

Report on the Completion Coaching Model at Walla Walla Community College
Presented to the Project Finish Line Consortium

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Introduction

The development of completion coaching and the hiring completion coaches at Walla Walla Community College have many antecedents. Additionally, there are many people whose ideas, energy, and efforts developed and continue to maintain the work of completion coaching. As the report the follows suggests, the college has developed and maintained a focus on addressing completion for over a decade.

In writing this report, the evaluation team sought to identify key causal factors in the development and implementation of completion coaching. As other colleges seek to replicate the work at Walla Walla Community College, it will be critical for these colleges to understand how this work evolved at Walla Walla Community College. This evaluation provides an explication of those causal factors to allow replicating colleges to see what elements they can address in replicating the work of Walla Walla Community College.

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Executive Summary

This report finds that completion coaching has contributed to the college's larger efforts at retaining its students to complete their goals. However, it also finds that completion coaching is the nexus of many efforts, with a system of supports, process, and people – all of which contribute to the college's aim at getting more students to attain their goals. In interviewing 16 staff members, directors, and senior administrators from the campus, the evaluation team discovered that completion coaching has provided a focal point for the college's efforts in increasing completion; however, that the completion coaching effort by itself would not have been adequate for the college to reach its aims. Therefore, the report reviews the history that identifies the evolution that led to completion coaching and then identifies factors that support its impact.

This report is divided in the following sections:

History of Completion Coaching

The beginning of completion coaching at Walla Walla Community College begins much earlier than the hiring of the first completion coach in 2012. In their interviews, administrative staff pointed to antecedents as far back as 2006 when the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges began its "Student Achievement Initiative" which established statewide "momentum points" tied to performance funding. That initiative established four critical categories of colleges' success that were tied to specific funding in colleges' budgets. One of those categories was completion.

Impact Factor: Campus culture

All of the interviewees from WWCC noted the innovative, collaborative culture of the institution to be critical to the success of the completion coaching model. Each part of the college plays a role, fulfilling a variety of tasks, all to ensure one common goal. As one director so simply stated it, there is a "shared commitment to getting students completed in the most practical and plausible manner." Staff members from many areas of the college know the students and their goals individually, know the resources available, and work together to ensure students reach their goals.

Impact Factor: Commitment from across campus

Commitment to completion, student success, and student support generally as well as to the completion coaching model in particular are critical to the success of the project and the college as a whole. This commitment is present at all levels of the institution, including staff members, faculty, department directors, and senior administrators. Commitment is generated from the broad success of the project in increasing completion rates. However, commitment to the project also comes from the personal involvement of those working collaboratively with coaches and the personal experiences of those who see students return to campus to complete.

Impact Factor: Systems that are responsive to needs

Technology tools and systems, access to and use of data, and responsive policies and procedures are all integral to this successful completion coaching model at WWCC. Equally critical, one senior administrator said, is that coaches and others on campus understand, ...“all of the systems that play into student success.” Communication and interdepartmental collaboration have contributed greatly to the development of these responsive systems and their ongoing use.

Impact Factor: Finances and funding

The college addressed both the needs of students to have access to varying levels of funding and the needs of the college to prioritize completion coaching in its base budget. By collecting data to show the efficacy of the model, WWCC administration has been able to ensure the continuation of the program.

Methods for Data Collection

This report evaluates the completion coaching model at Walla Walla Community College to determine what other partners in Project Finish Line might learn as they replicate the completion coaching model on their campuses. In order to understand what can and should be replicated, the report explains the causal factors that led to the development and implementation of the completion coaching model at WWCC. To that end, the principal investigator of the evaluation team developed a two-step process for data collection that will allow the evaluation team to understand and report what those causal factors are.

The first step in the evaluation of completion coaching at WWCC was to gather qualitative data from multiple sources that allows for analysis of how the college developed the concept of completion coaching and how that concept evolved and was implemented. To that end, the project principal investigator began with unstructured interviews of nine key informants on the campus. The purpose of those interviews was to understand some of the history of completion coaching and to use a snowball sampling technique that would allow the evaluation team to identify who, in addition to these nine key informants would be interviewed more formally.

Using structured interviews (see [Appendix A](#) for interview questions), research associates contacted and interviewed 16 people across campus. Those 16 people, based on the snowball sampling list from the unstructured interviews, included senior administrators, directors, direct-service staff, and faculty – all with direct experience with the completion coaching model. As noted in the interview script ([Appendix B](#)), participants were promised anonymity so that they could speak as openly as possible. Therefore, there are no specific attributions to specific roles or people. Respondents' comments were selectively transcribed; and the interview data that resulted were coded for themes and trends that could be triangulated from multiple respondents' statements.

The second step in evaluating completion coaching is to analyze the campus student records quantitatively to identify the impact of specific interventions within the completion coaching model. Such quantitative analysis allows the interview data to be further triangulated with the impacts on student outcomes. WWCC has developed robust data systems that allow for staff to use those systems to monitor students' progress. However, while respondents report that those reports are invaluable tools for their work, the reports and data sets have evolved over time with a purpose of student tracking.

In their current form, these data are not readily useful for a longitudinal analysis of program outcomes. Those quantitative data require restructuring to be useful for the kinds of regression analysis among variables planned for this step in the evaluation. In explaining impact on student outcomes, for example, it is critical to examine the correlation between the time and duration of service a student receives and that student's success. However, those data are in multiple source data sets and require concatenation for analysis. Given the timeframe needed to produce this current report, reorganizing the data sets is not possible. However, the evaluation team has received the initial data and plans to have the quantitative component of the analysis completed for a later report this year to the Project Finish Line team.

Not having the quantitative data eliminates the ability of this report to look at student outcomes. However, the interview data do provide a robust and complete picture of the

organizational structure, systems, tools, and relationships across campus that WWCC needed to develop and implement completion coaching. It is that picture of the college and its work in developing and implementing completion coaching that this report provides.

