

How Tools Support Coaches and Student Success Center Coaching Programs

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The [Student Success Center Network](#) (SSCN) Coaching Program expands institutional coaching as a capacity-building strategy for driving state- and institution-level college transformation efforts. Institutional coaches are trusted advisors who help facilitate change conversations, share resources and knowledge, and provide guidance to college administrators, faculty, and staff engaged in the daily work of implementing large-scale change initiatives. Through the SSCN Coaching Program, state-based Student Success Centers (Centers) have developed and expanded coaching programs, provided training and professional development for institutional coaches, and developed resources for the field.

To better support new and experienced coaches, Jobs for the Future (JFF), Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI), and Achieving the Dream created a comprehensive set of tools and resources, the [SSCN Coaching Toolbox](#). Backed by research, the tools were developed with Center feedback, incorporating both national and state-level perspectives. The purpose of these tools is to assist both coaches and Center leadership in directly supporting the process of complex institutional change. The toolbox reflects work happening in states and institutions and supports initiatives underway throughout the SSCN. For coaches, the tools enhance their coaching knowledge and skills, support communications and strategic planning with institutions, and provide documentation of progress being made. For Center leadership, these tools promote strategic planning, serve as ready-made supports for Centers developing or enhancing a coaching program, and provide resources to educate colleges on how to utilize a coach. The tools are shared through SSCN Coaching Program trainings and professional

development sessions and webinars, online through JFF and CCRI websites, and by peer sharing among coaches.

In the current phase of the SSCN Coaching Program, supported by Ascendium Education Group, JFF and CCRI partnered with grantee Centers in [California](#), [Michigan](#), [New York](#), and [Oregon](#) to further support their coaching programs and gather data on how coaching catalyzes institutional change. This brief shares results of a survey and subsequent interviews of grantee Center leaders and coaches. We learned which tools resonated the most with Center leadership and coaches, how they were used, their benefits, and the importance of training to augment their impact.



How Tools Assist Coaching and Institutional Change

The survey and interviews with coaches and Center leaders revealed three consistently used tools: the [College Readiness Assessment](#), the [Rubric of Equity-Minded Coaching Domains and Practices](#) (with companion resources [Glossary of Terms](#) and [Equity-Minded Coaching Dos and Don'ts](#)), and the brief [Coaching for More Equitable Outcomes](#). This section describes each of the above tools, including how Centers and coaches applied the tools in their coaching practice and the tools' value. This section also offers insights on how the tools save time and resources for Centers and provide opportunities for coaching skills development.

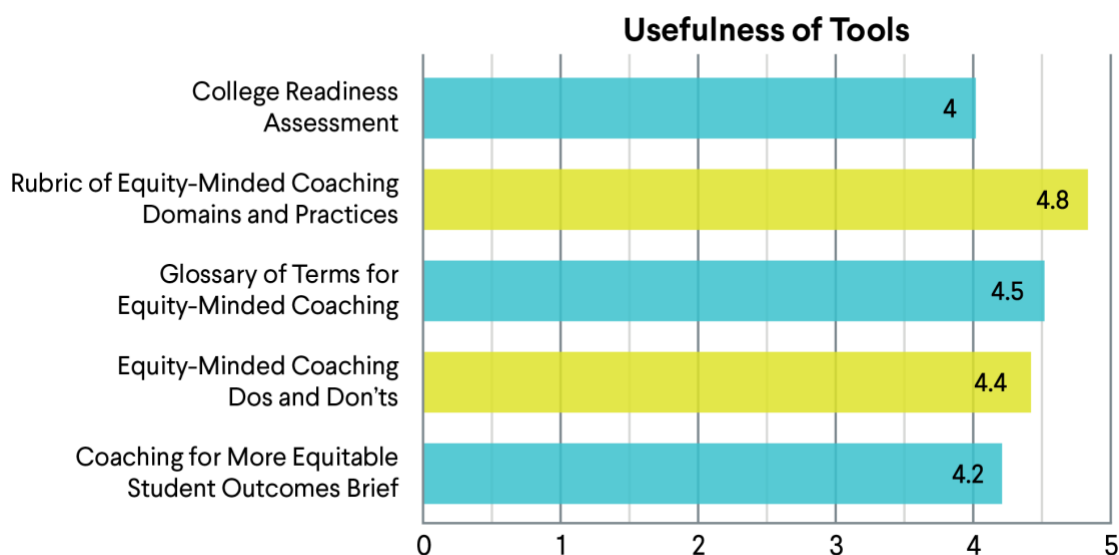


Figure 1. Usefulness of tools on a Likert scale of 1-5: not, slightly, moderately, very, and extremely

Tools can assist Centers, coaches, and colleges doing transformational change work. We heard from coaches and Center leadership that they are useful for Center leadership in supporting their coaches and coaching programs. According to one Center leader:

“Tools help coaches understand how to approach coaching. It’s still such a new endeavor for student success, and without these tools, it would be even *more* challenging for coaches to get that experience and knowledge.... In the organizational change process, these resources provide supports that are invaluable.”

