

Professional Development Coaching for Health Professions Graduate Faculty: A Pilot Implementation

Michelle J. Pearce, PhD

Introduction: Organizations have offered executive coaching to their senior leaders for several decades and report improvement in performance, leadership, self-efficacy, and goal attainment. Despite this success, little research exists on coaching programs for faculty who may also benefit from this resource. We sought to develop, implement, and evaluate a professional development coaching program for diverse graduate faculty at a health professions university.

Methods: We implemented a professional development coaching program to provide one-on-one support for interested faculty. Faculty were offered four 1-hour or eight half-hour sessions each academic semester by eight trained volunteer coaches unaffiliated with the university. We had 67 faculty members participate across the academic year. They were asked to complete a brief impact survey at the end of each semester.

Results: The coaches provided 378 sessions, totaling 281 hours of coaching. Survey results revealed that coaching was effective in helping faculty achieve their professional goals and empowered them for future professional success. Faculty were highly satisfied with the program.

Discussion: There is early evidence that professional development coaching can help faculty reach their professional goals and add value to an institution. The program may be a helpful model for developing and implementing coaching programs on other campuses.

Keywords: coaching, coaching program, faculty development, professional development, goals, faculty support

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Supporting the professional growth and well-being of academic faculty has the potential to impact faculty members' professional success, workplace satisfaction, retention, and quality of life. One valuable way to support professional growth may be through faculty professional development coaching. Business organizations have offered executive coaching services to their senior leaders for several decades to support professional growth and success. Employees who work with an executive coach are more likely to set goals, solicit ideas for improvement, obtain higher ratings from others, be more self-disciplined and conscientious, and report higher self-efficacy, workplace well-being, and career satisfaction.¹⁻⁴

Despite the success of coaching in the business sector, very few universities offer coaching services to their faculty. Coaching is a personalized, one-on-one relationship designed

to help individuals overcome challenges, increase clarity and confidence, realize their potential, and maximize performance.^{5,6} We define professional development coaching as a working partnership between a coach and a faculty member who is seeking self-directed, lasting changes, aligned with their own values to promote continuing professional development and wellness.

Most of what we know about coaching among health professions faculty comes from the nursing literature. Nurses who have received career or professional development coaching have reported greater goal achievement and job satisfaction, increased commitment and passion for work duties, greater emotional intelligence and self-efficacy, less burnout, greater work-life balance, and increased retention rates.⁷⁻¹⁰

Research is lacking on universitywide professional development coaching programs for health professions faculty. To address this gap, this short report seeks to describe the development, implementation, and evaluation of the pilot professional development coaching program for faculty at a health professions graduate university. We offer this program as a potential model for other universities who would like to offer coaching services for their faculty.

METHODS

The professional development coaching program was created in the summer of 2020 with the purpose of supporting interested faculty in achieving their professional goals and enhancing success. The program consisted of a series of confidential guided conversations between a trained coach and a faculty member, focusing on the faculty member's

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This research was considered not human subjects by the University of Maryland, Baltimore Institutional Review Board and thus did not need a full review.

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Pearce: Professor and Program Director, Graduate School, University of Maryland, Baltimore, MD, and Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, NC.

Correspondence: Michelle J. Pearce, PhD, Graduate School, University of Maryland, 620 W. Lexington Street, Rm 1115, Baltimore, Baltimore, MD 21021; e-mail: michelle.pearce@umaryland.edu.

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TABLE 1.
Goals Faculty Worked on in Coaching Sessions

Coaching Goal	Percent of Faculty Endorsed (<i>n</i> = 51)
Enhancing professional performance	39%
Increasing sense of fulfillment at work	25%
Gaining clarity about desired career path and steps for advancement	67%
Taking specific action toward career advancements	37%
Overcoming a specific barrier at work	37%
Better managing time and prioritizing tasks	49%
Improving organizational skills	25%
Improving work–life balance	47%

growth and development. The aim was to heighten faculty's self-awareness and anchor this with new strategies, a supportive relationship, and personal accountability. The focus of coaching was driven by the faculty member, not the coach. Notably, coaching is not mentoring, consulting, advising, or therapy. As such, coaches do not need to be an expert in academia and do not provide academic or professional advice.⁶

The program was created and directed by the author, who is a national board-certified coach and professor at the university. The coaching was provided by volunteer external coaches, who had completed the required 60 hours of didactic training for credentialing from a coaching training program (ie, International Coaching Federation requirements). Coaches did not have to complete a certain number of coaching hours to participate. Most coaches were incentivized to participate by having an opportunity to accrue required client hours for their credentialing application. Working with volunteer coaches made the program possible without funding support. Coaches were recruited by announcements made through coaching organizations. The onboarding process for coaches included submitting an application with verification of coaching training, participating in an interview, signing a contract, completing Title IX training, and participating in monthly group supervision. Of the nearly 50 applications that were received, eight coaches were chosen to participate in the program.

Faculty members could receive up to four 1-hour or eight half-hour free coaching sessions per academic semester, with the opportunity for more sessions if the demand for coaching did not exceed supply. The sessions were offered by phone or video. Interested faculty members self-referred and completed a brief request form. The program director then assigned the faculty member to a coach, who reached out to set up the first session. Faculty clients completed a welcome packet consisting of a consent form and questions about their goals for coaching. All session material was kept confidential and was not shared with employers or other university personnel.