The History of Completion Coaching at Walla Walla Community College

Antecedents to Completion Coaching

As is the case for any history, the beginning of completion coaching at Walla Walla Community College begins much earlier than the hiring of the first completion coach in 2012. In their interviews, administrative staff pointed to antecedents as far back as 2006 when the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges began its “Student Achievement Initiative” which established statewide “momentum points” tied to performance funding. That initiative established four critical categories of colleges’ success that were tied to specific funding in colleges’ budgets. One of those categories was completion.

WWCC, with the impetus of Student Achievement Initiative, established a work group. That committee developed the idea to approach students who had completed 60 credits and were no longer enrolled. The college sent those students a letter that promised them a \$10 credit at the campus bookstore if they came back to the college and worked with college staff to make a plan to complete. Campus administrative staff report that the college contacted 100 of these students and, as a result, 58 returned and completed the degree or certificate they had begun.

The success of that initial effort led the campus to extend it. In 2004, the college had partnered with Columbia Basin College and Yakima Valley Community College to write a collaborative federal Title IV grant proposal that was funded. A student services director explains that:

The focus of that grant was to utilize technology as a means for ensuring academic success for the colleges’ most at-risk students. The specific goals included increasing the number of degree seeking students who were active users of online advising web pages, and the development of an online educational planning tool.

As the three campuses looked at what was being accomplished at other recipient schools, they discovered that having data on student progress would be critical to each college’s ability to address completion issues. Although WWCC had developed an “early warning” database tool from a prior federal grant, that tool was difficult to use and was not efficient enough to provide the kinds of progress data that the school needed to support its goals of increasing completion rates.

Consequently, WWCC created Degree Estimates software that eventually was used to support the first version of its Advisor Data Portal tool. ADP was intended as an accessible tool that campus employees would find readily useful for their work in tracking and advising student progress. Interviewed staff from student services and interviewed faculty report that this tool still is a critical component of their ability to address completion issues. In 2010, based on user feedback, the campus applied for and received a College Spark Foundation grant that paid for upgrades to ADP that allowed the program to support the college’s management of Student Achievement Initiative metrics. After the 2011-’12 academic year, when the product was upgraded, WWCC began offering ADP to other colleges in the state.

In addition to the technical enhancements to student tracking that the college undertook after 2008, there was a concurrent focus on completion within the student services division of the

college which sought to continue to increase completions. In an e-mail reply to a query about the origins of completion coaching, a senior administrator explained that:

The effort to identify and reach students who were within 15 credits of graduation began as a pilot project in the fall of 2008 with the “Degree Booster Initiative.” Invitations were sent to 216 students in October 2008, and they were asked to participate in an advising session to finalize a “Degree Completion Worksheet.

Advisors in the Student Development Center and TRIO met with 81 students to determine their progress towards their degree. The pilot degree booster initiative evolved into an annual process where this type of scrutiny is followed and degree completions charted. The college concurrently began using an “autoconfer” process whereby students would, at registration, agree to have a degree or certificate conferred automatically when they met the requirements. This step eliminated having students who forget to apply for a degree or certificate.

During this time, the college also utilized Opportunity Grants to address barriers to completion. Students receiving Opportunity Grants participated in workshops on time management, financial aid, and financial planning. Separately, the college’s basic skills program, in 2010, partnered with a community-based organization to use “Achievement Coaches” and “Career Coaches” who were tasked with providing ongoing support for basic skills students. These coaches were tasked with assisting students with planning and transitions out of basic skills and into college-level programs. This effort, along with the efforts of student services staff provided a model for coaching students toward completion on the campus; however, the college until 2011 did not evolve those efforts into the completion coach roles that are now in place.

The Hiring of Completion Coaches

The evolution to completion coaches came with the college’s award as a finalist college for the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. In 2011, the college received \$100,000 as its award for being one of four finalists. During meetings among the administrative staff and in the college’s Administrative Council at the time, the college decided it would use the 2011 Aspen Prize funding to invest in student financial needs, and, more specifically, on student completion. As an administrator explained:

As a college we began our focus on completions in 2011 when the Aspen Institute helped us look at our completion and transfer rates. We made the determination that we wanted to improve that number. We were at 57%, but our president set a stretch goal of 75%.

In addition to investing the \$100,000 into student financial aid, the college also devoted its own resources for a pilot project at its Clarkston campus nursing program to employ its first completion coach. The college used the 2011 Aspen Prize money to provide loans that became forgivable to nursing students who participated in the completion model – if they completed. The pilot was a success, with administrators reporting that 92% of the initial cohort completed. With remaining funds from the Aspen Prize, the college expanded its scholarships to other

students; and, in August, 2012, the college used its base budget to hire two completion coaches for the main campus.

Completion Coaching Integration into Campus

In summer, 2012, the college's completion coaches began their work by contacting students who had been enrolled in the previous spring, were not enrolled in the fall, and had not completed. Two hundred and twenty students re-enrolled as a result. As the completion coaches looked for causes of non-completion, they quickly discovered that funding was a critical factor. While student financial aid covered most planned expenses related to a student's education, there were often unexpected costs that would keep a student from attending classes. In winter, 2013, the college developed a "triage funding" model that provided emergency funds to students as needed.

The president and college foundation provided \$25,000 in startup for triage funding, and students could come to the triage funding source and receive money. The triage funding group is comprised of staff members who work in areas such as financial aid, student development advising, worker retraining, and BFET. The group meets regularly and makes decisions about students' requests for emergency aid. Once approved, that request goes immediately to the foundation director who can (and regularly does) provides a check for the student's need on the day that the foundation receives the request. At the same time, the college's financial aid office reviewed its practices and made adjustments that allowed it to be responsive to the new focus on retention. The director made changes such as setting aside money for students who begin in winter term and making awards relative to expenses for high-cost programs.

The hiring of completion coaches in 2012 also provided focus for further, similar collaborations across areas of the campus. In order to maintain the data that the campus needs to support student completions, the IT office and student services offices meet weekly to discuss data management and data needs. There are also weekly meetings where financial aid staff, advising staff, and completion coaches meet to discuss their work. Three to four times each quarter, the people who attend advisor updates focus their discussions on changes in systems and policies. The vice-presidents and directors of institutional research, IT, student services, the foundation, and instruction meet frequently – both formally and informally – to discuss issues, practices and policies that impact completion rates and other critical work.