College Readiness Assessment

The [College Readiness Assessment](#) tool provides information on definitions, potential benefits, and preparations for coaching, as well as a planning guide for colleges to engage coaches. Survey participants considered it “very” useful on a Likert scale (from not useful to slightly, moderately, very, or extremely useful). One coach said, “This tool is helpful when preparing to work with a college as a coach, in particular to help to frame questions with ‘what,’ ‘why,’ and ‘how.’”

A Center leader described how the tool is useful in helping colleges prepare to participate in coaching and for coaches to facilitate conversations:

“We used it during the onboarding process for colleges in our third [state] pathways cohort. The college teams reported they found the tool useful for

helping them not only assess their readiness for coaching but to also spur conversations with their colleagues.... Our coaches utilized the tool results as a jumping-off point during initial meetings with college teams.”

To raise awareness for colleges about the various ways to use a coach, one Center leader adapted this tool to their state context and created a promotional resource guidebook on their website.

Coaching for More Equitable Student Outcomes

A [suite of equity-focused tools](#) and two briefs were developed to help coaches and Centers be catalysts for change toward more equitable student outcomes. The [Coaching for More Equitable Student Outcomes](#) brief argues that the purpose of organizational change in guided pathways and other comprehensive college reform efforts should be focused on closing equity gaps. This brief was the most commented on by survey participants, who said they found it “very” useful.

One coach described how the suite of tools helped in their equity work:

“What I appreciate about all of the resources is that they give me another language and other ways [to start conversations with colleges]. For example, we’re all talking about [diversity, equity, and inclusion] now and what that actually means. How can we get some clarity and specificity around that very broad concept? How can we frame it out...?”

Regarding the equity tools, a Center leader said:

“[They have been] really beneficial to explain how equity can be embedded in coaching and really use that as an opportunity to give it its own space because it's such an important topic.”

They added that using the equity tools to support coaches’ learning with something tangible to read through deepens understanding of how to apply these practices to coaching.

Rubric for Equity-Minded Coaching

The tool with the highest usefulness rating, “extremely” useful, is the [Rubric for Equity-Minded Coaching](#). The tool draws awareness to coaching domains and coaching practices that can advance equity-driven inquiry, dialogue, and decision-making within campus-wide reform efforts. Its two companion pieces are the [Glossary of Terms](#), which offers a common language,

and [Equity-Minded Dos and Don'ts](#), which serves as a synthesis of the rubric's main points. Both were found to be either “very” or “extremely” useful.

Participants described how they used the [Rubric of Equity-Minded Coaching Domains and Practices](#) tool for their own growth and to facilitate conversations at their institutions. A Center leader shared:

“I love this tool and have encouraged coaches to use it as a personal reflection on their equity journey. I really like how it reveals where you are in each domain, which can be quite different. It serves a useful purpose as a personal learning guide.”

A coach also commented:

“This tool helped me frame conversations around equity-minded practices at the schools I've been working with.”

Another Center leader appreciated the [Glossary of Terms](#), as “a good glossary is always handy.” They noted that the tool can be used by coaches on its own and that it “is a good tool to build a common language with coaches and colleges” as well as for “level setting.” The Center leader appreciated the [Equity-Minded Coaching Dos and Don'ts](#) tool, noting that “this short, two-page guide [helps] to keep coaching conversations on track.” A coach from New York said of the tool, “this is a great resource for accessing quick reminders as you prepare for meetings.”

Other Ways Tools Support Coaching

A Center leader summarized that the tools save time and funds in that leadership doesn't have to “re-create the wheel” for a “high quality...easy and simple-to-use” array of coaching tools and resources. The tools are valuable given that Centers can adapt them to suit their needs and share the coaching message. Creating them from scratch would be challenging and, in some cases, not possible.

For example, a Center leader said the evidence-based equity tools made it possible to create a coaching equity training series by pairing the tools with active learning exercises. It was easy to develop a course from the tools and incorporate the course into the Center's professional development work. “It's a huge time-savings. It's huge,” they said, noting that the tools described in this brief and others in the toolbox have become integral components of professional development in ongoing coach trainings. The tools provide coaches with an

“understanding of the different ways in which they can then use their coaching skills to support colleges.”

When thinking about how they applied these tools, one coach said:

“There's a richness in the level and depth of topics covered. Everything from 'here's how to organize yourself' to 'think about this big topic in small chunks.' [CCRI] uses language that is accessible and...wasn't in my suite of rhetorical strategies, so it helps me think through new ways of talking about topics.”

The coach shared how the tools helped their development as a coach and how they applied to the colleges they coach. The tools “alerted me to interdependencies” and “widened my own lens” of things to be aware of and look for on campuses.

We heard from coaches and Center leadership that the SSCN coaching tools helped facilitate conversations with colleges; provided strategies, framing, and language for elevating equity issues; and created structure for guided reflections on one’s own equity journey (integral to being an equity-minded coach) and level setting around equity language. Ultimately, ready-to-use tools that build coaching skills and knowledge save Center leadership time in aiding coaches. From this distillation, the connection between training on and using these tools surfaced as particularly salient to increasing coaching effectiveness.

Lesson Learned: Training Matters

We see a relationship between training provided and tool usage, as the tools that were most used were also those on which JFF and CCRI provided ongoing training for the SSCN: the [College Readiness Assessment](#), the [Rubric of Equity-Minded Coaching Domains and Practices](#) (with companion resources [Glossary of Terms](#) and [Equity-Minded Coaching Dos and Don'ts](#)), and the brief [Coaching for More Equitable Outcomes](#). This highlights the importance of receiving ongoing, iterative reminders that the tools exist as well as recurring training on how to use the tools for coaches and coaching programs. Additionally, the different stages of a developing coaching program will be best served by specific tools for that phase along with the guidance on how to use those tools. This section describes what we heard from coaches and Center leadership on the important ties between training and tool use to enhance coaching.

Recurring trainings serve two strategies, the first being that facilitated time spent with a new tool will increase the understanding of how to use and apply it. Offering more trainings creates more opportunities for coaches who have full schedules to find one they can attend. The second,

just-in-time learning, was noted by one Center's executive director: "You need it when you need it; otherwise, you forget." A coach offered their thoughts on timing for tool usefulness depending on the coach and college needs:

"What made the tools I used have a stickiness to them? Maybe that the tool made sense to the content when it was introduced and I connected it to where the campus was at a particular time. And during a training, if [the presenters] were talking about something that wasn't relevant at that time, I likely wouldn't remember."

As coaches learn the foundations of being an institutional coach and put into practice the new knowledge and skills, an opportunity opens to build on that base through layering new concepts and advancing one's coaching craft. The above coach also shared:

"I do seek out tools and want to elevate their use to the campus I'm working with.... I think that [increasing tool use] could change over time as my own comfort level with coaching increases. I'll likely bring in other tools, since I've now absorbed the foundational learning of coaching."

Training provides invaluable opportunities to practice coaching conversations by role-playing, as described by one Center leader:

"The racial equity role-playing exercise at one of the trainings was really helpful. The different roles gave [coaches] a chance to think about how they would start the conversation and talk about it. [The experience] gave the coaches a chance to practice and say it out loud, so it became easier. Being able to say it out loud was so important."

The key takeaways from survey participants are that people need reminders about tools—that they are available and how they can be used. The above Center leader reinforces this, saying that "the combination of showing us how to use *plus* periodic reminders the tools are there is a useful multipronged strategy." They offered a concluding thought on the trainings:

"The different trainings and webinars provided through the coaching grant were helpful to get the broader picture and to engage with colleagues across the country. That's important—you get too insular if you only talk to yourselves."

When strategizing about ways for others to understand the tools' usefulness, the Center leader noted that based on their experience, the tools can be applied more broadly than just for guided pathways coaching.

“We're all grappling with the equity conversations and how to get our colleges to use data and to really have those hard [racial equity] conversations.... This is stuff that we all can utilize, and so maybe just broadening it out a little bit and then letting people know that it's there, showing them what it is and how they could use it.”

Conclusion

Whether a Center is new to coaching, wants to start a program, or continue to refine and build an existing one, these tools offer impactful levers to Centers using coaching as a capacity-building strategy. They provide a structure for coaches to gain skills and deepen their coaching practice, as well as for colleges to learn how to use a coach. The tools are shared resources, accessible to everyone in the SSCN, and weave in guidance and training to support the change process with an equity focus. Recognizing the vast benefits of coaches as agents of institutional change, we hope this brief provides an understanding of the usefulness of the tools available to the SSCN to support state-based coaching programs.

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