

ABSTRACT

STALLINGS, CHARITY QUINN. Examining Alumni and Student Perceptions: A Qualitative Evaluation of an Alumni Career Coaching Program. (Under the direction of Dr. Catherine Sanders).

Mentoring is a common practice in higher education, as it can mitigate post-graduate uncertainties and support students at the university setting. Similarly, career coaching can promote career advancement, as well as personal and professional development, but is often seen in the workplace. Alumni mentoring programs are widely known in higher education, where their effectiveness is rooted in alumni sharing goals, experiences, and viewpoints. Although university alumni-student mentoring programs are expanding, little research has been done to explore alumni participation in these programs to gather perceptions, reflections, and impacts (Dollinger et al., 2019). The College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) Alumni for Student Success (CASS) Career Coaching Program bridges alumni mentoring and career coaching through nine-months of individualized career coaching between one CALs student and CALs alumni. This study utilized semi-structure interviews to collect student and alumni coach perceptions of the program. Throughout literature, few studies detail career coaching programs for students, and no studies have explored career coaching programs through the alumni perspective. Goal setting theory (GST) was the foundation of this study. The following themes surfaced from student interviews: *mentor v. coach*, *term slippage*, *student motivations*, *student perceptions of alumni effectiveness*, and *definitions of success*. Similarly, the following themes surfaced from alumni coach interviews: *mentor v. coach*, *term slippage*, *motivations*, *coach effectiveness*, and *program overview*. This program was the first alumni career coaching program, under the specific construct, to utilize GST; results also aimed to benefit future qualitative GST studies, as quantitative methods dominate GST research (Travers, 2022).

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Examining Alumni and Student Perceptions: A Qualitative Evaluation of an Alumni Career Coaching Program.

by
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DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my parents who have supported me throughout my life and have helped me become the person I am today. Thank you for your unwavering support and for displaying the importance of hard work and dedication needed to reach my dreams. I am where I am right now because of the both of you – I am so blessed and proud to call you Mom and Dad.

This research project is also dedicated to my late grandfather, Larry Stallings (Paw), and late step-grandfather, Louis White (Papa). Both of my grandfathers were pivotal in my life and were always such a huge support system. No matter what sport or event I was involved in, Paw and Papa always demonstrated their love, dedication, and excitement for me.

This project is also dedicated to the 2023/2024 CASS Career Coaching Program cohort. We succeeded in completing the first year of the program together, and I am so grateful for all the great connections I made through interactions with all participants.

BIOGRAPHY

Charity Stallings is a native of Chowan, North Carolina. Charity's involvement in her high school agriculture classes, family garden, county extension office, and 4-H sparked her interest in working collaboratively with agriculture and people. During Charity's undergraduate career at NC State, she participated in NC State Club Softball, Agronomy Club, and YF&R, as well as attending all sporting events and interning as a Peer Career Coach (PCC). It was her internship with CALS Academic Programs as a PCC that helped her land her graduate assistantship with CALS Academic Programs. Upon graduating in 2023, Charity returned to NC State that same year to pursue her Master of Science degree in Agriculture and Extension Education and spearhead the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program in the Academic Programs office. Extending her experiences by working with programming, students, and alumni kindled her love for higher education and promoting student success. Charity plans to enter the field of higher education in an agriculture university/college upon completion of her degree.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

What would our society look like without the influence of people who are well-experienced? Where would we find ourselves if we lacked an individual who provided knowledgeable advice to aid our journey towards a career? Our society is in need of mentors to address the challenges we face every day - university systems rely on the support of alumni more than ever before to enhance student success (Kurian & Nair, 2023). For many young adults, the first year following college graduation can bring exciting times. This year is accompanied by various imaginations about a big future, low commitments, and abundant possibilities that often result in a positive phase of life for recent graduates (Martin et al., 2022). Despite this, these young adults often face professional difficulties during the transition from college to a career (Schriver & Teske, 2020). Issues arise because recent graduates are unable to meet professional expectations, they set for themselves (Martin et al., 2022). Gaining mentorship opportunities from someone experienced in a desired field can increase retention rates among less experienced individuals in the same field (Nesbitt et al., 2022). Mentorship has been identified as a way that the more experienced can serve students in the university setting (Goh & Kim, 2023).

A similar strategy for career assistance is career coaching. Career coaching involves a collaborative relationship between a coach and coachee, where performance improvement (Lai, 2015) and professional or personal development outcomes are attained (Grant et al., 2010). Career coaching encompasses professional development and solution-focused orientation (Yates, 2019). Career coaching is seen as a positive option by increasing career optimism through clarifying career goals (Yates, 2019). Former research illustrates that career coaches serve “clients” to meet various career goals (Yates, 2019). Career coaches are professionals who

provide career expertise to individuals or groups, often consulting with the business or industry (Hambly & Bomford, 2018). Career coaching is often short-term and development-based, which is a differing aspect when compared to mentoring (Lai, 2015).

Mentoring has long played a role in successful educational programs (Morey et al., 2023). Mentors have continuously contributed to setting realistic career goals, building motivation and confidence, and preparing students for the ebbs and flows of professional life (Martin et al., 2022). Alumni mentoring programs have risen in popularity in the university setting (Dollinger et al., 2019). Universities see alumni as a wealth of knowledge because of the path they once walked in college (Skrypek et al., 2022). In fact, research suggests that experiences of current students can be improved by alumni mentoring, because these individuals previously walked that same path of these students (Abney, 2020). Certain alumni mentoring programs follow an informal approach, where the mentoring relationship is offered, lacking formal structure, regular scheduling, specific requirements, or set expectations. Conversely, other programs prefer a formal approach, where visible structure, specific expectations, support, and resources are provided (Ko & Zhadko, 2023). A formal approach was facilitated in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) Alumni for Student Success (CASS) Career Coaching Program and followed a similar pathway as the program is set to fulfill a successful first year - this program is the focus of the following thesis study.

While mentoring and coaching seem to be utilized interchangeably, there are noticeable similarities and differences that support the idea that mentoring and coaching are vastly different (Lai, 2015; Yates, 2019). Career coaching is short-term and development-based, which differs from mentoring (Grant et al., 2010). Mentoring is more people-oriented where in some cases, no specific goal for outcome measurement is present. For this reason, mentorship results in a longer-

term process (Lai, 2015). In contrast, career coaching is goal-oriented, where it is essential for coachee's career interests and core values to be explored throughout the coaching process (Grant et al., 2010). While coaching involves shared experiences, mentoring relationships form without shared experiences and technical knowledge necessary to benefit participants (Lai, 2015). Naturally, mentoring presents itself at a higher yield in academia, specifically higher education (Goh & Kim, 2023). Formal mentoring in academia has proven to be effective in receiving career guidance, assistance on career-related skill development, and necessary support for student goals (Skrypek et al., 2022). Similarly, mentoring and coaching benefit academia and the professional world in unique ways and have been identified as necessary to establish the new generation of leaders (Barnes & Gearin, 2022). Benefits of both approaches are important in career development and highlight the significance of relationships but are utilized in different ways depending on the desired outcome of the coachee, client, or mentee (Grant et al., 2015; Lai, 2015). Nonetheless, it is evident that higher education has utilized the mentorship method resourcefully by incorporating alumni participation (Nesbitt et al., 2022).

Alumni mentoring programs benefit university students by providing a diverse and resourceful wealth of knowledge (Skrypek et al., 2022). Literature suggests that alumni mentoring programs shed a positive light on students who choose to participate (Dollinger et al., 2019). Alumni mentoring programs both foster student learning experiences through development and bridge to a future career (Vieregger & Bryant, 2020). In fact, research suggests that student participation in an alumni mentoring program resulted in job security, pre-graduation contentment, and higher job satisfaction compared to non-participants (Dollinger et al., 2019). Vieregger and Bryant (2020) demonstrated that participants gained confidence, employability skills, and professional networks through an alumni mentorship program (Vieregger & Bryant,

2020). In addition, studies have shown that student participants often express the sharing of alumni experiences in academia and the workforce fostered career discernment, along with researching career opportunities, and written individual reflections (Egan et al., 2021; Larsson et al., 2022).

Alumni mentoring programs also benefit alumni who choose to volunteer time towards developing students (Kurian & Nair, 2023). Alumni mentoring programs allow alums to reconnect with their alma mater and give back to the college (Skrypek et al., 2022). Literature suggests that an alumni's experiences in college influences post-graduation participation in university donations and university sponsored events, illustrating that alumni who participate had a positive college experience. This illustrates the significance of understanding alumni identities, roles, and subjective experiences in congruence with engagement behavior as these alums participate in the program (Goh & Kim, 2023). Alumni mentoring programs provide a range of opportunities for alumni to cater to their profession and reconnect with their college, increasing a sense of satisfaction (Skrypek et al., 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The current study was guided by goal setting theory (GST) due to the programmatic outcomes of goal setting, goal striving, and goal attainment behaviors. For the purposes of this study, goal setting involves a confident, committed, and motivated person who takes action towards reaching an intended outcome (Eckhoff & Weiss, 2020). Goal setting theory is one of the most popular and influential theories utilized for motivation and performance (Travers et al., 2015). Goal setting theory embodies setting specific goals, establishing goals that are challenging, remaining committed to the goal, facilitating feedback, and considering task complexity (Locke & Latham, 2006; Sorrentino, 2007). Setting specific, challenging goals are

significant as it enables direction and motivates towards performance attainment (Locke & Latham, 2019). Overall, individuals were more committed to goals when the connection between goal and performance is strongest (Locke & Latham, 2002). In a mentorship setting, mentors collaborate with mentee to develop goals that are not only specific, but tailored, challenging, and attainable (Sorrentino, 2007). Having tailored goals insinuate that defined goals are significant to the individual, thus higher self-efficacy and commitment. Facilitating further goal commitment involves “a) factors that make goal attainment important to people, including the importance of the outcomes that they expect as a result of working to attain a goal, and (b) their belief that they can attain the goal (self-efficacy)” (Locke & Latham, 2002, p. 707). Locke and Latham (2007) explained that incorporating goal setting provides learning opportunities for success, as it provides visuals, structure, and aids in implementing goals that aim to reach the larger perspective.

Review of the Literature

This study sought to understand the extent to which the alumni career coaching program impacts student and alumni participants. The study’s research questions aimed to evaluate student and alumni perceptions, as well as evaluate the collegiate-level career coaching program, through participant perceptions of mentorship and coaching, alumni as coaches, and the overall program, as well as motivations to participate. The purpose of this chapter is to review literature that provides a more comprehensive understanding of the study and how it pertains to the research questions. This literature review was divided into the following sections: coaching in higher education, mentorship in higher education, evaluating coaching and mentorship programs in higher education, and goal setting theory. This study aims to situate career coaching in higher

education under a mentorship construct that incorporates goal setting theory for guidance. Goal setting theory serves as the theoretical framework for this study.

Coaching in Higher Education

There are many different definitions of coaching, but for the purposes of this study, coaching is defined as the “collaborative relationship formed between coach and coachee for the purpose of attaining professional or personal development outcomes which are valued by the coachee” (Grant et al., 2010, p. 3). Career coaching has been identified as a beneficial tool in the workforce, increasing job satisfaction, commitment, and other measures associated with job performance (Fontes & Russo, 2020). In fact, most illustrate that the purpose of coaching is to improve workforce performance or well-being through learning (Lai, 2015). In work-based career coaching scenarios, coaches often refer to their coachees or mentees as “clients,” exhibiting a professional form of career coaching (Yates, 2019). For this reason, there are few studies that focus on career coaching in higher education settings under specific parameters.

Within the realm of higher education, career coaching is often utilized for overall career development for post-graduates, used in correlation with academic advising for undergraduate students for post-graduation preparation, or for professional development (Otu & Omeje, 2021; Tudor, 2018). For most students, career coaching has led to positive outcomes, especially for results and behaviors among individuals undergoing coaching (Fontes & Russo, 2020). As graduates enter the workforce, programs like career coaching can help reduce the chance of experiencing unemployment due to fostering skills that are highly desired by future employers (Otu & Omeje, 2021). This illustrates that career coaching in higher education can have a positive impact on recent graduates (Otu & Omeje, 2021).

There is a gap in literature highlighting the benefits of career coaching programs for students enrolled in universities. While some studies indicate college student career coaching involves workforce preparation (van der Baan et al., 2025), few studies detail career coaching programs for students, and no studies have explored career coaching programs through the alumni perspective. Previous studies identified career coaching that engages students in goal setting as an effective strategy in promoting self-efficacy and commitment for their future, as well as increased optimism (Fontes & Russo, 2020). Self-efficacy refers to one's belief towards capacity to achieve certain tasks, which is increased by effective career coaching (van der Baan et al., 2025; Sorrentino, 2007). Effective coaching prepares students for the significant transition of education to the workplace, which is done through support of set career goals (van der Baan et al., 2025). Setting goals through career coaching is important because it allows students to remain attentive to the task at hand, which is necessary for commitment towards goal achievement (Sorrentino, 2007). To sustain successful career coaching programs and relationships, coaching programs often includes: "(1) the coachee setting goals with the help of the coach; and (2) the coach questioning, challenging, and providing feedback to the coachee that would facilitate reflection and insight into his/her strengths and barriers, ultimately helping the coachee to find paths towards goals" (Fontes & Russo, 2020, p. 459). Coaches are available in these coaching constructs to ensure goals are set through realistic expectations, necessary goal-oriented skills are fostered, and to ensure that university students are prepared for their future (Hambly & Bomford, 2018; Tudor, 2018). Throughout the literature, concepts such as fostering positive coaching relationships, structuring career coaching processes, and setting specific career goals are essential to contemporary coaching and practice, which can result in positive coaching outcomes (Lai, 2015).

Mentorship in Higher Education

Mentorship opportunities present themselves in diverse settings, within various mentor and mentee relationships, and can be established for different mentee needs (Deng et al., 2021; Marcellino, 2011). In addition, for the purposes of the current study, the mentorship definition is as follows: “mentoring is focused on the growth and accomplishments of an individual and may include several forms of assistance and broad forms of support (academic, professional, career); it is personal and reciprocal” (Law et al., 2020). Mentoring within a workplace setting is common and has expanded to 70% of Fortune 500 companies adopting and offering formal mentorship programs (Deng et al., 2021). Similar to career coaching, workplace mentoring often embodies career advancement and professional development (Ayyala et al., 2019). However, in contrast with career coaching, mentorship and mentoring programs are more widely utilized within higher education and have been identified as an effective tool for positive career outcomes in students, improved self-efficacy, and stronger commitment towards goals (D’Abate & Eddy, 2008; Morey et al., 2023; Sorrentino, 2007). Within mentorship programs in higher education, positive outcomes have resulted from programs that follow a strategic plan, where support, training, purposeful participant pairing, and continuous evaluation has been present (D’Abate & Eddy, 2008). This posits the importance of the mentor through the strategic planning approach of providing advice, feedback, and coaching strategies for student development (Ayyala et al., 2019).