The Historic Importance of Tools

In interviewing 16 people from across various programs and departments across the campus to gather the information that describes the history of completion coaching at WWCC, a key theme of almost every respondent was the importance of the tools that the college has developed over time. These are tools that have evolved as the IT department has provided service to each initiative as it grew. In addition to the Early Warning System developed in the 1990s and described above, these tools include:

- ADP: The Advisor Data Portal shows info about specific students and is built on WWCC's advising process, including how close students are to completing any degree (the top five are available at a glance on the program's dashboard, but more are available).

- RED: Retention Enrollment Data reports provide ongoing snapshots of student progression and completion to key managers and staff.
- DNA: The Degree Navigation App provides students with a specific plan for completing, and can map out a one or two year schedule. This allows completion coaches and advisors to follow up if students are not registered according to their plan.
- SAP: The Financial Aid tool allows a review of financial aid students have received and what they may be eligible to receive.
- Career Coach is an online application developed by EMSI (a private company with which WWCC has worked since 2000) in partnership with WWCC for career planning.
- CHIP: The Complete Holistic Intervention Program database collects data from departments, advisors, and counselors, to put information on interventions all in one place and to use those data to see if they made a difference in students' completion. This is a pilot product currently being developed and tested.

Each of these tools is continually refined through both formal and informal reviews that involve a collaboration of managers, users, and developers.

Causal Factors as Reported in Interviews

A significant reason for this report is to identify the causes for completion coaching's impact at WWCC. In analyzing interviews from 16 employees across the campus, four critical themes emerged as people described the factors they believed to be critical in developing and implementing completion coaching. Those four factors are:

1. Campus culture
2. Commitment from across campus
3. Systems that are responsive to needs
4. Finances and funding

In the sections that follow, each of these themes provides pieces of the explanation of how completion coaching has been developed and what respondents see as critical to its success on their campus. Within each theme, there are categories that provide clarity on both the development and implementation of completion coaching at WWCC.

Theme: Campus Culture

Culture of Collaboration

Among the factors that respondents report about the success of the Completion Coaching model at Walla Walla Community College is a culture of collaboration. Throughout the interview process, respondents at all levels of the institution – staff to faculty to senior administrators – commented on this shared valuing of teamwork. The stated driving force is the shared mission and vision of the WWCC staff. One senior administrator put it very simply as a shared goal of “getting students across the finish line.” This refrain was echoed verbatim by other respondents at various levels of the institution. This collaborative culture is reported to exist among colleagues within the same departments and also – most notably – across departments.

Various respondents cited the importance of working with colleagues in other departments, with one student service staff member referring to the “tight working relationships” with staff in another department and another mentioning that they “consistently bounce ideas off each other.” One example of this kind of teamwork, was shared by a student services staff member: “If a student is in crisis, [coaches] know that they can come into my office and I will drop what I’m doing to help them and that student. And they do the same thing for me.” This same employee noted that “this is a change in culture to make departments more accessible and approachable.”

As they described their experience with the Completion Coaching model, WWCC employees spoke of the importance of certain particular collaborations – the one shared by completion coaches, financial aid, and the Foundation; one among admissions, financial aid, and student services; another between IT, IR, and student services; yet another among instruction, business services, the Foundation, and community partners. The various collaborations that exist across campus take various shapes. Student services staff meet weekly with IR and IT; a Funding Triage Committee meets twice a week at certain points of the quarter, once a week at other times, and as needed at still other times; a Resource Distribution Group (composed of both on- and off-campus funding entities) meets once per quarter. The importance of collaboration was often mentioned in interviews, as was the priority that WWCC puts on intentionally working together interdepartmentally.

Relationships Among Staff

According to staff members in financial aid and advising, the relationship between completion coaches and financial aid is of particular importance. The completion coaches’ responsibilities are to address students’ barriers that stand in the way of completion. Because – according to one director – 80% of WWCC students in aid-eligible programs are receiving some type of financial aid, completion coaches work closely with financial aid to ensure that students have the financial support they need to succeed. A staff member in financial aid stated that it is not just coaches referring students to their office but also the other way around. Interviewees report that staff members in both offices know when and how to connect students to staff in the other office.

Completion coaches and financial aid staff are two of the categories of employees involved in the Funding Triage Committee, the previously mentioned collaboration which also includes staff members from areas such as advising, the Opportunity Grant office, WorkFirst, Worker Retraining, and the Foundation. Together, they pool information about particular students’ needs and about funding streams to make sure financial resources are available for all in need.

Beyond the Funding Triage Committee, there is also a Resource Distribution Team that meets quarterly. One director who is part of team explained that this group includes both campus and community funding partners and meets to “ensure process alignment” and communicate important information about quarter dates, program changes, etc., to all parties. There are currently four community partners represented (each of which helps provide financial support to students in need), as well as eight on-campus funding sources.

Aside from the teamwork in place to ensure all students have the financial support they need to complete, there is also a well-established connection among student services, IT, and IR. One director shared that IT and student services staff meet for an hour weekly to talk about tools and possible technology solutions to student services needs. These meetings, he said, involve staff from IT, advising, the registrar’s office, financial aid, and IR. One senior administrator stated that these meeting have been occurring weekly since at least the 2012-2013 academic year, while another director remembers these groups convening over an earlier Title III grant. These meetings have been valuable enough that they continue even now.

Knowing their colleagues in other departments, understanding each other’s roles, and ensuring ongoing communication among various constituents were named by multiple interviewees to be critical factors in successfully implementing the completion coaching model. Multiple staff and administrators within student services cited this as a feature of the college that supports the success of completion coaching, noting the “collaborative attitude and approach between different departments,” the “culture of collaboration,” and ability to “work together departmentally.” Aside from specific collaborations, one senior administrator noted that it is very important that the role of coaches and the coaches themselves be well-known on campus. “The person may be very good in their role but if no one knows what they’re doing, they’re not going to get any referrals.”

