



Implementation and Impacts of Career-Focused Advising: Research Brief

July 2024

School-based advising supports high school students in navigating the many complicated and consequential decisions they face as they plan for life after high school—whether their plans include postsecondary education or heading straight into the workforce. Much of the research to date on advising has focused on college advising. Less is known about career-focused advising, including advising for students participating in career and technical education (CTE).

Our study examined career- and CTE-related advising in the context of North Carolina’s career coaching program. The career coaching program places community college staff on select high school campuses to work alongside existing advising staff to provide students guidance around career pathways and high school coursetaking that can prepare them for those pathways. We examined the implementation of this program and then evaluated how school-level patterns in CTE participation, postsecondary plans, and college enrollment change when schools receive a career coach. We also evaluated how meeting with a career coach is linked to student outcomes.

North Carolina’s Career Coaching Program

The North Carolina General Assembly established the Career Coaching program in 2015. The state provided \$500,000 in funding for career coaches in the 2015-16 school year, and this increased to \$5.6 million by the 2021-22 school year. School districts can apply for a career coach by partnering with a local community college and applying to a state advisory committee that includes state educational agency staff and representatives of the business community. Criteria for selection include having a district-college partnership, evidence of matching funds, local workforce needs, plans for developing and deploying coaches, and geographic diversity.

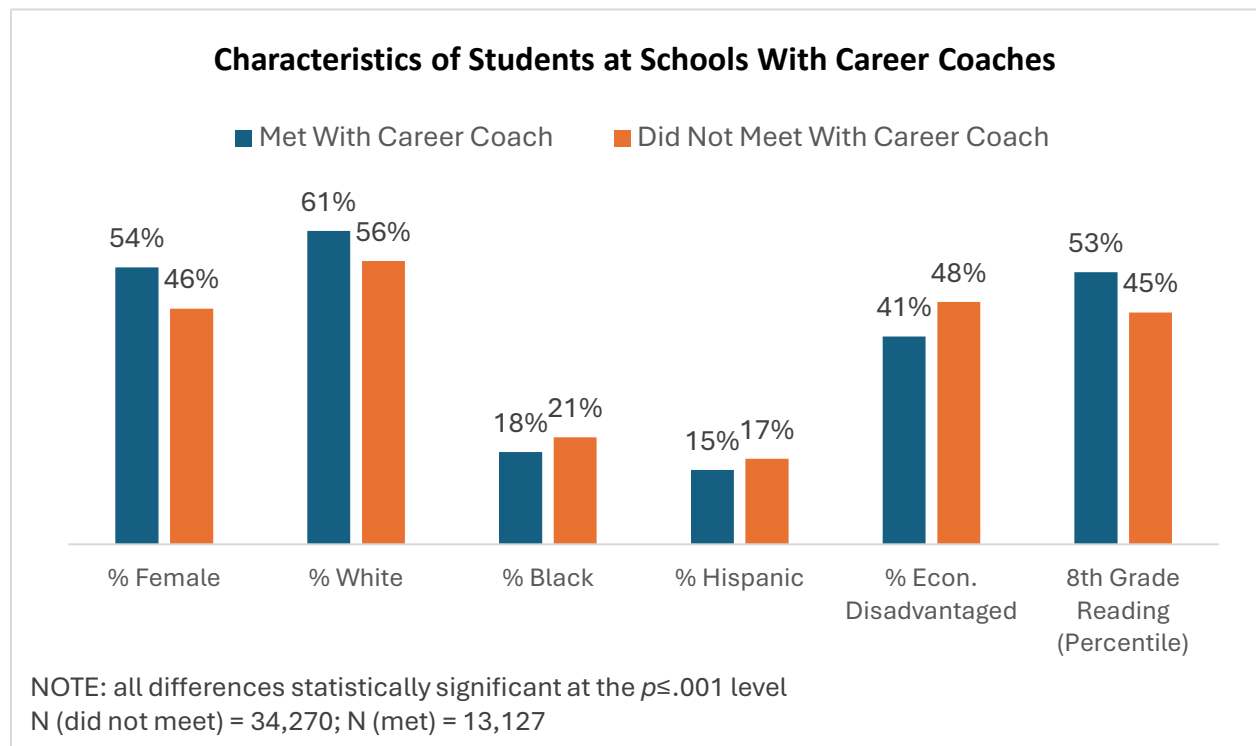
Career coaches engage with students through one-on-one sessions to discuss career interests, raise awareness of exploration or immersion opportunities, and identify courses and pathways to support student interests. They also may hold group advising sessions, promote engagement with local business or industry, and provide advising around Career and College Promise (CCP), North Carolina’s dual enrollment program. As of the 2020-21 school year, the state had awarded

five cohorts of coaches. In total, 160 comprehensive public high schools in North Carolina had received a career coach by then, while 231 schools had not received a coach.