Alumni mentoring programs are known to positively impact student development, within career growth, opportunities, career support, and other factors among students who participate (Kurian & Nair, 2023). Mentoring involves a relationship that is developmental, enhancing both individual growth and advancement through strategies the mentor utilizes (Lambert et al., 2010).

University alumni can easily encourage these relationships, as they are able to acquire common perceptions, goals, and even worldviews between themselves and their mentee (Abney, 2020). Research suggests that student participants in an alumni mentorship program advance academic competencies, career-related skills, and self-confidence (Skrypek, 2022). A study in a university business capstone course incorporated an alumni mentoring program into this capstone course to facilitate student-mentor engagement (Vieregger & Bryant, 2020). Survey results indicated that mentorship and alumni-engaging activities were perceived as an innovative learning strategy for students; results of this student-alumni mentoring program also encouraged the university to urge business students to become more involved with business professionals (Vieregger & Bryant, 2020). Results of this study illustrated the significance of alumni mentorship with current students in the same field, and how alumni mentoring programs can foster positive perceptions and commitment within students towards a career (Dollinger et al., 2019; Kurian & Nair, 2023).

The utilization of alumni mentoring programs, within the scope of the presented study and others, represents the significance of strategic participant matching to effectively allow for development of explicit career goals and expectations within the student (Skrypek et al., 2022). Providing structure through goal setting allows for facilitation of realistic and understood expectations and has been known to increase the likelihood of outcomes that are successful (Abney, 2020; Martin et al., 2022). However, while alumni participation in mentorship programs is often successful, many mentorship programs in higher education do not partner with alumni associations or other areas with a strong alumni presence (Abney, 2020). Lack of resourceful alumni presents fewer opportunities for these students to build trusting relationships and effective mentorship experiences with individuals who share the same alma mater (Larsson et al., 2022). Likewise, similar alumni-student mentoring programs have become more popular in the

university setting, but very little research has explored student and alumni participation within these programs to discover personal and individualized impacts (Dollinger et al., 2019).

Although there are fewer mentorship programs partnering with alumni associations, they are just as important as the more widely established programs (Abney, 2020). Establishing more university alumni mentoring programs may be essential for fostering self-efficacy, commitment, and motivation within students, providing them with a new sense of purpose when working towards their future career goals (Morey et al., 2023; Sorrentino, 2007).

Goal Setting Theory

GST has been identified as an effective tool for achieving goals through precise self-regulation, feedback, goal motivation, and goal setting (Komarraju et al., 2010; Travers et al., 2015). GST remains an effective method for performance or goal attainment, as it requires persistence, effort, and choices that result from identifying specific, high goals (Latham et al., 2008). A high goal, which is also specific in regard to goal setting theory, involves setting goals that are meant to be more difficult, as they lead to higher performance and persistence until goal attainment is reached (Latham et al., 2008). The main components of GST include advancement of goal setting, motivation and commitment, and self-efficacy (Gyepi-Garbrah et al., 2023; Locke & Latham, 2002). Students who implement goal setting encompassing specificity and complexity tend to perform and reach intended career goals at higher levels compared to students who lack goal setting (Friedman & Mandel, 2010).

A study by Sorrentino (2007) examined the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) Mentoring Program at the College of Staten Island, where GST was incorporated into the program. While not in an alumni or career development-based environment, the SEEK Program applied the foundation of GST to allow students to establish specific, modified,

challenging, and attainable goals towards their academics (Sorrentino, 2007). GST epitomized the significance of students stepping towards goal attainment as they made strategic plans for their future (van der Baan et al., 2024). In fact, developing these necessary plans or steps to facilitate goal attainment allows for feedback and reflection, which are necessary for deciding on goal attainment strategies (van der Baan et al., 2024; Camp, 2017). Qualitative results from the study illustrated increased commitment, self-efficacy, grade point average, and understanding of goal significance (Sorrentino, 2007). This study provided new insights into the successes of GST when utilized within higher education mentorship programs and may be essential for gaining cognizance of GST within our program.

The GST was selected for the theoretical framework to evaluate the CASS Career Coaching Program as the program allowed students to create specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely, and challenging goals with the assistance of a mentor/coach (Sorrentino, 2007; Weintraub et al., 2021). This is significant because students are more likely to increase their efforts while working towards more meaningful and challenging goals (Dobronyi et al., 2019). GST has paved a way for students to become more motivated to achieve career goals due to the goal setting process and fulfillment of goal attainment (Komarraju et al., 2010). This program was the first alumni career coaching program, under the specific construct, to utilize GST; results also aimed to benefit future qualitative GST studies, as quantitative methods dominate GST research (Travers, 2022).

Evaluating Coaching and Mentoring Programs in Higher Education

In higher education, evaluation of mentorship-based programs often involves evaluation measures that are formative and summative (Marcellino, 2011). Mentorship programs continuously evolve, and higher education typically lacks capacity for evaluating perspectives

and outcomes of students with a broader purpose in mind, such as going beyond evaluating students only for certain behaviors including teacher effectiveness (Nesbitt et al., 2022).

However, purposeful structure and application of lessons learned in mentorship evaluation is essential for ensuring the success of mentorship programs (D'Abate & Eddy, 2008). A study by Wolf and Brenning (2023) evaluated the impact a STEM mentorship program had on women within a university. Researchers intentionally formulated a questionnaire that would assess how mentorship influenced participants' academic and future careers in their field short-term, by looking at aspects such as self-efficacy and gender stereotypes, immediately following the program, providing structure that was necessary for sufficient evaluation and gathering of evidence (Wolf & Brenning, 2023). Patchy results, regarding internal and external factors, such as personal attitudes and exogenous events, of participants in this study, illustrated the need for structure and evaluation appraisals when evaluating these mentorship programs (Marcellino, 2011; Wolf & Brenning, 2023).

Utilizing qualitative methods is one way to improve the structure of mentorship program evaluations. Qualitative assessments, such as interviews, allow program facilitators to evaluate individual perceptions, characteristics, and outcomes (Deng et al., 2022). Within most mentorship studies, the majority tend to be mixed methods or quantitative (Sorrentino, 2007). In fact, regarding mentorship programs and the construct of Sorrentino's (2007) research study, quantitative methods tend to dominate. However, qualitative studies allow for a more individualized perspective that allows for deeper understanding of participant participation (Jiang et al., 2022; Marcellino, 2011). Literature suggests the need for more qualitative studies that not only address mentorship programs in higher education, but programs that utilize alumni mentorship (Skrypek et al., 2022).

Literature Review Summary and Gaps

Facilitation of alumni mentorship programs in higher education is important for not only the student participants, but for the agricultural industry and stakeholders who benefit from this formal program, such as future employers. While much is known about higher education mentorship programs, little is known about career coaching in higher education under a mentorship construct that incorporates goal setting theory for guidance. In addition, there are fewer studies involving qualitative assessments of alumni mentorship programs. Thus, the current study presents a novel program model incorporating the concepts of mentorship, coaching, and goal setting, the CASS Career Coaching Program. Intended implications of the study are to provide academic and professional institutions with enhanced information about an alumni career coaching program under a mentorship lens through perceptions of alumni and student participants in the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program. Data collected aims to foster a better understanding through their perceptions, while also aiding with evaluating the program.

This study aims to fill the gap between understanding perceptions of alumni and student participants and their involvement in the CASS Career Coaching Program, utilizing goal setting theory combined with alumni involvement. To build upon disparate but successful mentoring and coaching models to contribute to new models of career coaching approaches in higher education. Being cognizant of common evaluations of these programs is significant, with the understanding that more qualitative approaches are needed in alumni mentorship program studies (Skrypek et al., 2022).

Program Overview

The CASS Career Coaching Program is an NC State University facilitated by CALS Academic Programs, funded through the NC Agricultural Foundation. The CASS Career Coaching Program matched one CALS alumni with one CALS student for one academic year of career coaching. Participants were matched in congruence with experiences, majors, career interests, demographics, gender, and other defining characteristics. All students who participate in the program signed up approximately one month prior to the program and are considered coachees. For the purposes of this study, students and coachees will be used interchangeably but refer to the same group. CALS alumni participants, similarly, were recruited by an interest survey or other outreach method and are considered the (alumni) coaches in the program. Prior to starting the coaching process, alumni coaches and coachees were required to attend one training session together to meet one another, collaborate with ideas, set career goals, and discuss their future in the program. Virtual training sessions provided participants with the opportunity to engage with program expectations, ask questions, and directly work with their coach or coachee in individual breakout sessions. The main objective of this program was to allow alumni career coaches to work cooperatively with their coachees to help them develop a specific career goal that they want to achieve by the end of the program. The SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time bound) Goals method was used to establish goals, and an action plan was created to foster goal-striving and goal-achievement (Weintraub et al., 2021). This program was offered fully online, providing an opportunity for more participation. While online programming can have its downfalls, such as lower digital and technological literacy, an online environment allowed participants in the CASS Career Coaching Program to share thoughts, provide feedback, and increase communication efforts, as outlined by other scholars Morey et

al., 2023). These characteristics were enabled by the online environment, as the majority of participants lacked the ability to meet in-person with their coach or coachee. An online format was chosen to overcome the distance barriers and give participants an opportunity to make engagement plans to allow for a process feasible for all participants. Participants were given options of using Zoom, email, and other forms of communications they were comfortable with to create an environment to share thoughts, provide feedback, and increase communication efforts. Many of our program participants resided in different counties and states, making digital interactions the preferred method of program delivery. Providing opportunities for students to practice digital literacy skills to meet the growing technological advancements of academia and the workforce was an additional consideration of the online program.

While this program was considered a career coaching program, there were also significant mentoring aspects. This program encompassed both coaching and mentoring through one-on-one mentorship (Yates, 2019), but there are several ways that the CASS Career Coaching Program embodied both approaches simultaneously. The CASS Career Coaching Program remained people-focused (Lai, 2015), where the coachee increased self-esteem by exploring personal values and goals within the scope of their own competencies and provided resources (Nielson & Biswas-Diener, 2010). The coach facilitated this process through active listening, inquiry, challenging the coachee, and supplying necessary support (Devine et al., 2006). In addition, coach and coachee pairs (teams) shared common goals, experiences, and perceptions, as each pair is matched with these assumptions in mind (Abney, 2020). In essence, the overall objective of this pairing was to allow for goal setting, goal striving, and goal attainment of coachees in the program (Green et al., 2006). The process of goal attainment involved identifying outcomes that are desirable, creating goals that are specific, advancing motivation and building self-efficacy,

identifying resources, establishing an action plan, evaluating progress, and considering feedback as pairs move forward (Grant et al., 2010). A coach's ability to facilitate the goal attainment process can be significant, because the coach-coachee relationship can clarify personal goals and solution generation for coachees that experience higher self-efficacy coaches (Nielson & Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Self-efficacy is the judgment of one's own capabilities to organize and execute actions necessary to attain a certain outcome (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1977). Research on student self-efficacy in the last decade has increased, looking specifically at academic motivation and achievement (Artino, 2012). Research suggests that the majority of individuals overestimate their abilities to perform in academia; however, this overestimation can result in more effort and persistence in academic performance (Artino, 2012; Bandura, 1986). Additionally, self-efficacy relates to the level to which the designated goal is attainable by the individual (Artino, 2012). Goals that are lofty and out of reach results in lower self-efficacy (Artino, 2012). Individuals with higher self-efficacy tend to result in more commitment towards that goal, better goal attainment strategies, and positive responses to negative feedback (Artino, 2012). Collectively, reasonable goal setting helps increase self-efficacy and higher self-efficacy increases commitment (Artino, 2012).

The interchangeability between coaching and mentoring characteristics embodies the reasoning behind the structure of the CASS Career Coaching Program. After the similarities and differences of mentorship and coaching were considered thoroughly, it is important to understand that the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program was a short-term, goal-oriented coaching program that more closely followed a mentorship model. These alumni career coaches, or mentors, provided guidance and encouragement to achieve student

ambitions, large and small, which was key to facilitating a successful coaching relationship (Kurian, & Nair, 2023). Successful relationships in the mentorship process fostered goal achievement, identifying key trends in student and alumni perspectives of the program prior to the evaluation process.

Statement of the Problem

Limited research is available on both student and alumni perceptions of their involvement in a university career coaching program. While it is suggested that certain career coaching development programs and strategies are effective in the business sector, following a similar path by universities can foster college student success as they plan for their future career. Additionally, there are few studies on university alumni career coaching programs (Abney, 2020). The adoption of alumni career coaching programs aimed to aid higher education, as well as the industry, enabling the comprehension of how alumni of any institution can be a great career coach for their employees (Abney, 2020; Dollinger et al., 2019). In both higher education and industry, students and young employees must take ownership of their career. Alumni career coaches provide support for pro-actively designing a career path (Yates, 2019) and help identify realistic career goals to build confidence and motivation (Martin et al., 2022). Alumni mentoring programs yield higher career growth in students who participate in these programs, as their alumni coach provides a better understanding of the coachee's desired field (Kurian & Nair, 2023). An understanding of alumni and student perceptions of an alumni career coaching program allows university and industry leaders to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of an alumni program, how to adopt a similar program, or improve a current program. This research study evaluated alumni and student perceptions of the CASS Career Coaching Program, as well as the effectiveness of this a pilot alumni career coaching program.

Purpose and Research Questions

The overall purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of student and alumni participants in a pilot alumni career coaching program. This study aimed to allow academic and professional institutions to further comprehend an alumni career coaching program under a mentorship lens through perceptions of alumni and student participants in the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program. Data collected fostered a better understanding through their perceptions, while also aiding with evaluating the program. The research questions were to:

Student Research Questions:

1. Explore student perceptions of mentorship and coaching within the CASS Career Coaching Program.
2. Identify student motivations for participating in the alumni career coaching program.
3. Explore student perceptions of CALS alumni as career coaches.
4. Explore student perceptions of program successes and challenges.

Alumni Research Questions:

5. Explore alumni perceptions of mentorship and coaching within the CASS Career Coaching Program.
6. Identify alumni motivations for participating in the alumni career coaching program.
7. Explore alumni self-perceptions of themselves as career coaches.
8. Explore alumni perceptions of program successes and challenges.

Implications (Significance and Stakeholders)

As results were shared with stakeholders, they were supplied with important perspectives on the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program and how the perceptions may

assist in evaluating the program. CALS at NC State University provided time, funds, and other resources to administer the program, and the results of this study aimed to illustrate the significance of such investments. Aside from the university, the purpose of this research was to also provide information to stakeholders outside the university, including other institutions, the industry, the CALS Alumni and Friends Society, and others who are interested in fostering students and young employees.