Relationships with Students

One of the hallmarks of the completion coaching model is the one-on-one advising support that designated staff members provide individual students. According to one senior administrator, the hope is that completion coaches “develop a relationship with a student, they mentor that student, they inspire the student, they remove every obstacle that might get in the student’s way.” One dean noted that the campus can be an intimidating place and affirms importance of this individual connection, stating that students are “coming to see a face and not to the place.”

In interviews, one director estimated that completion coaches spend 80% of their time providing direct service to students. Students arrive at WWCC with various barriers to overcome, and without sufficient support and help in addressing these challenges, many are at threat not to be retained through completion. Completion coaches get to know the students, learn what challenges they face individually, and help them develop a plan that will lead to completion. According to one coach, they provide information about and connections to both on- and off-campus resources that may be of benefit to the students. When students need to access services on campus that they may not be familiar with, coaches may even walk the student to the needed office, introducing them to the person with whom they need to speak. One member of student services staff said it is not only the completion coaches who do this but “the entire advising staff.” A dean notes, “It’s not just a hand off and then we’re done. It’s a little more intentional.” As one staff member echoed, “We’re all completion coaches.”

This personal connection with the student is foundational to the completion coaching model. A completion coach noted that the time spent with students is the most valuable part of their work. One director said that 80% of WWCC students are first-generation, low-income college students; and another director touched on the importance of helping students believe that they belong on a college campus:

If you have a population that is unsure they should be in college, but if they can overcome barriers to their learning whether inside or outside the classroom, that's all related."

The same director went on to say, "The more that we can instill the idea that all students belong, the better off we'll be."

Culture of Innovation

WWCC administration and staff members also report the willingness to experiment and explore new possibilities as a contributing factor to the success of the completion coaching model. They noted that having WWCC consider providing funding for this kind of position indicates this culture of innovation, but even more significant is the fact that they did so – according to interview data – in the midst of difficult financial times. One senior administrator remembers that – because of the budget constraints – the team that originally met to design the completion coaching position knew that it would be easy for the new positions to be inadvertently “swallowed up by advising.” This team was intentional in the design and scope of these positions so that this would not happen. They wanted completion coaches to be dedicated positions, similar to, but distinct from, traditional advisors.

The administrative team at WWCC is, in the word of one student services staff member, “imaginative.” According to one director, the administrative team is “constantly willing to review current policies and practices to make sure they make sense.” WWCC has the kind of culture, this same team member says, where people are encouraged to try activities or to change things. One interview respondent noted that a critical component of the completion coaching model is simply to “stay nimble,” implying that this openness and flexibility of thinking are not only important in the beginning stages of a new project but throughout.

Student Completion as a Measure of the College's Success

Interviewees across WWCC institutional levels and departments consistently stated their common goal of helping students complete their desired degree or certificate programs. This identification of student completion as measure of success is a change for the school, as one senior administrator noted, stating that focusing on completions has required a culture shift from their earlier mantra that “if you provide access, you've done your part.” Instead of continuing to focus on enrollment as a goal, WWCC has begun looking at students' intended pathways in order to monitor their own success as an institution – i.e., whether or not these pathways help students achieve their intended goals.

One director shared that this goal of completion has affected the way the institution looks at student enrollment. Because funding from the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges is based in part on the FTEs that a student generates, the college benefits from having students enrolled for more credit hours as it increases their FTEs. For WWCC, however, this is not the driving force in their advising and enrolling of students. A financial aid staff member stated that while the college needs FTEs:

This is our philosophy: It doesn't do us any good to have a student for one quarter. We'd rather have them successful and here through completion. We want them here for six or eight quarters or however long it takes to get them through. And that's just our culture.

Completion coaches, according to interview respondents, fit with the college's focus on success as a measure of its performance. A senior administrator said, "We say that what we want to do is help students get across the finish line. Completion coaches help us do that." A director echoed this comment to say that, "Common sense says that if you make a plan, and you monitor the plan, and you give students clear information on the plan, and you keep in touch with them, and you mentor them and so forth, they're probably going to be more successful." According to one coordinator:

...we're not setting goals that have to do with what percentage of our students do this or what percentage of our students do that, but that every single quarter we look at a list of names and say that these are each human beings and we need to find out where they are and what they're doing.... For us that's critical because it sort of defines the importance of what the completion coaches are doing.

There is a shared understanding among staff and faculty interviewed that the completion coaches are filling a needed role in order to help the institution fulfill its mission. "Even if we get just a few extra students finishing their degree or certificate," says one director, "that's a few students that we wouldn't have gotten had we not had this process or these coaches in place." As a senior administrator explained:

Completion coaches were a tremendous institutional statement that completions are important.... It's really valuing the success of our students – where we see our own personal values in how well we've helped others. And that's a game changer.

Theme: Commitment from Across Campus

Another theme that emerged from interview data is the importance of commitment to the success of the completion coaching project. Respondents named support from across campus and from WWCC leadership as important factors in beginning and sustaining the project.

Support from Across Campus

Several respondents pointed out the importance of gaining campus-wide acceptance of the completion coaching project from the start to justify the creation and sustained funding of completion coach positions. One senior administrator noted that there was “some pushback at first” because of the allocation of scarce resources to fund new positions while others on campus remained vacant. A staff member explained:

If you think about it, everybody on campus should be a completion coach if you just word it generally like that. Everybody should be making sure these students are completing. So one of the barriers is figuring out what makes that a particularly necessary position beyond everybody just doing their job better.

Respondents noted reservations among some staff on campus for adding completion coaching positions. However, respondents noted that any initial resistance quickly faded. One staff member in student services said that “everyone here has the same objective... to help our students complete their degree.” Another echoed that “everyone on campus is invested in helping students complete.” The administrator who reported the resistance during the interview noted that that on-campus “pushback was short-lived” in part because the project was immediately effective in promoting student completion.