Schools receiving coaches were more likely to be in rural areas and small towns, less likely to be in cities, and about as likely to be in suburban areas, relative to schools that never received a coach. Schools receiving coaches were also about twice as likely to be in the 40 most economically distressed counties in the state. We focus our analyses on schools that were not in large cities because no large city schools had received a career coach by 2020-21. Among these schools, career coaches were more likely to be in schools with higher shares of economically disadvantaged students and Black and Hispanic students. The schools with coaches also had students with slightly lower average exam scores than schools without coaches.

Which Students Met with Career Coaches?

Data from the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years about which individual students met with coaches indicate that approximately one-quarter of students at schools with access to a coach met on at least one occasion with the coach. While schools receiving coaches were on average more disadvantaged than schools that did not, the students we observe meeting with a coach at those schools were disproportionately white, higher achieving, and less likely to be economically disadvantaged than their school peers who did not meet with coaches. The chart shows the characteristics of students who met and did not meet with coaches. As the table shows, 54% of students who met with a coach were female compared to 46% of students who did not meet with a coach. Eighteen percent of students who met with a coach were Black, while 21% of students who did not meet with a coach were Black.



Most students first met with a career coach after they were already taking courses offered by the local community college through North Carolina’s CCP dual enrollment program. Dual enrollment students are more likely to be higher achieving and less likely to be in disadvantaged groups than their peers, which may explain why higher achieving and more advantaged students were more likely to meet with career coaches.

Interview Findings: How Career Coaches Described Their Role at the School

We interviewed 12 current career coaches as well as two former coaches who recently transitioned to leadership roles to learn about their coaching experiences. They reported the following experiences.

- Coaches supported students through a variety of activities including one-on-one advising, group presentations/ workshops, and by facilitating opportunities for students to engage with college and community partners.
- Coaches typically focused on targeted postsecondary planning with juniors and seniors, and career awareness and exploration activities with younger students.
- Coaches’ integration into school advising structures varied, impacting their access to resources to support students and their effectiveness.
- Coaches collaborated extensively with teachers, especially CTE instructors, counselors, and others involved in college and career advising.
- Coaches played a key role in advising students about the CCP dual enrollment program, from raising awareness to providing logistical support.

“I think my number one job duty is to help each student develop a career and academic plan by the time they graduate. And so that’s my main focus. I do help students with selecting courses that achieve that goal. So, I am a part of some of CCP as far as advising and registration. But my main goal is to help the students figure out exactly what are their career goals and what are their academic goals, and how can I help them achieve those goals...”

Career Coach, Interview with Authors

Impact of a School Receiving a Career Coach

We analyzed the average impacts on students who attended schools that received a coach using a “difference-in-differences” approach that compares students at schools with coaches to students at schools without coaches as well as to students at their own schools in the years prior to the coaches’ arrival. This method accounts for factors common to each school over time as well as factors that changed over time across all schools. Our sample for the school-level

analysis included nine cohorts of 11th graders, with the first cohort entering 11th grade in 2011-12 and the last cohort entering 11th grade in 2019-20.

- On average, student CCP participation rates were 2.7 percentage points higher after the school received a career coach, which represented a 10% increase over pre-coach participation rates. This reflected an increase in participation in both the CTE and “College Transfer” pathways.
- We found some evidence that receiving a coach increased the share of students who intended to head straight to the workforce after high school while decreasing the share of students who attended a four-year college within one year of high school.
- Rates of enrollment at two-year colleges were not significantly affected by a coach’s arrival at a school.

It is important to keep in mind that these school-level model results represented the average effect of a school receiving a career coach, and that many students in schools with a coach did not meet with the coach.