At the end of the fall and spring semesters, all faculty clients were sent a brief Qualtrics survey (11 items in December 2020; 14 items in May 2021) to gather pilot data to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the program and faculty's satisfaction (see **Supplemental Materials for a copy of the survey**, <http://links.lww.com/JCEHP/A157>). Our institutional review board

determined that this mixed methods program evaluation study was not a human research study and did not require a full review.

RESULTS

Between September and May 2020, 67 faculty members participated in the coaching program, with 17 faculty members (40%) participating in both semesters (*n* = 41 fall; *n* = 43 spring). The eight volunteer coaches provided a combined 378 free coaching sessions for faculty, totaling 281 hours of coaching. In the fall, 29 of the 41 (71%) faculty members who participated in the program completed the survey, and 22 of the 43 (51%) faculty members did so in the spring. Given the fall and spring evaluations represented separate data points evaluating the coaching received during that particular semester, we chose to combine the data.

Faculty from six of our seven professional schools participated (exception of the Law School). The majority of faculty were in the School of Medicine (66%; 44 of 67), which is our largest school at the university. Although all faculty ranks were represented, 58% were assistant professors, suggesting this service was sought out primarily by junior faculty. Faculty reported their positions involved research (25%), teaching (24%), administration (29%), and patient care (49%).

Nearly one-third (31%) of the faculty completed four 1-hour sessions, whereas one-half (49%) completed eight or more half-hour sessions; the rest (20%) completed between zero and three sessions of either length. This suggests that most participants used all their offered coaching sessions and that offering two choices for the length of sessions was valuable. Two faculty members were unable to participate because of COVID-19–related time constraints.

In goal achievement, 98% (46 of 47) of faculty strongly agreed or agreed that working with a coach helped them to make desired changes in their goals; 91% (41 of 45) strongly agreed or agreed that they felt more confident achieving future professional goals; and 90% (19 of 21; spring only) strongly agreed or agreed that they were more productive at work. See Table 1 for the types of goals faculty worked on in coaching.

In satisfaction, 96% (43 of 45) were extremely satisfied or satisfied with their coaching experience, and 92% (45 of 49) were extremely likely or very likely to refer a colleague to coaching. In addition, 90% (19 of 21; spring only) agreed or strongly agreed that the opportunity to engage in the university-sponsored coaching program made them feel that the university values their personal career development.

The open-ended comments about coaching were very positive. Themes included how coaching helped them to reach their goals, gave them new tools and skills, and decreased stress and increased resilience and wellness. A few examples include “I felt more accomplished.”; “We academics have so few high-level resources for dealing with the structures of working environments. This program has hit at a critical time for me and working with an experienced coach has significantly lowered my stress and increased my resiliency”; and “This coaching service is extremely valuable. . . [it] is an investment in faculty, and thus an investment in the university and its productivity and future success.”

DISCUSSION

The professional development coaching program began at a unique time—during COVID-19—which, according to qualitative feedback, enhanced the relevance and meaningfulness of this service for many faculty members. The purpose for which the coaching program was designed was abundantly met. Faculty-reported coaching helped them to achieve the professional goals that were important to them. Some of these goals included better managing time and prioritizing tasks, improving their work–life balance, gaining clarity about desired career path and steps for advancement, and overcoming a specific barrier at work. The data also suggested that coaching was effective in empowering faculty for future professional success and that faculty were highly satisfied with the program. Thus, preliminary evaluation data suggest that the coaching program supports what has been reported elsewhere as the benefits to faculty participation in coaching: greater goal achievement and job satisfaction, greater self-efficacy, less burnout, and better work–life balance.^{7–10}

Faculty commented on the value of this service as an investment in faculty and in the university's overall productivity and success, and they saw coaching as a tangible benefit of working at this institution. Given this program operated without expense to the university (other than the director's time and effort), professional development coaching programs may be low-hanging fruit for the growth and support of health professions faculty and their institutions.

The development and implementation of this coaching program was rewarding and meaningful for all involved. We were delighted to find a relatively simple and inexpensive way to meet faculty's needs for professional development and academic and personal success. After a successful pilot launch, we have decided not only to continue to offer the service but also to expand it by increasing the number of coaches and, thus, faculty we can coach.

CONCLUSION

We sought to understand the impact and benefit of a pilot professional development coaching program among diverse graduate faculty at a health professions graduate university. The faculty reported benefiting from and being satisfied with the program and saw it as an institutional value-add. The program was relatively simple and cost-effective to develop and implement. We will continue to evaluate the efficacy of this program as it grows and evolves. We hope this offers pre-

liminary support for developing and implementing coaching programs on other campuses.

Lessons for Practice

- Professional development coaching is one way to address continuing professional development for health professions faculty who are seeking self-directed, lasting changes, aligned with their own values, to promote professional development and wellness.
- Faculty valued coaching as an employer-sponsored resource and found it helpful in achieving their professional goals and empowering them for future professional success.
- Coaching can be offered at no cost to the institution (beyond a director's time and effort) using external volunteer coaches. Thus, it is low-hanging fruit for faculty development and faculty support.

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