According to staff, and directors, and senior administrators, the value of having dedicated staff in completion coaching positions is demonstrated to faculty and staff members because they see results of coaches’ work first-hand. A director stated that practices and priorities within her department have changed because staff members are able to refer students to coaches and “see results.” A staff member in another department said that she knows completion coaching is working because of her “hands on” experience: “I can give you [a list of] names, and the completion coach goes out and hunts them down and gets them back and then we see them completing.” That same staff member said that:

It’s amazing how much better people understand the need once the need is being met. Sometimes people don’t have the vision to see how it can be better until it *is* better and then they wonder how they did it before.

Several respondents noted that positive responses to the effectiveness of the completion coaching model from people and organizations outside the college have generated support on campus. For example, one director said that “interest from other colleges in the state shows that people think completion coaches are a good idea.” In addition, an administrator attributed on-campus support in part to recognition by the Aspen Institute of the student services department for their “impressive work,” because that success demonstrated the value of student services to the campus at large.

Campus-wide commitment to the completion coaching project also stems from staff members’ personal involvement in the work. According to one department director, when directors discussed the creation

and implementation of the completion coaching model at WWCC in a meeting in 2012, the conversation focused on how each department would contribute to the work of completion coaches. As noted previously in this report, there is evidence of interdepartmental collaboration throughout the interview data as respondents commented on the roles that IT, IR, the registrar's office, financial aid, and others play in supporting the completion coaches.

Furthermore, a range of staff members and directors each named their own department's participation as critical to the success of the model. Several commented on various departments' investment in completion coaching because of that participation. For example, one director said, "it's kind of just become our culture... because we hear the direct results of [completion coaching] and personally been involved in students benefiting from it."

Despite support for completion coaching on campus overall, some staff and faculty respondents commented on an on-going need for on-campus education and communication about the role of completion coaches to generate more awareness of the coaches as a resource. In addition a director pointed to a need to "get faculty buy-in and participation at a level that could make greater improvement."

Support from Leadership

Respondents identified commitment from WWCC's leadership team as an important factor in beginning and sustaining the completion coaching project. Interview data show that senior administrators demonstrated commitment to the project from the outset. In fact, in describing the project's origins and history, respondents credited senior administrators with the idea to bring in completion coaches. Many of those interviewed commented on a "supportive" administration that prioritized efforts to improve completion and student support. In particular, a director stated that WWCC's president was key in beginning the project by "taking a leap of faith" that completion coaching would "pay off." A senior administrator stated that the president's decision to hire two completion coaches was "wonderful and shocking at the same time." Another senior administrator said that prioritizing the project was "a tremendous institutional statement that completions are important."

Administrative commitment is demonstrated through the continued funding of the project. Several respondents commented on the willingness of the administration to provide both initial funding for completion coaching "even in tough economic times" and ongoing financial support to keep those positions staffed. One senior administrator said that a community college's budget is "always a problem," but that it's unlikely completion coaching would be affected because of its proven effectiveness. Another senior administrator said that completion coaching is "a high priority project" and that it's not at risk for financial reasons.

One director said that the administration has prioritized "finding a way to fund [student support for completion] and finding a way to make it part of the way we do business." Another director echoed that prioritizing completion and retaining staff is important:

If you have the right people in there and you support them, they produce.... Even if we get just a few extra students finishing their degree or certificate, that's a few students that we wouldn't have gotten had we not had this process or these coaches in place.

Commitment among campus leaders stems from ongoing, positive project outcomes. One administrator cited improved completion rates as evidence of the payoff and said that the project “continues to prove itself.” Like others on campus who may work more directly with students, several other senior administrators noted that they have seen the benefits of the project. In particular an administrator said, “For me, it’s about the personal stories of our students”—those who had left but came back when contacted and those who hadn’t known they were so close to completion.

Senior administrators are not the only leaders whose commitment respondents identify as important. One administrator pointed to the need for strong and supportive leadership within the student services department. A staff member suggested that possible changes to the college’s administration due to retirements could present challenges to sustaining the program in the future. The person stated that it will be important to ensure that incoming administrators understand the project’s importance.

Theme: Systems that are Responsive to Need

One theme that emerged from interviews is the development of systems that are responsive to needs within the college. Respondents identified three systems that are critical to the success of the completion coaching project:

1. Development and use of the technology needed to be effective
2. Access to and use of data
3. Policies and procedures as steps to success or barriers

Technology Systems

Throughout interviews, respondents identified the work of the IT department at WWCC as critical to the completion coaching project. A director said, “Our IT here has been one of the major contributors to the success not only of completion coaches, the student development center, and student services but the college as a whole.” As noted previously, the IT department participates in weekly meetings between student services and IT staff members to discuss problems and the ways that IT can support student services work through technology. Additionally, IT developed technology systems in collaboration with end users in student services, resulting in highly effective and easy-to-use technology tools that are based on the processes and procedures in use at the college.

One director described the tools developed as a “functional infrastructure” that underlies the work of completion coaches and others in student services. Others interviewed, including staff and directors in student services as well as senior administrators, identified the tools created by the IT department (listed on page 8 of the [History...](#) section above) as critical to the work of completion coaches. The tools most often mentioned as critical in interviews were the Advisor Data Portal, the Degree Navigation App, and the Early Warning System.

Other technology tools were not widely identified in the interview data. For example, one staff member in student services mentioned the financial aid management (SAP) system, which allows users to see what financial aid a student has already received and what she may be eligible for. Additionally, a senior administrator named Career Coach, an online application for career planning. Finally, one director identified the Complete Holistic Intervention Program (CHIP) application currently being piloted on campus.

According to interview data, ADP, DNA, and the Early Warning System are critical because they allow immediate access to information, which supports early interventions and clear communication with students. Staff members and administrators report that the tools allow completion coaches and others on campus to monitor students’ progress relative to completion from beginning to end. For example, a staff member in student services said that DNA is used to “map out” a specific plan for completion and begin conversations with students “when they test into our college [about] where they’re at and how long it will take to complete their degree.” Furthermore, completion coaches are able to instantly check a student’s current enrollment against his or her enrollment plan allowing for follow-up conversations, referrals to resources, or adjustments to the plan to get the student back on track to completion.

Access to and Use of Data

There is an intersection between technology tools and access to data. The systems developed by IT in response to needs on campus allow for easier access to data, not only on individual students as described above, but also for the ongoing success of the completion coaching project and the college in general. A senior administrator explained that “data is available in a timely and consumable manner.”

According to respondents, quantitative data are collected on completion and retention rates, as well as on contact with students, demographics, and numbers of students served. A senior administrator also noted that qualitative data are collected through focus groups with students. Timely access to these data is critical to the work of completion coaches and the ability of the college to meet student needs. One director in student services noted that access to “actionable data” allows the coaches and others in student services to “do smart and strategic interventions at the right time.” At certain times of the year, coaches use reports on retention, enrollment, and completion to identify students for intervention. For example, between quarters and for the first two weeks of a new quarter, coaches contact students who are close to completion but not enrolled using multiple reports generated by the director of student services in partnership with IT. A department director stated that coaches now have more data to draw on to better target students for intervention than when the completion coaching project first began. At first, she said, coaches had access to one list of students who were close to completing but not enrolled; however:

Now they can grab that same list [of students within a certain number of credits of completion] but cross reference it with people who have financial aid, people who are in programs where their instructors enroll them... those types of things. So they have a really rich group of people to work on.

Coaches then track all students they contact throughout the year to document and monitor whether students have enrolled, reasons for not enrolling, interventions to mitigate barriers, and progress toward completion. Respondents said that these data help coaches and the institution better understand who students are and what they need. A staff member in student services said that there is now “a good understanding” of where students are and a “feeling that everyone is accounted for.”

Furthermore, many of the staff and administrators interviewed said that data on WWCC’s high completion and retention rates are powerful indicators of the success of the completion coaching project. These data, compared with data on students served, demonstrate the value of completion coaches. One department director said:

If you keep track of your successes with what the completion coaches are doing—how many students they’re able to bring back into the path and see to the finish line—if you have good data points that you can present to management, you can easily make the case that their value far exceeds their cost.

For example, according to several administrators, data collected in the first year of the completion coaching project were instrumental in garnering support from the WWCC Foundation for the completion coaching project. For about 20 years the Foundation had provided about \$7000 annually for emergency loans, distributed through the business office. During the early stages of the completion coaching project, those funds were provided through completion coaches and distributed to students to aid in completion. According to a director, that funding to students contributed to a 90% retention rate

among the pilot student cohort. A senior administrator noted that data on the impact of funding “proved the importance” of the project to the Foundation and another administrator said that comparing dollars spent to completion rates “raises the level of comfort people have of working within the completion coaching model.”

Respondents reported that there has been a shift in attitude toward the importance of data concurrent with the completion coaching project. Several department directors described an institutionalization of data collection and use that is still in progress. One director noted a “movement from... what people knew tacitly was going on to codification and institutionalizing” and said:

I think the perspective was always about getting students across the finish line but without much precision.... There was a lot of gut involved and a lot of anecdotal evidence involved, but it wasn't really evidence-based.

Another said that the college and individuals now have more awareness of the value of “good data and good data management”:

When I first came here.... I just scratched the surface. A lot of my impressions and what I thought and how I operated—I based my decisions on qualitative data or just things I've heard students say.... Those guys and gals who manage data so much more effectively than I ever did showed me how important it is to do that. I think that's really helped everybody out, not just the completion coaching project.

Still others noted that the college has become data-driven in its decision-making. For example, one senior administrator said that data informs decisions about target enrollment numbers and strategic student recruitment. Another said that using data “helps align institutional resources around our completion agenda” by helping the college determine what students need most and responding accordingly.

One staff member said that documenting the success of the completion coaching project could be a challenge because “not everything that counts can be counted.” However, although the formalization of systems to collect and manage data is still in progress, respondents overall said that data gathering and use has improved within the last several years.

Policies and Procedures

Policies and procedures related to completion coaching are evolving at WWCC as a means to support student success and mitigate barriers to completion. Respondents described an institutional willingness to learn and change—a “culture of innovation,” as noted in the [Campus Culture](#) section above—and reported that the development of completion coaching has been a learning process wherein job duties, policies, and procedures are defined according to need. For example, several directors and staff members in student services report that completion coaches' duties have changed over time to include more retention support rather than focusing solely on recruiting back students who are no longer enrolled.

Several respondents noted that policies and procedures can be barriers in themselves. One staff member in student services said that strict financial aid policies, both federal and within WWCC, can be problematic for students. Additionally, if a student is suspended, there is a long process for reinstating

him or her. Finally, the staff member said that changes to policy and procedure can't always happen quickly because of WWCC's decision-making processes. A senior administrator echoed this, saying "key players need to be empowered to make decisions." Despite remaining challenges, directors and administrators said that overall WWCC has worked to "break down barriers of procedures" and implement policies and procedures that promote completion. For example, one senior administrator noted that a policy to charge a \$35 fee for late registration was "not helpful" and was discontinued.

Furthermore, respondents identified several key policies and practices related to completion coaching that support student completion and mitigate barriers:

- **Funding Triage:** Seeking funding solutions for individual students through a group problem-solving process. This process allows students to receive financial support immediately through short term emergency loans from the WWCC Foundation.
- **WWCC Foundation's protection of donors' intent for funds to directly support student completion and protection of students' identities in receiving financial support.**
- **Mandatory Advising:** Requiring students to meet with academic advisors each quarter. This preceded completion coaching, but is related to the project because coaches have a standard advising load in addition to their duties.
- **Advising and planning around an annual schedule using DNA rather than looking only at a student's enrollment plan for the upcoming quarter.**
- **Responsive management of course offerings:** Collaborating with instruction to create new sections when needed so that students can enroll and stay on track to completion.
- **Auto-conferring degrees:** According to agreements made with students during registration, degrees can be automatically posted when the student has earned enough credits to complete their identified pathway. Auto-conferred degrees are then passed on to a transcript evaluator for audit.

Theme: Finances and Funding

Financial barriers must be addressed

The financial aspects of the completion coaching model are critical to its impact. Because one of the main challenges facing students is financial need, WWCC has had to consider how to ensure that both the college could help provide for those needs and also that individual students could receive the funds they need in a timely fashion. The institutionalization of the funding process has been important. In the words of one dean, the on-going completion coaching model means prioritizing students' need for support, finding a way to fund it, and "finding a way to make it a part of the way we do business."

One completion coach explained that there are various ways in which coaches help address financial issues: e.g., They help students understand what financial aid options are available, get out of financial aid suspension, and apply for FAFSA and WA State Needs grant as appropriate. If traditional financial aid will not work for the student, the coach helps the student complete a Challenge Grant application, which is taken to the Funding Triage Committee. There, the committee collaborates based on what they know about the student and also what financial support is available to determine how to best help the student. As one staff member involved with funding triage put it, "We just don't want students to be two or three classes from their graduation and not be able to finish. So when someone is close to completing, we will find the dollars to get them done."

It is significant that students with financial need at WWCC are able to access funds quickly. As one staff member explained, the completion coaching model – in coordination with the Triage Funding Committee – "...broke down barriers of procedures, allowing students to receive help immediately." Because the Funding Triage Committee meets as much as twice each week at certain points in the quarter, they are able to quickly address students' needs and ensure the students' can enroll when needed. This ability to assess and also address needs with immediacy has been valuable for WWCC students.

Sustained Funding

Funding completion coaching includes both funding the position of the completion coaches and also funding students' educational pathways. In multiple interviews, respondents noted that funding challenges are always a possible threat to continuing completion coaching at WWCC, but interviews with senior administrators affirmed that completion coaching is now a priority for the college. By tracking financial aid and student completions, the college has made a strong case for the success of the completion coaching model, helping ensure that funding will continue. Funding for staff positions is now included in the yearly budget. A dean agreed that budget is a challenge but "We're weaving [completion coaching] now into the fabric of how we do business." Respondents believe that this is imperative for the continued success of the Completion Coaching model.

As noted in the [History...](#) section above, the original funding for the student completion portion of the completion coaching model came from the 2011 Aspen Award of \$100,000. The students touched by these funds and their progress were tracked, and one director reported that 220 students were retained within the first quarter of this model. As also noted in the [History...](#) section, of the students supported by the original \$100,000, one senior administrator reported that 92% completed. These data were taken to the Board as well as to the Foundation to encourage the ongoing support from both bodies.

Since the original gift of \$100,000 from Aspen and \$7000 from the Foundation in fall 2012, the pool of resources available for students has grown. There are currently 12 on- and off-campus funding streams that support student completion, and representatives from each meet quarterly as a part of the previously mentioned Resource Distribution Group. Among these many sources of funding, one of the major contributors is the WWCC Foundation, who one director said now gives over \$100,000 per year toward student completions.

Importance of the Foundation

The WWCC Foundation has the mission to:

... provide a comprehensive educational program and essential support services designed to specifically meet individual and community needs throughout Walla Walla, Garfield, Columbia, and Asotin Counties. While carrying out this mission, the College strives to be an accessible, community-based, and performance-oriented institution providing affordable and quality education (WWCC Foundation Web site: <http://www.wvcc.edu/CMS/index.php?id=182>).

According to one Foundation staff member, “For us, it’s critical to the success of the model to have the foundation involved.” Numerous interviewees – from faculty to coordinators to completion coaches – spoke of the importance of the Foundation to the completion coaching model at WWCC. The Foundation is known for being generous in support of student completion, as is evidenced by their contribution of \$100,000 each year toward this end. Through targeted campaigns, both on- and off-campus, the Foundation uses students’ stories to raise funds for WWCC student completion assistance. A Foundation staff member said that this opportunity to know exactly how one’s donation is being used is motivating to donors.

The importance of the Foundation in WWCC’s Completion Coaching model goes beyond just their financial contributions, though. A member of the Foundation staff shared that “For WWCC, it’s significant that the foundation be directly involved in the financial process, getting to know students directly. It makes us better as fundraisers and better at serving students.” This staff member added that they have “greatly streamlined the process to allow the student to receive assistance immediately from the Foundation to lower their angst and take finances off the plate so they can focus on academics.”

Appendix A – Interview Question by Category of Employee

Outcome/Evaluation Question	Questions for the Institutional Liaison	Question for Completion Coaches	Questions for Selected Student Services Staff	Questions for VPSS, VPI, and President
<p><i>Implied Outcome 2:</i> The evaluator will identify the specific activities related to Completion Coaching at WWCC that led to the successes the College achieved.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the features of your college that support the success of this project? • What were the barriers at your college to getting completion coaching started? • How have those barriers continued or diminished? • From your perspective, what does a completion coach do in a typical week? Have those duties changed since the project started? If so, how? • What systems, processes, or supports within your college are critical to the work of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What duties do you perform in a typical day? In a typical week? • What are the features of your college that support your ability to do your work? • What barriers limit your ability to do your job as a completion coach? • What systems, processes, or supports within your college are critical to your work – the ones that you absolutely must have to do your work? • Which of your activities have you found to be most valuable in doing your job? Explain why each is valuable? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe your experiences with the completion coaching project. When did you first hear about it? How were you involved as the idea was implemented? How were you involved as the completion coaches were first hired? • How do you interact with the college’s completion coaches? • What are the features of your college that support the success of this project? • What were the barriers at your college to getting completion coaching started? • How have those barriers continued or diminished? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the features of your college that support the success of this project? • What were the barriers at your college to getting completion coaching started? • How have those barriers continued or diminished? • From your perspective, what does a completion coach do in a typical week? Have those duties changed since the project started? If so, how? • What systems, processes, or supports within your college are critical to the work of completion