Results benefitted the CALS Alumni and Friends Society in evaluating the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program, as well as visualizing their investment. As the creators of the program, the CALS Alumni and Friends Society wanted to ensure that their investments in the program are well advised and successful. Yates (2019) expressed that humans lack the same capabilities used to make acceptable career choices or take action on designed plans. Research shows that college students specifically, across academic achievement levels, career decision status, demographics, and academic years' experience career decision-making challenges (Arbona et al., 2023). Individuals, student or not, that hold confidence, resilience, optimism, and goal setting abilities at a higher level may be more advanced with career related objectives (Yates, 2019). Those who participate in alumni mentoring programs can have higher self-confidence, personal skills, and career-related skills (Skrypek et al., 2022). Alumni career coaches promote students by connecting them with information about a desired career and provide an understanding of career goals (Dollinger et al., 2019). Understanding how alumni and student participants perceive this program is significant because it evaluated how successful the overall CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program was for participants. A key goal of this program was to serve current students in CALS and provide them with an opportunity to take action in aiding their future. This program evaluated success through

perceptions, which stemmed from a goal-setting perspective, focusing on student growth, alumni assistance, role modeling, and goal attainment (Grant et al., 2010).

Further conclusions of this program aim to benefit CALS Academic Programs as well, providing this department with a space to evaluate the program and those involved. CALS Academic Programs fund numerous programs that aim in fostering support, success, and opportunities for all students in the college. Within the scope of internal stakeholders, it is expected that results were of significant value to the Dean and Director of Academic Programs for CALS and the Director of Career Services, as these stakeholders play an important role in program facilitation. In addition, conclusions aimed to inform CALS students and CALS alumni who are not in the program with a better understanding of the program and potentially show interest in participating. Externally, results aimed to advise other academic program departments and current CALS professors how the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program prepares students for attaining a rewarding career, post-graduation. Likewise, further information on the program focused on allowing administrators and facilitators of the program to adjust and refine the program following more research.

Limitations and Assumptions

Limitations:

1. Main results are limited to participants who agreed to take part in the exit interview process. There were many important perspectives not gathered in research data.
2. There is no widely accepted operational definition for mentoring. Similarly, there is no widely operational definition for coaching in the career context.
3. As a virtual program, participants lacked important in-person interactions that could have benefitted student and alumni experiences.

4. Due to various reasons, not all participants proceeded through the whole duration of the program. Thus, certain participants may have felt less obligated to share perceptions due to their experience.
5. Each student and alumni pair in the program endured different duration of involvement in the 2023-2024 program.
6. Due to the study researching the pilot year of the CASS Career Coaching Program, the researcher was unable to generalize.
7. One participant participated in an in-person interview, which could have influenced levels of rapport and how questions were answered.
8. Only one program facilitator, the primary researcher, was involved in this study, which could have inhibited the level of accuracy portrayed in this study.

Assumptions:

1. Each pair participated in the one, academic year program, where expectations were met and the SMART Goals Method was utilized.
2. Participants answered interview questions honestly and with great thought.
3. Not everyone who signed up for the program was fully committed.

Operational Definitions

1. Career Coaching – “aims to support people to purposefully traverse this landscape rather than cling fearfully to the familiar” (Hambly & Bomford, 2018, p. vii).
2. Coaching – “collaborative relationship formed between coach and coachee for the purpose of attaining professional or personal development outcomes which are valued by the coachee” (Grant et al., 2010, p. 3).

3. Mentorship/Mentoring – “mentoring is focused on the growth and accomplishments of an individual and may include several forms of assistance and broad forms of support (academic, professional, career); it is personal and reciprocal” (Law et al., 2020, p. 29).
4. Formal Mentoring – “involve carefully planned and intentional mentoring relationships; expectations of participants; third-party mindful matching; and university support for time, space, and activities” (Law et al., 2020, p. 31).
5. SMART Goals – “mnemonic device most commonly represented as specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time bound” (Weintraub et al., 2021, p. 1).
6. Career – “the varied means by which we express ourselves and participate in society, whether through salaried, community or voluntary work” (Hambly & Bomford, 2018, p.vii).
7. Self-efficacy – “the belief that you can successfully accomplish what you set out to do” (Bandura, 1997).

In regard to this study, coaching and mentoring, coach and coachee, and coachee and mentee will be used interchangeably. This research studies a career coaching program that follows closely with a mentorship model.

Design

The research study used a case study approach as a way to both gain insight into participant perceptions of the CASS Career Coaching Program and to evaluate the program. For a case study, the site selected by the researcher should be chosen, whether that site involves programs, events, activities, process, or others (Creswell, 2016; Maxwell, 2012). A case study is unique, as it allows researchers to go beyond behavior and emotions that are portrayed by participants during data collection, allowing for assertions and interpretations to formulate about the

unconscious processes of the case or those impacted by the case due to prolonged engagement by the researcher (Day, 2010; Grant et al., 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, according to Creswell (2016), a description of the case is a defining feature of a case study. This case was the CASS Career Coaching Program at NC State University, which lasts for one academic year. For this study, the case was the 2023-2024 program. This case focuses on providing a way for CALS students to reach specific career goals with the help of an alumni career coach. The CASS Career Coaching Program intentionally matches one CALS student with one CALS alumni based on various characteristics, including: area of study, experiences, interests, along with others. Each coach and coachee pair use SMART Goals and action plans towards goal attainment at the end of the program. Gaining perceptions on program participants will help formulate patterns to efficiently evaluate the case. Retrospective check-in reflections of participants were gathered and assessed as part of the program and act as a triangulation for data gathered regarding the case. This research design used semi-structured interviews through an exit interview process, which were conducted two months post program completion. The use of the semi-structured interview aims to establish flexibility and conversation between interviewer and interviewee.

Journal Article I

Population

The population included students who participated in the pilot CASS Career Coaching Program cohort during the 2023/2024 academic year. There were 39 total coach/coachee teams at the beginning of the program. Following personal and academic conflicts, 34 teams remained. The population of this study was restricted to the 34 students who completed the program without withdrawing their participation.

Sample

Stratified random sampling was used to collect study participants for this study. Specifically, each coach/coachee pair was placed in one category, ensuring that each coach and coachee would be chosen simultaneously by the randomized generator. Participatory recruitment occurred during Summer 2024, which was an obstacle for student recruitment. Following frequent and consistent stratified random sampling of student participants, only five consented students to participate. Lacking saturation, snowball sampling was introduced to recruit a few more students. Introducing snowball sampling allowed two more coachees to be recruited for the exit interview, where data saturation was reached.

Design and Data Collection

Prior to conducting interviews, the researcher submitted the full interview guide for review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at NC State, where the study received exempt status (Appendix C). Prior to conducting interviews, each participant was sent a recruitment email, where they were directed to thoroughly read the student consent form and reply to the recruitment email (Appendix D). Program participants received follow-up emails and reminders that they had the opportunity to participate in the study. Following consent and joining individual virtual, semi-structured interviews, the researcher initiated the interview process by reading through the student exempt consent form (Appendix E). The researcher utilized the Zoom recording feature, where video and audio recordings were administered. Cameras were left on during interviews to build rapport between participants and the researcher, where video portions were deleted immediately following the interview session. Audio recordings were kept for transcription purposes only. All personal and recognizable information of participants remained confidential and was stored on a CALS computer accessible only to the researcher. The

researcher housed transcripts in a Google Drive folder that remained accessible only to the researcher and the independent reviewer.

Data Analysis

Data collected from semi-structured interviews were exported to a transcription service (Temi) for verbatim transcription. Interviews were rewatched to allow the researcher to take field notes and allow relations among the data to flourish. Thematic analysis, through open and axial coding, was utilized for coding data from participant interviews. Visualizing and creation of themes surfaced following axial coding and peer debriefing. Check-in email responses were used as a data triangulation technique for themes in the data. Check-in emails were a major part of the CASS Career Coaching Program and were voluntarily answered by all who desire to include their input. Triangulating check-in responses with study themes provided unique insights of participants, aiding in researcher interpretation of subsequent interviews results.

Study Limitations

This study is limited to participants who consented to be interviewed by the researcher. Due to this, there are countless significant perspectives that did not surface in the research data. Additionally, several perceptions were unqualified to collect, as not all coaches completed the entirety of the program. This further adds to the small sample size of this study. Each coach/coachee team endured a vastly different time frame of the program, as each team started the program at a different time. Completing the program while still experiencing more or less time in the program can limit the collective experience of some participants. In addition, there are limited in-person interactions available through this program, as the CASS Career Coaching Program is founded in virtuality and flexibility to reach a broader audience. Another limitation involved one in-person interview, upon a participant's specific request. Holding only one in-

person interview could have influenced the levels of rapport developed between participant and researcher, in addition to how questions were answered. Additionally, there is no widely accepted definition for mentoring or career coaching, illustrating the diverse view and common misconceptions of the terms among participants.

Journal Article II

Population

The population included CALS alumni who served as a coach in the 2023/2024 CASS Career Coaching Program cohort, which was during the pilot phase of the program. There were 39 total coach/coachee teams at the start of the program. Following personal and academic conflicts, 34 teams remained. The population of this study was restricted to the 34 alumni coaches who completed the program without withdrawing their participation.

Sample

To sample study participants, stratified random sampling was used. Each coach/coachee team was placed in one category to ensure each team would be chosen simultaneously by the randomized generator. Following consistent outreach, eight alumni coaches participated in the study, where data saturation was attained.

Design and Data Collection

The researcher submitted the full interview guide for review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at NC State prior to conducting interviews, where the study received exempt status (Appendix C). Prior to interviewing study participants, each alumni coach who was participating was sent a recruitment email, where they were directed to thoroughly read the student consent form and reply to the recruitment email (Appendix F). Follow-up emails and reminders were sent to all program participants, granting them the opportunity to participate in the study. After

consent was received and individual interviews began, the researcher initiated the interview process by reading through the student exempt consent form (Appendix G). The Zoom recording feature was used during each interview, where both video and audio recordings were administered. The researcher aimed to build rapport by keeping cameras on during the interview process, where the video portions were immediately deleted following the interview. Audio recordings were used for transcription purposes only. Collectively, personal and identifiable information was kept confidential and was stored in a CALS computer only accessible by the researcher. Research data, including transcripts, was housed in a Google Drive folder that remained accessible only to the researcher and independent reviewer.

Data Analysis

Data collected through participant interviews were exported to a transcription service [Temi] to be transcribed verbatim. The researcher rewatched recordings, allowing for field notes to be taken and relations among the data to emerge. Thematic analysis was used to code data from each semi-structured interview. Specifically, the analysis process immersed the researcher in open and axial coding. Check-in email responses, which were voluntarily answered by program participants, were used as a triangulation technique for themes in the data. Check-in emails were a significant part of the CASS Career Coaching Program, allowing participants to provide their input three different times during the academic year. Triangulation between check-in responses and study themes provided insight of alumni coaches, aiding the researchers in interpreting the subsequent interview results.

Study Limitations

This study is limited to alumni coaches who consented to participate in the study, restricting the number of important perspectives that were collected in the research data. Participation in the

study required that alumni coaches complete the entirety of the program, further limiting the number of alumni coaches to interview. As a pilot study, this study was further limited by the small sample size relative to the overall CASS Career Coaching Program. Additionally, each alumni coach was matched with a student at a different time, resulting in participants enduring vastly different timeframes in the program. The time spent in the CASS Program can influence the experiences of alumni coaches in the program. Furthermore, the CASS Career Coaching Program is a virtual initiative to extend program outreach, limiting the in-person interactions available to participants. Moreover, there are no widely accepted definitions for mentoring or career coaching, which contributes to variable understanding and misconceptions of the terms among study participants.

Summary and Conclusions

Higher education continues to promote successful educational programs that cater towards student success, where mentorship is widely viewed as an essential tool to do so (Goh & Kim, 2023; Morey et al., 2023). Mentorship in university settings correlates with enhanced academic success and adaptation (Docherty et al., 2018), as well as increased critical thinking skills, student achievement, and overall student success (Crisp, 2009). Mentors are essential in higher education, as they can provide perspective and advice relating to support, professionalism, career development, and student desires (Priest & Donley, 2014). Embedding alumni into mentoring programs can foster student learning and bridge students to their future career, as alumni once walked a similar path of current students (Abney, 2020; Viereggar & Bryant, 2020). There is a greater alumni network that extends alumni engagement beyond fundraising and satisfaction-related efforts, as alumni can voluntarily share their unique and extensive networks, experiences,

and insights to impact colleges, universities, and current students (Gallo, 2021; Gannod et al., 2010; Vieregger & Bryant, 2020).

Career coaching is different from mentoring, as coaching involves performance, professional, and personal development surrounding taking initiative through achieving and setting specific and strategic goals (Fowler, 2014; Grant et al., 2010; Lai, 2015; Wilson, 2024). Additionally, coaches and coachees share common goals, experiences, and perceptions in coaching relationships (Abney, 2020). Although prevalent in professional settings (Hambly & Bomford, 2018), career coaches in higher education can foster guidance, support, and sharing of resources to help students achieve their career goals and positively impact career trajectory, employability, and identity related to coachee's competencies, values, goals, and character (Cox et al., 2023; Esen & İpçi, 2022).

The researcher aimed to understand student and alumni perceptions of their involvement in the CASS Career Coaching Program for the purpose of evaluating the program, as well as further comprehend an alumni career coaching program under a mentorship lens through perceptions of alumni and student participants. To build upon disparate but successful mentoring and coaching models to contribute to new models of career coaching approaches in higher education. The findings and conclusions of the research aim to help advance the future of CASS, while informing other colleges, universities, and other stakeholders about the program's effectiveness, how to adopt a similar program, or how to improve a current program. The CASS Career Coaching Program provides another support system for students in CALS that can foster student success. The researcher aims to further understand student success in the program while investigating the significance of alumni engagement in the program, adding to the qualitative literature on alumni mentoring and related programs.

CHAPTER II.

COACHEE PERCEPTIONS OF ALUMNI CAREER COACHING PROGRAM

Introduction

Throughout higher education, student success has gained prominence over other academic-related agendas (Wolff-Eisenbery & Braddlee, 2018). Student success includes student and institutional outcomes, such as persistence, retention, achievement of educational objectives and academics, overall development, high-intensity activities, and post-graduation execution (Wilson, 2024). In the United States alone, 7.1 million students were projected to enroll in a public 4-year university or college in 2018 (Docherty et al., 2018). Exponential growth in college student enrollment and degree completion increased the need to expand student success support from academic institutions (Docherty et al., 2018; Fernandez et al., 2022). College students originate from all walks of life, where no single experience is the same (Law et al., 2020). Individualized support is needed by university systems to meet the needs of diverse student populations, as each student requires unique support systems and structures (Means & Pyne, 2017). Institutions can provide student support that increases academic and social belonging in students, including scholarship programs, faculty relationships, academic services, mentoring, and high-impact experiences, thus enhancing student success (Crisp, 2009; Lott, 2024). Colleges and universities have expanded supporting student success and development through mentoring programs (Al-Aqeel & Alhumid, 2024). Environmental support alone cannot enhance student success in university students and impact student development capacities (Li et al., 2023). Ensuring students focus on personal academics and futures instead of comparing themselves to their peers is key to student success during college and as they transition into their future careers (Apriceno et al., 2020).