Impact of Students Meeting with a Career Coach

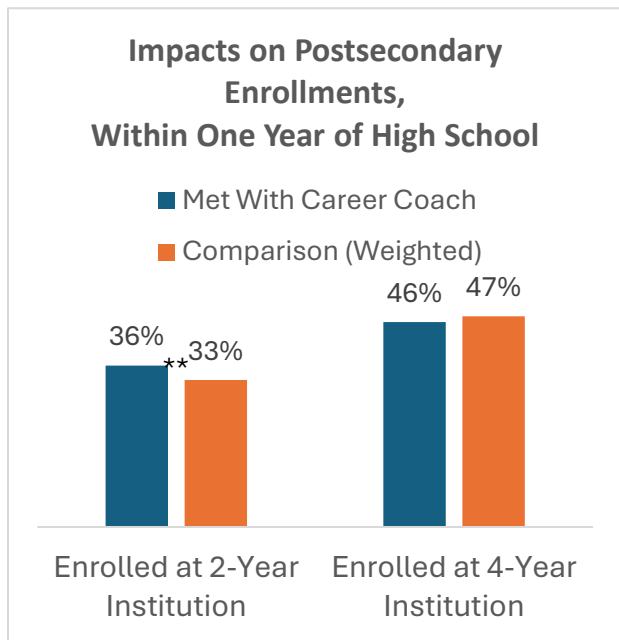
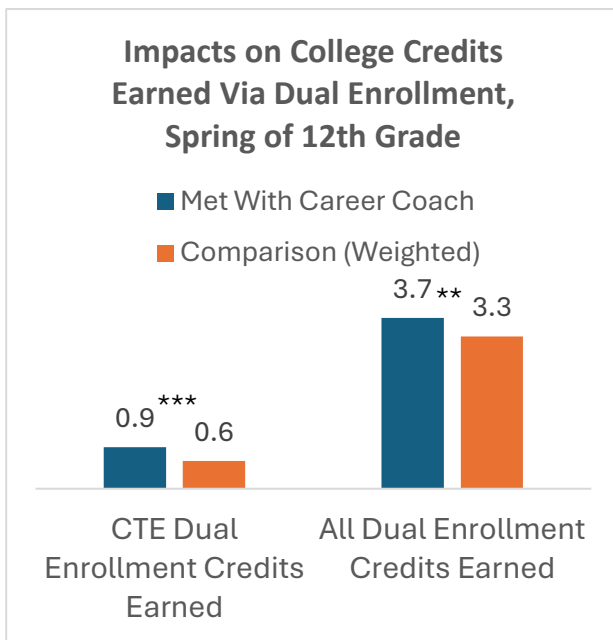
We also analyzed the impacts of coaches on the students who met with them in the 2019-20 or 2020-21 school years. For this, we compared students who met with the coaches to students at schools that did not receive coaches.

We statistically weighted the comparison group to resemble the students who met with coaches on several factors including demographics, prior coursetaking, and prior achievement. We focused our student-level analyses on CCP dual enrollment students because dual enrollment students were more likely to meet with a coach.



We focused on how outcomes differed for students who met with a coach starting the fall of senior year versus students who did not have access to a career coach at their schools.

- Coached students took slightly more CTE dual enrollment courses and earned slightly more college credits through dual enrollment (CTE and overall) than their CCP counterparts who did not have access to a coach at their high school.
- Coached students were more likely to go to two-year postsecondary schools—both as reflected on their pre-graduation intentions survey and as documented through actual enrollments.
- There was a small negative impact on intentions to enroll at four-year institutions but the effect on actual enrollments was not statistically significant. There was no discernable impact on intentions to head straight to employment.



NOTE: ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Policy Implications

These findings have implications for North Carolina’s career coaching program and career advising more broadly. These include:

- **It may be beneficial to increase engagement with the career coaches among students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.** Prior research suggests that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds likely have the greatest need for career advising. Despite North Carolina’s career coaching program disproportionately placing coaches in high schools with higher rates of economic disadvantage and larger shares of students in underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, within schools, the students who met with coaches were on average higher achieving, less likely to be economically disadvantaged, and less likely to be in underrepresented racial or ethnic groups.

- **Relatedly, students outside the CCP dual enrollment program may benefit from more interactions with the career coaches.** Our analyses found that most students who met with a career coach were dual enrollment students, and we restricted our student-level analyses to these students. However, the school-level model suggests that career coaches can spur increased participation in dual enrollment in the first place. Taking intentional steps to reach out to a diverse group of students who are not already participating in dual enrollment could help to broaden exposure to career-focused advising and encourage more students to consider dual enrollment pathways.
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This research brief summarizes key findings from the working paper “Implementation and Impacts of Career-Focused Advising” by Brian Phillips (RAND), Christine Mulhern (RAND), Bryan C. Hutchins (UNC Greensboro), and Julie Edmunds (UNC Greensboro). The working paper was published in June 2024 at <https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai24-1011.pdf>.