for data management, materials and compensation for coaches?

What will you do to get learner buy-in? Not all medical students and residents come with an understanding of coaching or its value. How will you pitch the program during your recruitment to your school or residency program? And how will you orient learners to the process?

How will you develop coaches? Coaching is a new concept to many. Think about whether there are people at your institution who have coaching expertise and can help, as well as whether you will use simulation and/or direct observation with peer feedback.

How will you assess and evaluate your program? Holding coaches accountable is important. Consider how you will do this and with whom you will share your data. More to the point, have a goal in mind.

More help with academic coaching

Learn more with the AMA about coaching in medical education. Coaching in Medical Education: A Faculty Handbook provides a practical framework for medical educators who are creating medical student coaching programs. It Takes Two: A Guide to Being a Good Coachee is a handbook focused on what learners need to know.

The AMA has also published The Master Adaptive Learner, an instructor-directed textbook designed to help medical school faculty produce physicians who have the habits of mind for lifelong learning in medicine. The Master Adaptive Learner is the first book in the AMA MedEd Innovation Series, which provides practical guidance for local implementation of the education innovations tested and refined by the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium.