



City Year AmeriCorps members are student success coaches

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Education

National

City Year has served communities and young people for more than three decades. During that time, we have evolved and grown from a small service organization founded in Boston in 1988 to a national education nonprofit working in 29 U.S. cities.

A big part of our journey has been shaped by what [City Year AmeriCorps](#) members and school-based staff have experienced and learned while serving in thousands of classrooms across the country. [Our approach](#) has also been influenced and refined by working with school and research partners to develop more effective ways to support student and school success, grounded in the [science of how children learn and develop](#), while striving to advance educational equity.

More recently, we've described our corps as "[student success coaches](#)" to better communicate the holistic nature of their training and service (offering students integrated academic and social-emotional support throughout the school day) and how they connect with and build positive relationships with students.

We also worked with Intentional Futures to better understand and describe the [six components](#) or "[drivers](#)" of a student success program.

"Our approach aims to help students make sense of their educational journey as it relates to their aspirations, their own potential, and the young adults they want to become," said City Year Chief Transformation Officer Stephanie Wu, "which prepares them for opportunities and to have quality life choices as adults."

While the term is not unique to City Year, we are the largest provider of student success coaches in the U.S. That said, we know the term isn't always well known and education jargon can be frustrating. So, we thought we'd describe what "student success coach" means to us and why we believe more schools could benefit from having more student success coaches in classrooms across the country, even if those schools aren't part of City Year's network.





Student success coach: What it means to coach students

To City Year, the word “coach” or “coaching” conveys several distinct yet interconnected components that are crucial to City Year’s holistic approach and the work of student success coaches: proximity, relationships, trust, agency and equity. We’ll briefly explore each one.



Learn more about [City Year’s Whole School, Whole Child services](#).

BEING PROXIMATE

A coach is close to the people they are guiding and supporting and sees them on a regular, if not daily, basis. Coaches often get to know the likes and dislikes of the people on their team, their habits and strengths, and their spoken and unspoken beliefs, as well as gain insight into their everyday lives and friendships—knowledge that can only be gleaned by spending a lot of time together while carefully listening, supporting and observing, with empathy.

This is similar to how student success coaches get to know their students. They serve in schools full-time as tutors, mentors and role models. They see students consistently—when they arrive to school, as they work in the classroom, walking through the hallways on the way to lunch and during afterschool enrichment programs. They work with individual students, small groups and whole classrooms every day over the course of an academic year. The closer they are, the more coaches learn, the more empathy they develop, and the more they understand the viewpoints and lived experience of their students.

We’re inspired by [Equal Justice Initiative](#) founder and CEO Bryan Stevenson’s [call to be proximate](#) to the people and communities we serve—a priority for every good coach.

FORGING RELATIONSHIPS

Coaches understand the power of relationships—between themselves and players, among teammates, even between the team and the outside world. A good athletic coach, for example, knows how to inspire and support their team’s growth and development, on both individual and whole-team levels. A coach also knows when to stay silent or step back and allow their team to lead and even stumble. Everything the team does out on the playing field and the locker room depends on the human connections they have forged with one another.

Student success coaches operate in much the same way. By being proximate and showing up for students day in and day out, genuine connections begin to form. Students know they can count on the consistent, stable and caring presence of these coaches as part of their school experience.

Student success coaches learn how to forge “[developmental relationships](#)” with the students they serve, which Search Institute describes as “helping young people be and become their best selves.”

BUILDING TRUST

While being proximate enables initial connections, trust is the transformational ingredient in any strong and positive relationship. That’s why coaches spend so much time and effort on earning their players’ respect and on trust-building exercises among teammates—without trust, victory is

far less assured on the playing field.

Gaining, earning and safeguarding the trust and respect of students are equally necessary for a student success coach to effectively support their academic and social-emotional learning.

[Learning happens through relationships](#) and trust is an essential component of social-emotional skill building that helps students to thrive in school and in life.

In fact, research shows that learning and development are maximized when students feel safe and cared for in a nurturing [developmental](#) environment —what we often refer to as a [whole child approach](#).

HONORING AND ENABLING AGENCY

All the coaching in the world amounts to little if a team cannot act, if players can't exercise their full talent and potential, if an athlete doesn't feel empowered. A good coach strives to build the confidence of their team; strengthen their muscles and resilience; refine their skills; and position them to excel.

Student success coaches share these same goals as they help to encourage and guide student academic, social and emotional growth. They tap into students' intrinsic motivation, helping students to identify their passions and interests, rebound after setbacks, and exercise positive action and agency—a belief that they can affect the world around them and blaze their own trail. Student success coaches can help to elevate student voice.



Explore a [toolkit for mentors](#) that helps students to develop a "growth mindset".

While data on student academic achievement has been scarce during the pandemic, we can glean how students have been feeling through student surveys similar to one piloted at a City Year site on the West Coast^[1], which sought to capture student experiences with AmeriCorps members and their learning environment during COVID-19.

Eight out of 10 students responded that they felt their corps member, acting as a student success coach:

- Taught them how to self-advocate and ask for help when they needed it.
- Emphasized that it's okay to make mistakes so they can learn from them.
- Helped them understand what went wrong when they make a mistake.
- Considered their ideas while making decisions.

ADVANCING EQUITY

Coaching has many definitions. One is a partnership between coach and player that is designed to support a person in becoming who they want to be by maximizing their skills, strengths and opportunities. A partnership connotes mutuality and a relationship that is transformational for both participants. When done correctly, [coaching can be a powerful tool for advancing equity](#).

"Coaching can build self-awareness for both the coach and the student, empower choice and inspire positive action," said Stephanie Wu. "I believe that coaching is less about teaching and more about learning and developing the innate strengths that every one of us possesses. Key to the concept of coaching is helping to expand a person's sense of self, possibilities and agency."

These definitions also fit our vision of [student success coaches](#). We believe by ensuring that all students—particularly students of color and students growing up in low-income households—have access to the resources, relationships and environments they need to thrive, we can significantly advance educational equity in this country—an outcome that benefits all of us.

A holistic approach that prioritizes and nurtures student academic growth and social-emotional well-being; that honors the experiences, background and strengths of every student; and that

contributes to responsive, relevant, joyful and engaging learning environments are the cornerstones of our vision of student success coaching.

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[1] A student survey was administered at one City Year site in February 2021 with 480 responses in English and seven in Spanish. Survey items included customized questions from Search Institute's Developmental Relationships survey tool and University of Chicago's Cultivate survey tool,

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