Outcome/Evaluation Question	Questions for the Institutional Liaison	Question for Completion Coaches	Questions for Selected Student Services Staff	Questions for VPSS, VPI, and President
	<p>completion coaching?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there any procedural challenges to keeping completion coaching continuing at your college? • Are there any institutional barriers that might hinder the completion coaching project in the future? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please describe the training and types of professional development support you've received as a completion coaches. • Which activities did you try in your work that weren't worth continuing to do? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From your perspective, what does a completion coach do in a typical week? Have those duties changed since the project started? If so, how? • What systems, processes, or supports within your college are critical to the work of completion coaching? • Are there any procedural challenges to keeping completion coaching continuing at your college? • Are there any institutional barriers that might hinder the completion coaching project in the future? 	<p>coaching?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there any procedural challenges to keeping completion coaching continuing at your college? • Are there any institutional barriers that might hinder the completion coaching project in the future? • Are you aware of any regional or state issues that will impact the completion coaching project's future?
<p><i>FROM Process Outcome 1:</i> What steps did the four principal colleges (Seattle Colleges and</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please describe the origins of your use of completion coaches and completion 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please describe the origins of your use of completion coaches and completion

Outcome/Evaluation Question	Questions for the Institutional Liaison	Question for Completion Coaches	Questions for Selected Student Services Staff	Questions for VPSS, VPI, and President
GRCC) take to implement Completion Coaching?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coaching. Please include as much detail about the people and events and time from the project until now. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • coaching. Please include as much detail about the people and events and time from the project until now.
<p><i>FROM Process Outcome 2:</i> In what ways did the Completion Coaching intervention affect student progress and completion rates at each college and within the Coalition overall?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you know that completion coaching is effective? • What data do you collect on the impact of your completion coaching efforts? • Are any of those data kept longitudinally so that the changes in the impact can be measured over time? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you know that completion coaching is effective? • What data do you collect on the impact of your completion coaching efforts? • How do you use that information in your duties? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you know that completion coaching is effective? • What data do you collect on the impact of your completion coaching efforts? • How do you use that information in your duties?
<p><i>FROM Process Outcome 3:</i> What changes to policies and practices did the Puget Sound Coalition college learning community participants make as a result of their</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From your perspective, what were your college's efforts at addressing students who were close to competing and weren't enrolled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What policies are you aware of in the college that support your work? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From your perspective, what were your college's efforts at addressing students who were close to competing and weren't enrolled prior to this project? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From your perspective, what were your college's efforts at addressing students who were close to competing and weren't enrolled prior to

Outcome/Evaluation Question	Questions for the Institutional Liaison	Question for Completion Coaches	Questions for Selected Student Services Staff	Questions for VPSS, VPI, and President
participation?	<p>prior to this project?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the three most important changes in policies or practice that you're aware of as a result of implanting the completion coaching model at your college? 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the three most important changes in policies or practice that you're aware of as a result of implanting the completion coaching model at your college? 	<p>this project?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the three most important changes in policies or practice that you're aware of as a result of implanting the completion coaching model at your college?
<p><i>FROM Process Outcome 4:</i> How did participation in Project Finish Line and related campus initiatives (e.g., Achieving the Dream, NCII, etc.) lead to changes in the principal and Puget Sound Coalition colleges' organizational culture?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What other initiatives on your campus had similar aims as the completion coaching project? • If identified, how did those other initiatives fit with completion coaching? • If so, how did those other initiatives impact the general policies and practices of your college? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What other initiatives on your campus had similar aims as the completion coaching project? • If identified, how did those other initiatives fit with completion coaching? • If so, how did those other initiatives impact the general policies and practices of your college? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What other initiatives on your campus had similar aims as the completion coaching project? • If identified, how did those other initiatives fit with completion coaching? • If so, how did those other initiatives impact the general policies and practices of your college? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What other initiatives on your campus had similar aims as the completion coaching project? • If identified, how did those other initiatives fit with completion coaching? • If so, how did those other initiatives impact the general policies and practices of your college?

Appendix B – Interview Script

Initial Introduction (by phone, voice mail or e-mail)

Hello, my name is [full name] and I'm a research associate with Bob Hughes and Associates. We're conducting an evaluation of the Completion Coaching model at Walla Walla Community College. Our work is connected to another project funded by a grant that will help four other colleges in the state to replicate Walla Walla Community College' Completion Coaching model. You were identified as someone who could tell us about the Completion Coaching model. I have a list of questions that will take about 30 minutes to complete. I'd like to schedule some time soon when I can ask you those questions. Please let me know if you're willing and available for this conversation. You can reach me by e-mail at [address] or by phone at [phone number].

Interview Script: WWCC Interviews

As I mentioned when we set up this interview, my name is [full name] and I'm a research associate with Bob Hughes and Associates. We're conducting an evaluation of the Completion Coaching model at Walla Walla Community College. You were identified as someone who could tell us about the Completion Coaching project. I have a list of questions that will take about 30 minutes to complete, and we have scheduled this time when I can ask you those questions. Does this time still work for you? [if not, reschedule]

These questions will take about 30 minutes to go through. If any of the questions don't make sense, please ask me to re-state it.

I'd like to record this conversation so that I can review the notes I will be taking for accuracy. The recording that I make will only be available to our lead researcher, Dr. Hughes, and one other research associate. The audio file that I create will be kept in a secure, password protected directory on my computer until I share it with Dr. Hughes and the other research associate. At that time, I will delete it from my computer and place it onto a password secured CD-ROM which will be kept in a locked cabinet by Dr. Hughes. At no time will we share the recording or any transcription of the recording beyond the three of us.

Would it be okay if I record our conversation?

[if yes, turn on the recorder]: Okay. Thanks for allowing me to record our discussion. I've turned on the recorder now.

[if no, begin taking notes]: Thanks. I will just take notes and not use a recorder.

The comments that you make will be kept confidential by our research team. That means that when we write our report, we won't be using any comments that you make which might identify you. We will not reference your name or position or any identifying characteristics you might use. Our goal is to develop an overall picture of the Completion Coaching model, so we'll be writing our report in relation to that overall picture.