Student success exceeds college milestones and goals, as post-graduation success is critical to consider as well (Docherty et al., 2018). Transitioning from college to future careers, there is often time of exploration, identity seeking, and cultural change (Halstead & Lare, 2018). Focusing on student success in college can help post-graduates overcome adversity in the post-graduate transition (Salazar et al., 2016). Additionally, academics, college experiences, and overall successes are significant for career exploration, as higher levels of educational attainment are required to meet the demands of employers each year (Wright et al., 2012). Overall, supporting student success opportunities not only impacts college years, but post-grad as well (Docherty et al., 2018; Emery, 2024).

Mentoring Programs

A notable pathway for college student support is through mentoring (Crisp, 2009). Mentorship opportunities by the more experienced can increase retention rates among those who are less experienced in the desired field (Nesbitt et al., 2022). Mentorship has historically played a role in successful educational programs, as more experienced individuals in a certain field guide and serve university students (Goh & Kim, 2023; Morey et al., 2023). Among mentoring relationships in the university setting, they correlate with enhanced academic success and adaptation (Docherty et al., 2018). Improved critical thinking skills, student achievement, and student retention among college students result from mentorship participation, which can also increase student success and future employment security (Crisp, 2009). Mentors can positively impact college students, as they can provide insight on support, professionalism, career development, and student desires (Priest & Donley, 2014). Particularly, university alumni have been identified as impactful mentors in higher education (Emery, 2024). Alumni mentoring programs in higher education have risen in popularity, as alumni walked a similar path to current

students (Abney, 2020). Alumni mentoring programs can take a formal or informal approach, depending on whether the intent of the mentoring relationship revolves around structure, expectations, and support or infrequent meetings and simple advice (Ko & Zhadko, 2023; Viereggar & Bryant, 2020). Nonetheless, alumni mentoring programs can foster student learning experiences and bridge students to a future career, which aligns with student success pre- and post-graduation (Viereggar & Bryant, 2020).

Role of Coaching

Coaching involves a collaborative relationship between a coach and coachee, where performance, professional, and personal development outcomes are sought and attained by the coachee (Grant et al., 2010; Lai, 2015). Although coaching is more prevalent in professional settings (Hambly & Bomford, 2018), coaching can enhance student retention efforts by assisting students in taking initiative for their future through goal setting (Wilson, 2024). Career coaching in particular is very development-based and revolves around achieving specific and strategic goals (Fowler, 2014; Lai, 2015). Career coaching students can enhance innovativeness and creativity, as students discuss how they will reach personal and career development outcomes by the end of their coaching relationship (Kun-Dang & Yu-Ye, 2017). In the context of higher education, career coaches are responsible for supporting the coaching relationship, through active listening, inquiry, challenging the coachee, and providing support (Devine et al., 2006). Additionally, it is significant for coaches and coachees to share common goals, experiences, and perceptions (Abney, 2020). Overall, the coach's role is to advance the goal attainment process, share knowledge, and inevitably set steps and expectations for goal achievement for their coachee (Nielson & Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework

This study sought to understand the extent to which the alumni career coaching program impacts student participants and their ability to reach specific career goals. The study research questions aimed to evaluate student perceptions and evaluate a university career coaching program, observing student participant perceptions of mentorship and coaching, alumni as coaches, motivations to participate, and the overall program. The purpose of this section is to review the literature pertaining to comprehending this study and how it aligns with said research questions. The literature review was divided into the following sections: coaching in higher education, mentorship in higher education, goal setting theory, and Evaluating Student Success through Coaching and Mentoring Programs in Higher Education.

Coaching in Higher Education

For the purposes of this study, coaching is defined as the “collaborative relationship formed between coach and coachee for the purpose of attaining professional or personal development outcomes which are valued by the coachee” (Grant et al., 2010, p. 3). Specifically, career coaching is recognized as a favorable tool in the workforce, as it increases job satisfaction, employee commitment, and similar job performance measures (Fontes & Russo, 2020). In workplace environments, coaches refer to coachees as “clients,” illustrating the professionalism in workforce career coaching (Yates, 2019). Very few studies center research around career coaching in higher education settings under specific parameters.

In higher education, coaching-related support is often offered through academic coaching for current students or career development coaching for post-graduate students (Joiner, 2024; Otu & Omeje, 2021; Tudor, 2018). Academic coaching is a practice founded upon students building one-on-one joining relationships with a trained college employee, where students enhance their

self-awareness and ability to reflect (Dalton & Crosby, 2014; Joiner, 2024). Academic coaching is similar to having academic advisors but uniquely benefits current students by supporting institution efforts of increased retention and completion (Joiner, 2014). Similarly, career coaching in higher education often caters to post-graduate professional development, in correlation to undergraduate academic advising (Otu & Omeje, 2021). The majority of college students who underwent career coaching exhibited positive outcomes related to results and behaviors, recalling its effectiveness (Fontes & Russo, 2020; Kun-Dang & Yu-Ye, 2017; Wilson, 2024). Overall, career coaching in higher education can have positive impacts on recent graduates, as it can enhance employee-desired competencies reducing chances of unemployment (Otu & Omeje, 2021).

There is a noticeable gap in the literature highlighting how university career coaching programs benefit students. Some studies focus on how college student career coaching involves workforce preparation and development (van der Baan et al., 2025); however, few studies detail student perspectives on career coaching programs. Within higher education, coaching has been utilized to encourage students to identify and set goals, promoting self-efficacy and optimism (Fontes & Russo, 2020; Wilson, 2024). Self-efficacy is one's belief towards their ability to accomplish set tasks, which is improved through career coaching (van der Baan et al., 2025; Sorrentino, 2007). Specifically, effective career coaching impacts students' post-graduation in their transition from education to the workplace through career goal support (van der Baan et al., 2025). Improved self-efficacy through career coaching can enhance student motivation, commitment, and willingness to engage in activities and opportunities that promote the student's intended goals (van der Baan et al., 2024). Commitment towards goal achievement is promoted by setting goals through the career coaching process, as it allows students to remain attentive to

goal-related tasks (Sorrentino, 2007). Successful career coaching programs and relationships are sustained through proactive outreach relationship building through coach support of coachee goal setting and action plan establishing, as well as through the coach questioning and providing impactful feedback that encourages reflection and perspective on coachee strengths and weaknesses - paving a pathway for student goal attainment (Fontes & Russo, 2020; Wilson, 2024). Students are tasked with staying committed to their specific, set goals and stay reflective of their coach feedback throughout the goal attainment process (Lai, 2015; Priest & Donley, 2014).

Mentorship in Higher Education

For the purposes of this study, mentorship is identified as being “focused on the growth and accomplishments of an individual and may include several forms of assistance and broad forms of support (academic, professional, career); it is personal and reciprocal” (Law et al., 2020, p. 29). Mentorship is unique, as mentoring relationships can take multiple forms and levels within diverse settings, as mentor/mentee relationships are dependent on the mentee's needs (Crisp, 2009; Deng et al., 2021). While mentorship in the workplace is common and often similar to career coaching (Ayyala et al., 2019; Deng et al., 2021), mentorship has consistently enhanced student development, as a higher education mentorship survey identified stated students strongly agreed or agreed (97%) that their mentor provided interior and exterior support and strongly agreed or agreed (100%) that their mentor allowed them to explore, discuss, and reflect on their studies, experiences, successes, and challenges (Hillman et al., 2024). Mentorship and mentoring relationships have historically been widely utilized in the higher education setting in comparison to career coaching and have been identified as an impactful tool for positive student career outcomes (D’Abate & Eddy, 2008). Specifically, higher education mentoring has improved

student self-efficacy, optimism, and security towards goal commitment (Docherty et al., 2018; Morey et al., 2023; Sorrentino, 2007). Mentors play a significant role in student development, as mentorship in higher education accommodates approaches geared towards providing advice, feedback and coaching strategies by the mentor (Ayyala et al., 2019).

Alumni-student mentorship programs in higher education are gaining popularity in academic research (Wisner, 2022), as said programs can positively impact student development in student participants through growth in career opportunities and support (Kurian & Nair, 2023). Mentoring involves “a) a personal, reciprocal relationship between mentor and mentee; b) an activity by which the mentor shares wisdom, support and assistance in personal, professional, or career development; and c) a developmental process of mentee growth and/or accomplishment” (Priest & Donley, 2014, p. 18). University alumni can easily replicate mentoring relationships, as they obtain perceptions, goals, and potential worldviews of current university students (Abney, 2020; Gallo, 2021). Additionally, students’ academic competencies, career-related skills, and self-confidence can be boosted through participation in alumni mentoring programs (Skrypek, 2022). A study in a university incorporated alumni mentorship between social work alumni (mentors) and first-year Master of Social Work (MSW) students (mentees) to illustrate the need for MSW students, alumni, and how the school benefits from a continued connection between the two groups in the program (Skrypek et al., 2019). Students received an annual end-of-year survey, indicating students desired mentors who worked in similar positions in social work and alumni who aspired to become more engaged with students from their alma mater (Skrypek et al., 2019). Results demonstrated alumni mentors enhanced student guidance, support, networking, and professional connections (Skrypek et al., 2019). Study results illustrated alumni-mentoring programs are significant to student development, success, and perceptions of their

future that are positive, as these programs allow students to seek guidance and support from alumni who successfully navigated a very similar academic pathway (Dollinger et al., 2019; Skrypek et al., 2019).

The presented study used alumni mentoring in a way that portrays the importance of matching student-alumni participants strategically, giving students the capacity for developing explicit career goals and expectations (Skrypek et al., 2022). Supporting program structure through goal setting is significant, as it enhances students' learning, view of realistic goals, and comprehension of expectations, which can increase the likelihood of goal achievement and other positive outcomes (Abney, 2020; Martin et al., 2022; Vieregger & Bryant, 2020). However, few studies have explored student participation within alumni-student mentoring programs to identify personal perceptions and individualized impacts (Dollinger et al., 2019). Comprehending student perceptions can help evaluate programs and how students are impacted by alumni mentoring in higher education (Emery, 2024; Priest & Donley, 2014). Overall, alumni mentoring programs have been identified as an effective tool for student development (Dollinger et al., 2019), illustrating the importance of expanding alumni mentoring programs in higher education. The incorporation of more university alumni mentoring programs can provide students with a new sense of purpose for working on future career goals, fostering self-efficacy, commitment, and motivation within students (Morey et al., 2023; Sorrentino, 2007).

Goal Setting Theory

Research has identified goal setting theory (GST) as an effective instrument for utilizing detailed self-regulation feedback, goal motivation, and goal setting to achieve goals (Komarraju et al., 2010; Travers et al., 2015). Goal setting is defined as a person taking action towards an intended outcome, where the individual is confident, committed, and motivated (Eckhoff &

Weiss, 2020). The effectiveness of GST is rooted in persistence, effort, and choices that lead to specific, high goals, illustrating why it is a notable method for performance or goal attainment (Latham et al., 2008). Establishing challenging goals produce enhanced levels of motivation, effort, and strategy in achieving goals, and lead to higher performance and persistence until goals are achieved (Clements & Kamau, 2018; Latham et al., 2008). The main constituents of GST are progression of goal setting, motivation, commitment, and self-efficacy (Gyepi-Garbrah et al., 2023; Locke & Latham, 2002). In comparison to students who lack goal setting, students who implement specific and complex goal setting tend to perform and achieve intended career goals at higher levels (Friedman & Mandel, 2010).

A study by Sorrentino (2007) examined a mentoring program at the College of Staten Island, known as the SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) Mentoring Program. The SEEK Mentoring Program lacks alumni and career development aspects but clearly utilizes GST for students to create academic goals that are specific, modified, challenging, and attainable (Sorrentino, 2007). GST exemplified the importance of students taking initiative towards establishing a plan for their future through goal attainment (van der Baan et al., 2024). Developing necessary steps to facilitate goal achievement was imperative for feedback and reflection, as they are important strategies used to assess performance and goal attainment strategies (van der Baan et al., 2024; Camp, 2017; Xu et al., 2019). Enhanced commitment, self-efficacy, grade point average, and goal significance comprehension were illustrated by qualitative results from the study (Sorrentino, 2007). This study provided a unique understanding of GST when incorporated into a higher education mentoring program and may be necessary for gaining a more comprehensive understanding of GST within the framework of our program.

GST was chosen for the theoretical framework to evaluate the CASS Career Coaching Program as students created specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely, and challenging goals with the assistance of a mentor/coach through the program (Sorrentino, 2007; Weintraub et al., 2021). This is important because students are more likely to perform better and with more effort when working towards goals that are meaningful, specific, challenging, and achievable (Clements & Kamau, 2018; Dobronyi et al., 2019; Locke & Latham, 1990). GST has continuously impacted student motivation to achieve career goals, as it has encouraged fulfillment of the goal setting process and goal attainment (Komarraju et al., 2010). This program was the first alumni career coaching program, under the specific construct of career coaching through a mentorship lens, to utilize GST; results also aimed to benefit future qualitative GST studies, as quantitative methods dominate GST research (Travers, 2022).

Evaluating Student Success through Coaching and Mentoring Programs in Higher Education

While the majority of mentorship program evaluations utilize methods that are both formative and summative (Marcellino, 2011), more strategic ways to evaluate mentoring program effectiveness still needs revising (Law et al., 2020). As mentoring programs continuously evolve, higher education evaluators remain incapable of strategically evaluating student perspectives or outcomes, as it often centers around teacher/mentor behaviors and found successes (Crisp, 2009; Nesbitt et al., 2022). It can be hard to draw conclusions on successes driven by mentoring programs if student perspectives are examined without purposeful structure or goals in mind (D'Abate & Eddy, 2008). A study by Wolf and Brenning (2023) evaluated impacts of a STEM mentoring program on women at a university, where inefficient results of internal and external factors were pulled based on lack of evaluation structure and appraisals for

evaluating mentorship programs (Marcellino, 2011; Wolf & Brenning, 2023). The need for purposeful structure and defined evaluation of student testimonials from mentoring program participation will be essential moving forward.

Qualitative assessments (i.e., interviews), are a form of evaluation structure that facilitates a more personable approach to evaluating individualized perceptions, characteristics, and outcomes (Deng et al., 2022). Mentoring program evaluations tend to utilize mixed methods or quantitative approaches, where quantitative methods often dominate (Sorrentino, 2007). Perspectives of students in mentoring programs are lacking, as qualitative studies are few and formal studies often omit the significance of how students define success resulting from their participation (Marcellino, 2011; Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). More qualitative research can provide the capacity for individualized perspective and deeper understanding of student participation (Jiang et al., 2022; Marcellino, 2011). Literature suggests adding mentoring and alumni mentorship studies that are qualitative (Skryzypek et al., 2022) and evaluative measures that define how students view their successes from program participation (Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). There is a gap in the literature between measuring student success and success defined by students themselves (Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). Oftentimes, student success is measured at surface level by institutions, state boards of education, and the government, leaving out the student perspective altogether (Law et al., 2020; Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). Gaining perceptions of students in the university career coaching program can offer insight to how students personally identify their own success. Additionally, allowing students to share perceptions of their goal attainment journey can help advance student success measurement at the program level. Further promoting qualitative forms of assessment directly

for student success can encourage other institutions and programs to explore new methods of student success measurement and student success definition.

Literature Review Gaps

Alumni mentorship programs are significant in higher education to elevate overall student development and enhance opportunities for the agricultural industry and stakeholders to have access to an effective pool of potential employees. While much is known about higher education mentorship programs, little is known about career coaching in higher education under a mentorship construct that incorporates goal setting theory for guidance. Additionally, few studies utilize qualitative evaluation measures of student participation in alumni mentoring programs, where studies are already sparse, and studies often omit student testimonials of their own success from mentoring. Thus, the current study introduces a novel program model that utilizes constructs of mentorship, coaching, and goal setting - the CASS Career Coaching Program. Implications of the study were to produce advanced information regarding an alumni career coaching program under a specific mentorship lens through perceptions of student participants in the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program for academic and professional institutions with. Data collected from the research study aims to cultivate a more advanced understanding through student perceptions, while also evaluating the program.

This study aims to fill the gap between understanding perceptions of student participants and their involvement in the CASS Alumni Career Coaching Program, utilizing goal setting theory combined with understanding how students define their success. To build upon disparate but successful mentoring and coaching models to contribute to new models of career coaching approaches in higher education. Being cognizant of common evaluations of these programs is significant, understanding that more qualitative approaches that focus on specific student

perceptions are needed in alumni mentorship program studies (Skrypek et al., 2022; Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore student perceptions of a pilot alumni career coaching program and how their participation contributed to student success. Additionally, the research sought to explore how the CASS Career Coaching Program and alumni career coaches foster student goal attainment in coachees.

Research Questions

The research Questions of the study were to:

1. Explore student perceptions of mentorship and coaching within the CASS Career Coaching Program.
2. Identify student motivations for participating in the alumni career coaching program.
3. Explore student perceptions of CALS alumni as career coaches.
4. Explore student perceptions of program successes and challenges.

Methods

CASS Career Coaching Program

The CASS Career Coaching Program is a nine-month program that runs throughout one academic year. CALS students signed up prior to the start of the program if they were interested in taking initiative toward their future career. Based on various criteria, including participants' majors, field of work, interests, and other characteristics, one CALS student was matched with one CALS alumni for one year of individualized career coaching. Coaching functions in the CASS Program through the functions of students setting, striving, and achieving goals with the support of their coach (Müller & Kotte, 2020). SMART Goals are a foundational component of

coaching and the CASS Career Coaching Program. Mentorship components are organically present in the CASS Program, as coaches and students can build more personal relationships. Additionally, coaches can provide more broad support systems, such as professional or personal, to help their students' development. However, mentorship can emerge and function without goals in mind, unlike coaching (Lunsford et al., 2017).

At the beginning of the year, a virtual Zoom training was held where each coach/coachee pair was in the same training. Program training for CASS consisted of running through specific expectations that both coaches and coachees must follow, including the expectation of meeting at least once a month, going through SMART Goals and action plans, and leaving room for questions. Specifically, the program facilitator presented a formal PowerPoint, initiating the training by going over the foundation of the CASS Program and leading an icebreaker activity. All students were provided the "How to be a Good Coachee" handbook prior to the official training and were encouraged to utilize the handbook during the training session while the program facilitator went through components of being a good coachee in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Program expectations, such as meeting at least once a month with their coach, were clearly communicated to students during the training. Additionally, students were provided an in-depth overview of SMART Goals and creating an action plan, followed by examples. Succeeding SMART Goals, action plans, and ideas surrounding setting their own specific career goals for the program, students were educated on how to communicate with their coach and with program facilitators when extra support and resources are needed.

The second half of training consisted of a time where each pair was sent into breakout rooms to meet one another, talk through goals, plan future meetings, and set individualized expectations. While program facilitators encouraged each pair to begin working on SMART

Goals during the breakout session, some students took the opportunity to get to know their alumni coach. Program facilitators entered each breakout room informally during individual breakouts to answer participant questions and check in. After breakout sessions concluded, the program facilitator brought all participants to the main meeting room to close the training and open the room up for specific questions. In total, the training session lasted approximately one hour to an hour and a half in duration. Due to time constraints, the final few pairs that were matched after early November were required to watch a recorded training session that was created by the program facilitators before meeting with their match.

Following the required training, each coachee goal was to reach their SMART Goal by following the action plan that they created with their career coach. Meeting once a month, each pair worked together to reach those short- or long-term goals by the end of the program year. Throughout the duration of the program, three check-in emails were sent out to the participants by the program lead team. This check-in, sent via a Google Form, asked various questions about progress, successes, resources, and other important information. While these check-ins were not a requirement, they were a useful tool for advancing the program.

Procedures

Design and Participants

This study utilized a qualitative research design and evaluation of a pilot program. Based on the 2023-2024 CASS Career Coaching Program, there were 39 students who had an alumni coach. Following personal and academic conflicts, five pairs dropped from the program, leaving 34 students remaining in the program. The target population included the 34 students who remained in the program, where 10 student interviews was the target number for the study. Coachees were chosen for interviews through stratified random sampling, where coachees were

placed in an online generator (Maxwell, 2012). Specifically, each pair was placed in one category, ensuring that each coach and coachee would be chosen simultaneously by the randomized generator. Participatory recruitment occurred during Summer 2024, which was an obstacle for student recruitment. Following frequent and consistent stratified random sampling of student participants, only five consented to participating in the exit interview. Lacking saturation, snowball sampling was introduced to recruit a few more student participants. Snowball sampling is non-probability sampling that is efficient for researching very specific groups that are small scale (Gierczyk et al., 2024). Additionally, snowball sampling is “a more intellectual strategy than simple demographic stratification” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). Introducing snowball sampling allowed two more coachees to be recruited for the exit interview, where data saturation was reached at seven student interviews.

Following the identification of tentative participants, coachees were invited to participate in the interviews, along with a consent form. If the researcher was unable to receive consent from both a coach and coachee pair, the consented coachee still participated. In cases where neither member of a coach and coachee pair could not participate after a minimum threshold of two pairs were interviewed, additional participants were recruited for interviews. While an equal number of participants from both research groups was desired, data saturation was reached at seven coachee interviews.

Participant Description

A total of 34 students who completed the program were invited to participate in the research study. Of those invited, seven participated in the semi-structured interview. Each of the seven participants are represented by participant number to maintain anonymity. Participant numbers are using the following convention: P1-7 (Participant one through seven). Assigning participants

with numbers was a part of organization during the initial coding process. To ensure anonymity, information shared in interviews and the program description aims to present a brief overview of the collective research group.

Each participant (P1-P7) was a coachee during the 2023/2024 CASS Career Coaching Program and completed the nine-month program. The entirety of study participants were CALS students, ranging from sophomore to master students. During the program, study participants were enrolled in the following degrees: bioprocessing science, animal science, horticulture/nutrition, entomology, animal nutrition, agriculture business management/horticulture, and soil science.

Data Collection

Prior to contacting and beginning research with coachee participants, permission was granted by the NC State Institutional Review Board (27106). The first step in data collection included individual emails sent out to each participant that consented to participation. This email included information regarding participant confidentiality, contact information for IRB and the researcher, and a Doodle Poll for planning times to interview students (Appendix A). Data collection procedures also included one exit interview that was administered to study participants. The interviews were administered to participants individually during a 30 minute to one hour time frame. This interview was semi-structured, allowing for flexible interviews and ability for participants to elaborate on their experiences without constraint (Weaver et al., 2021). Participants completed this interview through Zoom, two months following completion of the program. Interviews were conducted on Zoom to accommodate coachees who are not in geographic proximity to the researcher. Each coachee began the CASS Career Coaching Program at a different date in Fall of 2023, but all ended on the same date.

An overview of the exit interview protocol questions can be found in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Research Questions, Interview Protocol Questions, and Supporting Literature.

Research Questions	Protocol Questions	Citations
Explore student perceptions of mentorship and coaching within the CASS Career Coaching Program.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you define mentorship? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Can you describe past mentorship experiences that influenced your definition? 2. How do you define coaching? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Can you describe past coaching experiences that influenced your definition? 3. How would you describe any similarities between mentorship and coaching? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. How would you describe differences between mentorship and coaching? 4. How do you see mentoring and coaching both working within the CASS Career Coaching Program? 	<p>(Nesbitt et al., 2022)</p> <p>(Lai, 2015; Skrypek et al., 2022)</p> <p>(Lai, 2015; Nielson & Biswas-Diener, 2010) (Skrypek et al., 2022)</p>
Identify student motivations for participating in the alumni career coaching program.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Prior to this program, what made you take initiative towards your future career? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Were you sure of what you wanted to pursue post-grad? b. What made you want to participate in this program? 6. Prior to this program, had you ever looked for other resources for career advancement? 7. What was your main motivation for participating in this program? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Can you describe a specific example? 	<p>(Dollinger et al., 2019)</p> <p>(Lambert et al., 2010; Sorrentino, 2007)</p> <p>(Dollinger et al., 2019; Kurian & Nair, 2023)</p>

Table 2.1. (continued).

<p>Explore student perceptions of CALS alumni as career coaches.</p>	<p>8. Can you describe your experience with your CALS alumni career coach?</p> <p>9. To what extent has your alumni career coach impacted you and your career trajectory?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Have they been able to provide you with the knowledge and tools necessary to reach your career goals? <p>10. What were your initial perceptions of having a CALS alum as a career coach in the program?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. To what extent have those perceptions changed during your time in the program? b. To what extent would you consider alumni as effective career coaches? 	<p>(Vieregger & Bryant, 2020)</p> <p>(Sorrentino, 2007)</p> <p>(Dollinger et al., 2019; Kurian & Nair, 2023)</p>
<p>Explore student perceptions of program successes and challenges.</p>	<p>11. Can you describe your experience participating in the CALS Career Coaching Program?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What successes have you experienced in the program? b. What challenges have you experienced in the program? <p>12. To what extent have you been able to achieve the goals you set for yourself at the beginning of the program?</p> <p>13. What recommendations do you have for us as we implement the second year of the program?</p>	<p>(Vieregger & Bryant, 2020)</p> <p>(Sorrentino, 2007)</p> <p>(Camp, 2017; Dollinger et al., 2019; Kurian & Nair, 2023)</p>

Table 2.1 reflects information for the coachee interview protocol. The entire interview protocol is located in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Data from the interview Zoom recordings were exported to a transcription service (Temi) to be transcribed verbatim. Following completion of transcription, interview recordings were rewatched, allowing for more field notes and relations among the data to be made. Thematic analysis was used for coding data from participant interviews. Thematic analysis is where “the researcher identifies themes ‘told’ by a participant” (Creswell, 2016, p. 69). The researcher used open coding and axial coding for thematic analysis. Open coding involves identifying major categories from the data, then performing data aggregation and the meaning-making process. Axial coding emerged from open coding results, where one open coding category, or the core phenomenon, was focused on. Going back to the data and creating categories around the core phenomenon allowed themes to emerge (Creswell, 2016). Responses from program check-in emails were used as a data triangulation technique for themes in the data. Check-in emails were a major part of the CASS Career Coaching Program and were voluntarily answered by all who desire to include their input. Check-in emails provided insight into coachee perceptions on their participation in the CASS Career Coaching Program, aiding in researcher interpretation of subsequent interview results.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through holding individual interviews, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing of thematic codes, audit trail, and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Individual interviews promoted credibility by providing a safe space for students to share their experiences. A clear description of participant privacy concerns was also discussed prior to the

interview process, ensuring that participants feel comfortable and safe during the interview process. Additionally, the researcher remained in contact with all participants throughout the 2023-2024 CASS Career Coaching Program. Through synchronous program training and frequent email conversations, the researcher had the opportunity to build rapport with the majority of students prior to conducting the research study. The researcher, along with an independent reviewer, maintained frequent and valuable discussions regarding coding strategies and emerging themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative codebook was developed by the primary researcher to establish an audit trail for review. This codebook was assessed and crafted rigorously by the researcher and reviewers. This audit trail created shared meaning and understanding among the researcher and reviewers to ensure accurate and thorough themes emerged from coding procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Quotations and definitions were included within each theme and subtheme. Codes developed through thematic analysis from the raw data and interview questions. Codes were used by the primary researcher to craft themes, make connections among themes, and establish theme labels. Analyst triangulation was used by the researcher to provide justification for data interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed that a researcher produces trustworthiness by utilizing prolonged engagement, peer debriefing of thematic codes, audit trail, and triangulation; all of which was used by the researcher of this study.

Ethical Considerations

Data collection of this study consisted of semi-structured interviews, which were conducted through Zoom, recorded via Zoom, electronically transcribed with (artificial intelligence) AI software (Temi), supplemented with interviewer field notes. Audiovisual recordings raise ethical concerns for participants, as it records their voice and face through a recording process which

can often be an identifier. However, participants were encouraged to leave their camera on to build rapport during the interview process. To ensure privacy, participants were made aware that the researcher was the only individual with granted access to audiovisual recordings and that the video recording would be deleted immediately following the interview. Participants were clearly made aware of ethical considerations and were asked prior to the start of the interview if they consented to audiovisual recording.

Subjectivity Statement

Qualifications, Expertise, and Experience

As a first-time researcher, conducting this study was important because of my passion for outreach, engagement, higher education, and helping others succeed. While I lacked experience running programs, I have other experiences through academic programs that allowed me to work with students. During my time as an undergraduate Peer Career Coach, I had the opportunity to work with students on professional materials, plan an educational and informative event for my undergraduate major, and aid other major student events hosted by the CALS. Participating in this experience allowed me to gain an advanced understanding of engaging with students in a higher education setting, working adjacent to academic programs' staff to establish development opportunities for students, and helping others succeed through career counseling appointments. While I have fewer experiences working directly with alumni, I utilized skills and methods gained from past experiences regarding outreach and professional engagement with others to work effectively with alumni. Additionally, although I lacked research experience, I was confident that my past experiences and my passion for helping others would aid as I portrayed perceptions of CASS Career Coaching Program participants and as I evaluated the program.

Role of Researcher in the Research Process

My role as the researcher was to be an active listener for program participants, as they shared their experiences in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Maintaining a successful program was important for stakeholders and my graduate career, and studying participant perceptions can help illustrate program effectiveness and a way to evaluate the overall program. As the research instrument, I gathered themes from participant interviews through interpretation, and portrayed the data through graphs, tables, and direct quotes.

Background Influences

My background as both an NC State alumni and current student provided me with a unique perspective to program participants. Through my position, I understood points of view from both coaches and coachees in the program, as I identified with both. For this reason, I saw this as an opportunity to help all participants in the study and gain a holistic understanding of perceptions and the program at hand. I was eager to utilize my positionality as a current alumni and student to learn perspectives of study participants.

While my past and current experiences presented me with a great opportunity to influence my research, it was important to also acknowledge potential biases. As a white, female graduate student who played an important role in implementation of the CASS Career Coaching Program, there was room for biases as I interpreted participant responses. It was important for me to produce a successful program and collect positive and constructive responses from participant interviews. As a result of my administrative role in this program, it was significant that I remembered that information gathered by participants was a way to help the program grow; instead of being a reflection on my ability to run a program. Nonetheless, ensuring that I responsibly utilized my role ethically was important for establishing true and clear results and

implications. Additionally, remembering that the raw data allowed certain information to emerge to improve the program for future cohorts can be important for this study.

Results

Overview of Themes

The coding process yielded five themes. The first theme, *Mentor v. Coach*, embodied results surrounding mentorship and coaching. Study participants identified *Mentorship as a Knowledge Transfer* and *Coaching as a Compass*, where participants directly viewed coaching as including *Goal achievement*. Collectively, participants identified *Similarities* between mentorship and coaching through interviews. Succeeding mentorship and coaching identification, a second theme surfaced, *Term Slippage*, which portrays how participants misused mentorship and coaching terminology during each interview. The third theme directly illustrated *Student Motivations*. Specifically, participants illustrated *Taking Initiative for their Own Success*, leading into additional concepts of *Learning from new experiences* and *Career advancement* as the theme expanded by student experiences. The fourth theme was *Student Perceptions of Alumni Effectiveness*, where subthemes *Quality of the Relationship with Coach* and *Effectiveness of Alumni Coaches* surfaced. Students further justified the subtheme of alumni coach effectiveness, as additional findings, *Alumni share perspective* and *Alumni promote career advancement*, appeared. Lastly, the fifth theme articulated *Definitions of Success* according to students. Study participants specifically identified subthemes to illustrate how they define success through the program, which were *Success as Goal Attainment* and *Program Effectiveness*. Study participants further elaborated on program effectiveness, adding perceptions on *Reshaping future career aspirations*, *positive program experience*, and *CASS as a resource*.

Research Question 1: Explore student perceptions of mentorship and coaching within the CASS Career Coaching Program.

Theme 1: Mentor v. Coach

Although CASS is considered a career coaching program, there were notable mentorship constructs identified with the program. Comprehending how participants differentiate mentorship and coaching, along with their experiences, aims to enhance our understanding of the foundation and benefits of the CASS Career Coaching Program. Participants brought unique perspectives on past and current mentoring and coaching experiences and how those may have influenced their insight on mentorship and coaching in the program.

Mentorship as a Knowledge Transfer

In reference to interview question two (Appendix A), participants described that mentorship is founded in mentor/mentee relationships and sharing of experiences. Some participants provided their own definition of mentorship, while others used their experiences to shape what they thought mentorship is supposed to be based on their perspective. P1 provided a definition of mentorship, which aligned with utilizing mentor experiences to pave a way for mentees. They included:

I define a mentor as someone who's been through an experience that is able to provide that feedback and experience onto someone else. [Someone] that they can learn from it in some way, shape or form. [...] I think this has been my first true mentor experience at least like most positive ones. Whether that's big or small, just being able to show wisdom and experience.

Similar to P1, P2 provided their unique definition of mentorship, where a mentor's experience is key to providing efficient mentorship, stating:

I see mentorship as a partnership between an experienced person and a less experienced person in a certain area, field, topic, whatever you would like to call it. [With mentorship], the experienced person is really guiding the less experienced person but both of them are learning at the same time, just from each other's perceptions of things. [My soccer coach was a great mentor] and shaped a very positive perception for me of mentorship just because of my experience growing up with her in soccer.

Likewise, participants remained consistent with how they view mentorship as both relationship- and guidance-based, where P5 said:

[Mentorship is] the relationship that you have between usually a more experienced person in the area of your interest, and you seek guidance, and you have that close relationship where you can be guided and receive feedback along the way. Also adding a previous experience of mentorship: I currently have one mentor, which I consider my advisor. The advisor being my mentor. I had a very good relationship with and close relationship with my committee members of my masters.

Coaching as a Compass

Participants saw coaches as a guidepost when asked interview question three (Appendix A), but that was not the dominant perspective gathered. Mentorship and coaching perspectives may have been unclear, as the two are often used in the same context. P1 even expressed confusion of mentorship and coaching, stating that “I think coaching is more leading while mentoring is more giving advice, but the overlap is where they tend to blur the lines a lot.” Despite this, participants notably saw coaching involving goals specifically.

Goal Achievement

Contrary to misconceptions of mentorship and coaching may overlap, participants unanimously discussed coaching as helping a coachee work towards their personal goals. Some participants, such as P1, even included points on their experience with their alumni career coach.

P1 gave their perspective on coaching, stating:

Coaching is leading someone or guiding them in a way like a path to success. You are trying to get either a person or a group of people to a goal and helping them along the way with all of your knowledge. My coach was younger was closer to my age and [my coach] shared about previous mentorship and how that experience helped shape them and how [my coach] has learned from it and how [my coach is] able to give me that knowledge they learned so I can apply it to what's happening in my life right now at the moment.

P5 specifically noted that coaching involves helping coachee seek and reach goals, where advancement is involved. P5 stated:

I see the coaching being this same idea as having someone more experienced and helping you seek your goals and reach your goals. With coaching, I feel like it's usually in a strictly professional area. I don't know, like or organization skills or improving skills like to help you in either your academic or professional career.

Congruently, P6 used their CASS Career Coaching Program experience to influence their perceptions of coaching, and said:

It was more of [my coach] helping me with setting my own goals. I'd say coaching's more specific than mentorship, where mentoring being broader and more based on character more than technical skills.

Similarities

Although coaching and mentoring are different, it was previously noted that coachees identified that the two can overlap. During the interviews, several participants were particular about how they saw coaching and mentoring both functioning in the CASS Career Coaching Program collectively.

P2 discussed how mentoring and coaching are similar, specifically adding they are both rooted in the experienced guiding the inexperienced, saying:

I definitely [see] similarities, they both are about teaching another generation something that you've already learned if you were the coach or mentor. I think both share that similarity because they're both about teaching the inexperienced person something that you've already gone through, you're more experienced in. [Both involve] guiding them through situations throughout that topic or area y'all are kind of paired in. The biggest similarities I see is just definitely the guidance that happens regardless of if, you know, you keep it very professional or if you make it more personal and help them grow as a person as well or just in their professional area. I think both are applicable [to the CASS program]. I think again, it's what you make of it and what both of your experiences are.

Several other participants were very brief with describing similarities between mentoring and coaching. P4 even described it is hard to decipher between the two, stating:

For me it kind of goes hands in hand. I don't know if I really defer them, because like a coach and a mentor for me, they're pretty much the same thing.

P7 saw mentoring and coaching working in the program, explaining how they overlap and operate as an entity, saying:

In order to build a coaching relationship, you need the personalness and that comes from mentorship. I think that they work very well. They're just like two different facets of the same coin.

Theme 2: Term Slippage

Term slippage was an unexpected result of this research study. Term slippage involves the misuse of coaching and mentorship terminology, where students often referred the CASS Career Coaching Program to mentors, mentees, and mentorship. Study participants utilized mentorship terminology when specifically asked questions about coaching and the program, resulting in overall term slippage of important program constructs. P1 used mentorship terms when giving recommendations for the coaching program, stating:

Maybe like an in-person thing that's optional. Just as a way to get more people connected with each other throughout the program rather than just their mentor because even though it's great, some people just want that one-on-one connection.

In congruence with P1, P2 experienced term slippage when asked about their alumni career coach and experience in the program, and said:

I think in the future, especially since we're continuing this mentorship for another year at least she can continue to help me grow my network. I wanna say she has equipped me with these abilities. I definitely think even with this official mentorship and I definitely think we'll stay in contact.

Similarly, P6 utilized the term mentor when asked about their career coach and mentorship when questioned about the CASS Career Coaching Program, saying:

My mentor wasn't necessarily in a position that I wanted to be in later in my career. Not very sure. Before my mentorship program, I was pretty set in stone. Throughout the

mentorship program, other external experiences showed me that being very set on what I want to do is probably not the smartest thing to do. My mentor helped me with thinking through those new ideas.

Research Question 2: Identify student motivations for participating in the alumni career coaching program.

Theme 3: Student Motivations

Universities offer a variety of support systems and resources for students - many of them being program-based resources. Although university and college support systems and resources are available, not all students capitalize on these resourceful opportunities. The CASS Career Coaching Program is one of those resources catered specifically to student success and career advancements. Study participants were granted the opportunity to share their motivations for participating in the program, where coachees notably exhibited their desire to capitalize on the moment by taking initiative of their futures.

Taking Initiative for their Own Success

In reference to interview question six (Appendix A), students who participated in the CASS Career Coaching Program as coachees noted that they desired to seize the opportunities the program provided them. During exit interviews, participants elaborated on their motivations for being in the program. P1 described their natural drive to improve themselves and how they desired to reach their goals, stating:

I've always really been like a really driven person. I'm a big planner, I'm a very organized person. Working towards what I think I need to be and where I need to be in life. I definitely take that initiative most of the time towards my goals. I saw it as a great

opportunity that I didn't wanna pass up. I just thought it was gonna be a good experience for me. I didn't see a downside in not at least applying.

P3 discussed their situation as a college student and how it motivated them to participate in the program. As an out of state student, P3 decided to take initiative of her future by building connections and professionalism through the program, saying:

Honestly, I knew I wanted to be an animal science major, but I came in from out of state, so I was kind of looking to make connections, build that base level of professionalism, and build my career. So, I just was looking for ways to build that baseline.

P5 described they were motivated to receive support from the program, illustrating the significance of seizing the opportunity to reach professional and personal goals, stating:

Especially like dealing with other teams, other people and having support to structure your goals and have someone to guide you through that. I feel like the companies offer that, and I was able to see the benefits [of this program]. So, when I saw the opportunity, I'm like, okay, that may be helpful to help me reach my goals and also help me manage my time better.

Learning from New Experiences

Coachees articulated taking initiative for their future included learning from the experiences of their respective alumni coaches. Particularly, many study participants were motivated to learn how their alumni coach walked through college and into their careers. P2 discussed how they were motivated to work with a coach who walked a similar path, stating:

At the time didn't know [my mentorship experience] was gonna be with CASS, but just having that security and knowing I was bound to be paired with someone that was an alumni and that they had been through similar things, at least within CALS and things

like that, maybe not specifically my major, but they had been through a similar area before, was really motivating just because again, I was looking for a way to network better and I was just lacking a little bit.

Similarly, P4 desired to gain unique insight from someone who attended the same university and how they succeeded in their personal academic journey, saying:

For this specific program, I got interested because it's different from the program I participated in before because the other program involved somebody from the industry who didn't study at the same university or anything like that. I liked this programming specifically because it puts me in touch with someone who came from the same university. So that person could give me insights on how it happened.

Although not expressive with their motivations, P6 illustrated they sought guidance in this program from someone through sharing of experiences, and said:

I'd say just to have another resource, another person to talk to. Just to see somebody else's experience and maybe learn from them.

Career Advancement

In reference to interview question seven (Appendix A), study participants discussed their specific motivation to advance their skills and knowledge for their future career through the career coaching program. Each coachee briefly described career advancement opportunities they have taken outside of the CASS Career Coaching Program. P1 discussed their experience with career advancement opportunities from the college and university:

I mean I went to NC State, like the whole school, not just the CALS Career Services. I also attend the biomanufacturing career fairs, those have been a great thing that I go to

every semester. I've gone every semester since I joined the minor program. I think I've taken advantage of those.

P2 mentioned they had not fully experienced formal career advancement opportunities before until participating in the CASS Career Coaching Program, stating:

I was definitely looking, [but] I didn't really find much other than just reaching out to professors, which can be quite awkward, especially if I'm not sure if I'm gonna have them or not. So was I looking, yes. Found anything before this? No.

Similarly, P3 added they had not participated in a formal career advancement-related program before, saying:

Yes. I had gone to a few before joining. I'd gone to a few career expos, and I think I went to one resume builder. Other than that, I'd never done direct career building programs.

Research Question 3: Explore student perceptions of CALS alumni as career coaches.

Alumni career coaches are unique, as they can provide a unique perspective for current students. Lack of research surrounding alumni career coaching programs illustrates the need for perceptions of alumni career coaches and their effectiveness to be explored. During interviews, students were asked questions regarding their participation and experience with their alumni coach, as well as their perceived effectiveness.

Theme 4: Student Perceptions of Alumni Effectiveness

Quality of the Relationship with Coach

Coachees in the CASS Career Coaching Program suggested that alumni effectiveness was directly related to the quality of relationships fostered through the coaching process. Coachees shared they had a positive experience with their alumni coach, where they felt both guided and prepared for their future career. P1 described their experience with their alumni coach, stating:

From my experience with my coach, they were able to help guide me with their experience because she was in my position only a couple of years ago. My coach was younger so they were closer to my age, and they shared about previous mentorship and how that experience helped shape them and how they have learned from it and how [my coach has been] able to give me that knowledge they learned so I can apply it to what's happening in my life right now at the moment. [...] I again loved my coach, so I think that also helped with [my experience] a lot. I think they are very similar. So that connection helped, and their knowledge again helped.

Similarly, P2 expressed their strong relationship and overall positive experience with their career coach, stating:

I was partnered with [my coach] and I love them. [...] [My coach has] been such a great guide. Even for me, personally I was a little nervous about doing it, she just dragged me right along, which is what I needed. And I think [my coach] knew that. [My coach has] just been a really great coach or mentor for me. [My coach is] a really great person and a really great contact to have. So, I definitely think [my coach] has equipped me with some really valuable tools so far. And I think, you know, whether we continue this officially or not, I think it will also help in the future.

P6 shared how their perceptions of alumni coaches positively changed over time concluding their experience. P6 was surprised by how supportive their alumni coach was, along with the program, saying:

I'd say [my perceptions of alumni as career coaches] changed from the first meeting. I thought it would be more of like a weekly meeting thing, but then it ended up being

longer term, which wasn't a bad thing. It was very helpful to have [my coach] as somebody I could talk to, but not somebody I had to.

Effectiveness of Alumni Coaches

In reference to interview questions following Research Question Three (Appendix A), alumni coaches proved their effectiveness according to study participants, based on experiences reaching goals and reducing feelings of apprehension. P2 described their positive experience with their alumni coach, explaining ways their coach proved themselves, stating:

I definitely think [my coach was] a very effective coach. [My coach] had open lines of communication and was there for the big questions and things like that. I would say [alumni] are very effective career coaches. [...] I was definitely nervous [at first]. Just because I also felt like a little bit that I needed to prove myself, I guess because whoever I was paired with has already done the grunt work has been on the grind. I think [my initial perceptions of alumni as career coaches] did change just because [...] of me and [my coach]'s partnership in this or just the program in general or any other factor.

P6 shared how their coach was not dominating the coaching relationship or increasing levels of uncertainty in their student, stating:

I'd say [my coach] was very good at what they did and being open to talking with me, but not overbearing of like, wanting to talk all the time. I would say [alumni coaches] are effective.

P7 shared the effectiveness of their alumni coach and how they helped their coachee face future career uncertainties, saying:

[My coach] has been able to help me a lot in finding different avenues that I may want to seek out. [My coach has] also helped me find other opportunities in order to widen my

eyes in the field I wanna pursue. With my coach, [they] have been very helpful and very effective. [...] I thought it'd be really helpful [working with an alum] both in navigating life here at NC State as well with being out of state. I also was unsure of which undergrad major I wanted to go in.

Alumni Share Perspective

Study participants suggested that alumni are effective because they bring unique perspectives to the coaching process - alumni once walked the path of coachees in the CASS Career Coaching Program. P1 shared their perception of alumni effectiveness, stating:

I think it is a great thing to have an alumni because NC State I even though it is a big school, and CALS is big too. Just having someone who's been through NC State, knows NC State, and again has that real life experience that they can give back is valuable. It wasn't like I had to prove myself. It was like [my coach] had been through it so they knew what I needed to ask help for, which was nice. So [my initial perceptions of alumni coaches] definitely changed.

P7 also shared how their alumni coach guided their academic path and provided them with new insight to reaching their goals, stating:

At the time [of entering the program] I was picking between nutrition, horticulture and plant biology. So, in picking a CALS alumni, I think it really helped me make my decision as far as which of the three, because they're very similar but different facets of what I want to go into. So [my alumni coach] helped me to pick which of the three.

Alumni Promote Career Advancement

Coachees in the program illustrated that alumni effectiveness was also rooted in their ability to advance students in their future careers. Whether career advancement included new

opportunities or competencies learned, alumni coaches were able to impact coachee's outlook on their future career. P3 shared how their alumni coach helped them learn something as simple as writing professional emails, allowing them to land their desired internship, saying:

[My coach] helped me write emails for my summer internship for this summer and figure out who I should be reaching out to in order to connect with the right people, either through the school for research or outside the school for jobs. That definitely had the biggest impact just because it kind of shaped my summer.

P4 shared how their alumni coach opened doors for networking with potential employers. P4 saw their alumni coach as effective based on building employer relationships and being attentive to their coachee's interests, stating:

I think so. [My coach] connected me to a couple of people in the industry from different companies. I've been in touch with them. I am still in touch with them, so it's been good. I liked a lot that my mentor or coach was putting me in touch with other people based on my needs and my own interests. So, I think that's something that stands out is just considering the mentee needs and personal interests.

Similar to P4, P7 shared how their alumni coach helped them make connections. P7 was an out-of-state student who lacked student, faculty, and overall professional contacts - lacking networks can have an impact on one's future. The alumni coach guiding P7 gave them experience in how to connect with others, which will be necessary for advancing in their future career. P7 stated:

I would say coming from out of state, it's very hard to meet people. I mean, on one hand it is very hard to meet people and connect with people. But, through this program I would

say it's helped me at least connect with one person. So that makes it seem easier to connect with a lot of other people.

Research Question 4: Explore student perceptions of program successes and challenges.

Theme 5: Definitions of Success

Success as Goal Attainment

During coachee interviews, they were asked to describe the successes they experienced in the program, allowing them to express how they perceived personal and program success. In reference to interview question 13 (Appendix A), study participants expressed that achieving their set goals was a huge success of their participation in the program. P2 described that their goal is half completed, as they were able to earn the paid summer internship, they were looking for immediately following the CASS Career Coaching Program. Another goal included becoming an officer of a club P2 was heavily involved in, where that goal was still ongoing. P2 further described their successes, stating:

I definitely think other networking connections with other extension agents or just getting my name out there going to certain events [my coach has] invited me to has been a great help. And again, I would accredit in getting this internship to both [my alumni coach] in this program just because it was a partnership throughout. So, I think those are some really huge successes.

P4 described their successes in the program and how they continued to learn and grow throughout the program, saying:

[My successes included] identifying skills, [and others] that I have. So, communication skills and how it could be applied in like a different career path outside of R&D specifically. So, identifying skills was important and also the network working. I think

we achieved most of [my goal] because I think at the very beginning, we were not exactly sure how things were going to be looking like or what exactly we were doing. Once we figured it out, then things started flowing. But yeah, I think we achieved most of it.

P6 discussed their unique goal of finding an internship and networking with others, saying:

I guess that would be a success. [I experienced] a change of perspective on how to move forward in a career. [...] Not career goal [successes] but finding internships and stuff like that. I was able to meet those [goals]. I was able to talk with those people, but a lot of the opportunities I had came from just accidental conversations that I had [that were encouraged by my coach], which were the opportunities that I took, which goes along with keeping an open mind.

Program Effectiveness

Study participants were given the opportunity to share their experiences in the program and share their perceptions of the overall program. In reference to interview question 12 (Appendix A), coachee experience illustrated that CASS is a needed program through their successes and experiences, suggesting the program is effective for CALS students, CALS, and NC State University. P1 shared how their invaluable experience in the program proves its effectiveness, stating:

Getting that experience and knowledge given back to me has been just genuinely one of the best things I think I've done in college. I think this program was a great addition and I think other departments or colleges within the university would benefit greatly from having a program like this. [...] Overall I still think positively about the college and the university.

P3 also shared how CASS is a great program for students, as it is a great support system, stating:

I feel like it was a really great program. I definitely say [CASS] kind of showed me that both the college and the university are there to support me and have programs that will support me throughout school and post school. So that was really nice.

P5 shared different ways they perceive positive outcomes of the program, saying:

It was very interesting to see the success cases and to have the connection with other people too. And exchange ideas and exchange opinions. I think that was very good. I enjoyed that.

Reshaping Future Career Aspirations

Coachees discussed that their participation in the CASS Career Coaching Program gave them insight on their future careers. Specifically, study participants noted that their participation allowed them to re-evaluate and reshape their future plans, sharing that their alumni coach helped them see new opportunities. P3 shared how their alumni coach helped them see beyond becoming a veterinarian with their animal science degree, stating:

In my case, because [my coach] was in a field that I was kind of looking to explore more, I could talk to her about her job specifically, which was really helpful. It kind of opened up options. [My coach] was in genetics, so it kind of opened up that whole branch of genetics that I hadn't really looked into, which was definitely helpful and opened my eyes to all of the other fields outside of vets. So that was definitely the biggest impact for me. [...] Through our conversations, we definitely talked about jobs and looking for internships and other steps I could take outside of school to like put me in the right

direction, which is really helpful and what I really needed in that situation. So [my ideas] definitely changed throughout the program.

P4 noted that participating in the program changed the trajectory of their career intentions, stating:

Yeah, I definitely change how I'm looking into my future. So right now, I'm still learning about other career paths outside of R&D. So, before the program I was really just focused on R&D and now I am trying to learn about other possibilities.

Similarly, P6 shared how they were very set in their ways prior to participating as a coachee. P6 shared how their coach encouraged them to seek opportunities outside of their intended career plans to expand their possibilities, saying:

Before my mentorship program, I was pretty set in stone. And then throughout the mentorship program, other external experiences showed me that being very set on what I want to do is probably not the smartest thing to do. [My coach] was very encouraging in keeping my mind open to different opportunities instead of being more narrow minded. Having specific things that I would want to do, [my coach] was helpful in showing me how it's good to be able to look in multiple directions at the same time.

Positive Program Experience

The CASS Career Coaching Program was established to foster student success and see students reach their future career goals. Overall, study participants described their program experience as positive. P2 shared their positive experiences in the program while also noting a particular component of the program they enjoyed, saying:

I enjoyed being partnered through the CASS program as well because there was more communication I felt, which was really nice. I know some people don't, so I think

personally I had a really great experience so far. I think [the program] was all really good. I personally enjoyed the check-ins just because again, I tend to be nervous going into new things and I think the check-ins were a great way to keep up with confidentiality if things were going well, but also check in if things are going well.

P3 described how goal setting and achievement helped define their positive program experience, saying:

My goals were mostly either class related, or job related as in figuring out my class schedule for the next couple years or finding jobs that would help me explore different programs. I kind of did both of them. We did work on my class schedule a little bit just so [my coach] could help me find classes that would kind of put me in the right direction. And then I obviously had a job for the summer that was kind of found through the program [and that made it a great experience].

P7 expressed how supporting CASS has been to their collegiate years, noting that it was helpful even while being completely virtual, stating:

It's been very helpful. Last year it was mainly through Zoom, just because of differences in schedules and everything. [The program has] been very helpful.

CASS as a Resource

Coachees shared how the program was a resource for them as a student, highlighting its effectiveness. P2 shared how the program drove them to build connections and gain an internship, stating:

I've definitely connected with more professors, [...] regardless of personality, they're all here to work for the students and work for research, which is fantastic to learn about. I definitely was trying to look for things that I could kind of ally into just because

sometimes I feel like I'm in a difficult spot because I'm only [...] years old. I'm only a second year technically, but I have more credit. So, I am in this really weird rocky zone where I'm ahead of the game, but not in connection because I haven't been here as long. [This program and my coach] helped me get the internship I'm in now not only because [my coach] definitely helped me learn more about the internship process and also just the interview process in general, which I never really had before. And so, I think I definitely will credit [my coach] to getting this position as well.

P4 noted that their participation in CASS lead them to earn a fellowship, stating:

I participated in this program and now I'm going to start participating in the FFAR Fellowship. Which is also related to career development.

P5 expressed their gratitude to the college and university for having CASS as a resource. P5 noted that many students are in need in guidance, where the CASS Career Coaching Program is able to fill that void for students, saying:

[CASS participation can] allow students to become a more complete professional also taking care of their wellbeing in general. I feel like [this program] gives more resources and it would be helpful for sure. It was interesting to have that connection with [my alumni coach] and to see that this program is available. And so, I know that there is this resource, especially for people that are struggling to have guidance and to be completely like they need guidance. I think that it's very helpful to have that support from the university having like both resources in the same place.

Summary and Conclusions

The semi-structured interviews revealed diversified findings related to coachee perceptions of the CASS Career Coaching Program. Experiences shared among the first cohort of CASS

Career Coaching Program coachees are both distinctive and comparable. Generalization of study findings should not go beyond coachees who participated in the qualitative research study.

The goal of research question one was to explore how coachees perceive mentorship and coaching in the CASS Career Coaching Program based on their experiences. Based on data collected from this research, study participants saw that mentorship was related to relationships and guidance, where coaching involved goal achievement. An unexpected yet notable finding surrounded term slippage, specifically where participants used mentorship terminology when asked directly about coaching or the CASS Career Coaching Program. Although they are two different entities, consistent term slippage of significant program terminology illustrates how mentoring and coaching is often used interchangeably (Lai, 2015; Yates, 2019). Term slippage was used 18 times among all seven interviews, where P2 used mentorship terms in place of coaching terminology seven of those times.

The data collected supports findings of Lai (2015), where mentorship involves people-oriented through relationship building and experienced mentors sharing personal experiences. Similarly, findings connect to Grant et al. (2010), highlighting that career coaching is goal oriented. Findings illustrated both mentorship and coaching overlap, and as previously stated, are often seen as interchangeable terms (Lai, 2015; Yates, 2019). Findings related to term slippage illustrate the misconception of mentoring and coaching, as Lai (2015) identifies the two terms as unique entities with different constructs.

Research question two explored what motivated students to participate in the program as a coachee. Findings were organized into categories that encompassed overall student initiative, as well as the desire to learn from new experiences and desire to advance in their future career. Overall, all coachees identified motivations with taking initiative on their own towards learning

and developing themselves through the program. Parallel to these findings, Morey et al. (2023) found that university alumni mentoring programs allow student participants to feel motivated towards their future. A study by Abney (2020) found that alumni mentoring, or coaching, can improve student experiences since alumni once walked a similar path. Additionally, results from Sorrentino (2007) illustrate how remaining attentive to goal steps can enhance commitment and overall motivations to succeed. Although the research presented does not specifically discuss student motivations, they illustrate university alumni mentoring and coaching programs directly related to students taking initiative towards their future.

The purpose of research question three was to discover how effective alumni are as career coaches in a formal career coaching program that caters to students. While coachees' experiences with their alumni coach and the program were unique, findings delineate how effective alumni career coaches were to study participants. This study reiterates findings from van der Baan et al., (2024), where GST epitomized the importance of students taking initiative towards goal attainment and their futures. Additionally, study results reflect Lambert et al. (2010) illustrating that university students who participate in alumni mentoring, or related, programs can foster meaningful relationships between alumni and students, where growth and advancement is achieved through alumni sharing personal experiences. A study by Skrypek et al. (2022) illustrates how alumni career coaching builds self-confidence, personal skills, and career-related skills; thus, lessening anxiety and enhancing career advancement in students who participate. In turn, this can help students reach their intended career goals and expand career opportunities.

The goal of research question four was to gain insight into successes and challenges students faced in the program. The theme involving definitions of success surfaced as study participants shared their own experiences with personal successes and how the CASS Career Coaching

Program helped foster student successes. Study results replicate findings from Friedman & Mandel (2010), where students who utilize specific and complex goal setting tend to perform and reach their intended career goals at higher levels compared to students who lack goal setting. Since the CASS Career Coaching Program encompassed GST, students were more likely to enhance efforts while working towards goals that were meaningful and challenging in the program (Komarraju et al., 2010). According to van der Baan et al., (2024), strategic feedback and reflection through the goal setting process was identified as a goal attainment strategy. A study by Vieregger & Bryant (2010) found that students identified their university alumni-student mentorship program as an innovative and effective strategy for their learning and skill development. This reflects the effectiveness of the CASS Career Coaching Program on students who participated.

The framework of this study surrounded goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2019). Students in this study implemented goal setting, striving, and attainment through actively working towards specific career goals they wanted to reach by the end of the program, illustrating the foundation of the CASS Career Coaching Program (Locke & Latham, 2006; Locke & Latham, 2019). Findings of this study directly demonstrated motivations and performance of coachee's related to goal attainment, echoing the popularity of GST in assessment of motivation and performance in research (Traverse et al., 2015). Utilizing GST created structure for students to establish specific and challenging goals, which enhanced goal commitment, as well as commitment for feedback and task complexity (Locke & Latham, 2006; Sorrentino, 2007). SMART Goals, a foundational component of GST, were utilized by students to establish specific career goals (Weintraub et al., 2021). Establishment of specific career goals built stronger connections between goal and performance, enhancing goal commitment and

motivation (Locke & Latham, 2019; Lock & Latham, 2002). Findings illustrated students were motivated to reach their goals, while being successful in attaining their set goals. These findings support existing literature and add to them by presenting the first study to examine a higher education career coaching program, with mentorship components, that utilizes GST as the framework. Study findings also add to higher education studies that directly utilize GST in studies catered towards student goals.

Implications

Findings from this qualitative study can add to alumni career coaching literature by contributing to its qualitative research in the university setting (Skrypek et al., 2022; Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). This study provides individualized accounts to formally evaluate the effectiveness of an alumni career coaching program. Studies highlighting student perceptions of participating in a university alumni career coaching program are few. The CASS Career Coaching Program facilitators can use qualitative findings to strategically identify how coachees perceive the overall program and how it impacts student success. This study provides implications for facilitators to understand how CALS students perceive mentorship and coaching, motivations for professional advancement, alumni as coaches, and successes and challenges of the program and how those perceptions contribute to their overall pre- and post-success. This information is significant for how colleges and universities can better support their students. Capturing student perceptions of their involvement in CASS, view of alumni, and perspective of program outcomes could inform the program about additional resources students need to further succeed in the program. Additionally, findings related to motivation can inform colleges and universities on how to enhance student recruitment and retention for current and future programs.

Study findings could also inform exterior colleges, universities, and other stakeholders about the program's effectiveness, how to adopt a similar program, or how to improve a current program. There is a gap in the literature surrounding university alumni career coaching programs, as alumni mentoring programs are more readily available and common. Identifying how students navigate their program experience may be imperative for enhancing training materials and resources for students in the program. Findings related to goal attainment can imply to colleges, universities, and stakeholders how impactful this program is for students. Insight on the program from the student perspective can allow program facilitators to improve communication, preparation, and expectations for the CASS Career Coaching Program, making the program more effective for student success.

This study provides supplementary implications for promoting student success post-graduation. Students benefit from alumni in these programs, as students are able to walk a similar academic path compared to their coach (Abney, 2020). Findings related to understanding of coaching and alumni effectiveness can illustrate how alumni coaches fostered career competencies and other important skills in coachees. The program could use this study to enhance other academic programs-related programs that cater to upper-level students who are close to entering the workforce. Findings related to career advancement, alumni effectiveness, and program effectiveness can offer additional support to amplify why college and university students need and benefit from this program. Comprehending first-hand experiences from students in the CASS Career Coaching Program can effectively evaluate the program and support current and future university alumni career coaching programs.

Recommendations for Future Practice

To further support student success through the CASS Career Coaching Program, it is recommended the program incorporate more in-person opportunities. Findings illustrated coachees desire and seek networking opportunities, where alumni hold the capability to enhance networking and professional connections (Skrypek et al., 2019). Coachee participants were given the opportunity to share recommendations they had for improving the CASS program, during individual interviews. Study participants suggested providing more one-on-one opportunities for engagement, such as holding a mid-program event. Providing more in-person opportunities could improve connectedness and networking opportunities for students.

To advance student experiences in the program, it is recommended that program facilitators find ways to overcome meeting barriers between participants. Study participants identified the significant conflicts that occurred between schedules and setting meeting times each month. It is recommended that program facilitators personally assist coach/coachee pairs in setting monthly meetings as a part of the program. Sharing best practices and examples can promote dependability and seriousness regarding program participation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Since this study was done on a pilot program, a replication of this study with a larger sample size is recommended. Including additional detail on student age, demographic, and academic year would generate findings related to how the CASS Career Coaching Program caters to students across the college at different levels. The addition of a pre- and post-interview model could further evaluate how students view their personal successes before and after completing the program. This would help underscore the importance of the student experience in a university career coaching program. More information gathered of students overall, without de-

anonymizing participants, could also communicate to program facilitators how to better serve and meet the needs of students in the program.

This study is representative of current students in a university career coaching program but does not evaluate coachees following their participation. It is recommended that formal interviews are conducted with study participants six months, one year, and two years post-graduation to attempt to speculate future outcomes of coachee participants. Discovering more robust experiences coachees gained from the career coaching program that they carried over into their career could further support the effectiveness of the program and why students should participate.

Additionally, a limitation of this study included the conduction of one in-person interview. Upon specific and personal request, one student expressed the significance of participating in the exit interview in-person, instead of virtually. Conducting one in-personal interview could have influenced stronger rapport between the researcher and that participant during the individual interview. Additionally, the in-person interview experience could have altered how the study participant answered questions. It is recommended by the researcher to conduct fully in-person exit interviews, when possible, to identify how interview questions are answered differently between virtual and in-person interviews.

The researcher also recommends specifically looking at competencies related to student success and how alumni coaches and the program helped students develop those skills. Competencies of student success include academic, critical thinking, communication, self-management, collaboration, adaptability and resilience, digital literacy, and social and emotional awareness. Many of these student success competencies reflect career competencies that are desired by employers. Exploring how students gain the above competencies through qualitative

interviews and quantitative surveys as a mixed method study could further support how alumni career coaching programs promote career readiness, employability, and readiness in students.

CHAPTER III.

COACH PERCEPTIONS OF ALUMNI CAREER COACHING PROGRAM

Introduction

As higher education institutions aim to continuously grow and consider their alumni network, they often focus on fundraising and satisfaction efforts (Emery, 2024; Osborn et al., 2015). Satisfaction efforts refer to satisfying current student needs related to access to academic resources to improve retention and alumni for increasing involvement and engagement with their alma mater (Emery, 2024). Satisfaction between students and alumni is frequently studied, as student satisfaction is often directly related to alumni satisfaction (Arizzi et al., 2020; Bejou & Bejou, 2012). Literature suggests student experience in the university directly impacts how alumni view and engage with the university (Emery, 2024). However, there is a great alumni network that looks beyond how satisfied alumni are with their alma mater, which involves alumni engagement with colleges, universities, and current students (Vieregger & Bryant, 2020). Alumni bring a unique perspective, as they maintain a flow of people, knowledge, and resources (Gallo, 2021). Alumni often have more extensive networks, experiences, and insights compared to university faculty, enriching partnerships made between alumni and current students (Gannod et al., 2010). Being uniquely qualified to assist students in academics, career aspirations, and real-world transition makes alumni significant resources to colleges and universities (Kurian & Nair, 2023; Larsson et al., 2022).

Mentoring Programs

Higher education often seeks alumni support through alumni engagement that broadens university culture, student learning, student transition to career, and regional benefits (Osborn et al., 2015). Alumni can also support university institutions and students through mentoring, as

alumni have been identified as impactful mentors in higher education (Emery, 2024; Larsson et al., 2022). Mentorship has historically been a strong support mechanism for students and successful educational programs, as they can increase retention rates among those less experienced in the same field as their respective mentors (Crisp, 2009; Goh & Kim, 2023; Morey et al., 2023; Nesbitt et al., 2022; Treasure et al., 2022). Specific alumni mentoring programs follow an informal approach, where the mentoring relationship is offered, lacking formal structure, regular scheduling, specific requirements, or set expectations. Conversely, other alumni mentoring programs prefer a formal approach, where visible structure, specific expectations, support, and resources are provided for guidance (Ko & Zhadko, 2023). Mentors can impact university students, as they provide unique insight related to experiences, professionalism, career development, and student aspirations (Priest & Donley, 2014).

Alumni mentoring programs have risen in popularity in higher education institutions and academic research (Abney, 2020; Viereggar & Bryant, 2020). Alumni utilize their university and professional experiences to guide current students, leading to personal and professional growth in students (Abney, 2020; Astrover & Kraimer, 2021). Alumni mentoring programs are effective in general, as they often connect students with the business and industry professionals, as alumni are linked to specialized networks (Dollinger et al., 2019). Mentoring programs that utilize alumni provide a special experience, as alumni can easily bridge the gap between the classroom and one's career (Vieregger & Bryant, 2020). An alumni mentoring program in a business capstone course specifically built effective mentoring relationships by following a mentorship model, which included: matching participants, preparing participants, facilitating interaction, and assessing outcomes (Vieregger & Bryant, 2020). Modeling the significance of alumni engagement in mentorship programs can be imperative for expanding traditional alumni outreach

and engagement, where more focus is placed on utilizing alumni networks, knowledge, and resources (Gallo, 2021).

Career Coaching

Career coaching assists individuals in achieving professional goals (Otu, 2024). Career coaching acts as a temporary support for developing career goals, implementing goal attainment strategies, and reflecting on coachee progress and personal growth (Ebner, 2021). Career coaching is a way to proactively design a desired career path (Yates, 2019). Coaches play a critical role in the coaching relationship, as they support their coachee in developing a coaching plan around a coachee's goals (Cheesebrough et al., 2020). Traditional career coaching encompasses the development of skills and competencies clients need in order to pursue their career goals (Ebner, 2021). University career coaching involves more guidance, support, and sharing of resources in order to assist students in reaching their intended career goals (Esen & İpçi, 2022). Career coaches play a significant role in career trajectory, employability, and professional identity related to coachee's competencies, values, overall goals, and character (Cox et al., 2023). Coaches in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALs) Alumni for Student Success (CASS) Career Coaching Program can additionally enhance student guidance, support, networking, and professional connections (Skrypek et al., 2019). For the purpose of this study, alumni are the non-traditional career coaches that support their coachee in reaching their specific career goals.

Theoretical Framework

This qualitative case study sought to explore the perceptions of alumni coaches in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Goal setting theory (GST) guided this research study due to pragmatic outcomes that result from goal setting, striving, and attainment behaviors. GST is

notably one of the most popular and influential theories geared towards motivation and performance measurement (Travers et al., 2015). GST involves setting specific and challenging goals, where one remains committed to the goal while facilitating feedback and considering the complexity of goal-related tasks (Locke & Latham, 2006; Sorrentino, 2007). Direction and motivation towards performance attainment can be enhanced by setting goals that are specific and challenging (Locke & Latham, 2019). One's commitment towards their goal is further enhanced, when the connection between goal and performance is strengthened (Locke & Latham, 2002). In a mentorship setting, mentors collaborate with mentees to develop goals that are specific, tailored, challenging, and attainable (Sorrentino, 2007). Tailored goals increase levels of self-efficacy and commitment, as it illustrates how the individual values their defined goal (Locke & Latham, 2002). Facilitating advanced goal commitment involves “a) factors that make goal attainment important to people, including the importance of the outcomes that they expect as a result of working to attain a goal, and (b) their belief that they can attain the goal (self-efficacy)” (Locke & Latham, 2002, p. 707). Exploring how GST, SMART Goals, action plans, and other significant foundations influence participation in a university alumni career coaching program may lead to relationships and connections among study data related to alumni coach perceptions and their level of engagement and effectiveness in the program.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this section is to analyze the literature concerning gaining an understanding of this study and how it aligns with the provided research questions. The literature review was divided into the following sections: coaching in higher education, mentorship in higher education, goal setting theory, and evaluations of higher education coaching and mentorship programs - alumni

contributions. This study aims to use career coaching in a higher education setting under a mentorship construct that embodies goal setting theory.

Coaching in Higher Education

While there are many definitions of coaching, the current study defines coaching as a “collaborative relationship formed between coach and coachee for the purpose of attaining professional or personal development outcomes which are valued by the coachee” (Grant et al., 2010, p. 3). Career coaching in particular has been identified as a temporary support and beneficial tool in the workforce that utilizes career goals and goal attainment strategies to enhance job satisfaction, commitment, and other job performance measures (Ebner, 2021; Fontes & Russo, 2020). Career coaching is commonly utilized in a professional manner in the industry, where coaches work with their ‘clients’ to improve workforce performance and well-being (Lai, 2015; Yates, 2019). Workplace career coaching dominates formal research studies in comparison to career coaching in higher education under specific parameters. Although limited research is available surrounding career coaching in higher education, utilizing career coaching at the university or college level has the potential to prepare students for post-graduate careers (Otu & Omeje, 2021).

Generally, higher education career coaching supports post-graduation planning, as it is often utilized in unison with academic advising for undergraduate students as they prepare for post-graduate life, or professional development specifically (Otu & Omeje, 2021; Tudor, 2018). According to a study by Fontes & Russo (2020), results and behaviors of students were identified as positive outcomes among the majority of students who underwent career coaching. Career coaching in higher education can leave positive impacts on recent graduates, as such programs

can help reduce the chance of experiencing unemployment due to the ability to develop highly desired skills by employers (Otu & Omeje, 2021).

There is a gap in the literature highlighting alumni perceptions of participating in a career coaching program; specifically, no studies have explored career coaching programs through the perspective of alumni (van der Baan et al., 2025). Foregoing studies recognized career coaching that immerses students in the goal setting process as an effective strategy for enhancing self-efficacy, future commitment, and optimism (Fontes & Russo, 2020). Promoting student self-efficacy is essential for their future development, especially in university students, as it can be pivotal for influencing how students make significant professional career-related decisions (Esen & İpçi, 2022). Enhancing student self-efficacy can substantially increase motivation and commitment towards intended career goals in students (van der Baan et al., 2025), underscoring the significance of alumni career coaching on student self-efficacy (van der Baan et al., 2024; Esen & İpçi, 2022).

Self-efficacy is one's belief towards individualized readiness to achieve certain tasks, which is enhanced by effective career coaching (van der Baan et al., 2025; Sorrentino, 2007). Effective career coaching is facilitated through support of set career goals, as it prepares students to enter the workforce (van der Baan et al., 2025). Setting goals in the career coaching process is imperative to students maintaining attention to their goal-related tasks, which is necessary for commitment towards goal achievement (Sorrentino, 2007). Successful career coaching programs and relationships are maintained through "(1) the coachee setting goals with the help of the coach; and (2) the coach questioning, challenging, and providing feedback to the coachee that would facilitate reflection and insight into his/her strengths and barriers, ultimately helping the coachee to find paths towards goals" (Fontes & Russo, 2020, p. 459). In coaching constructs,

coaches remain available to coachees to support goal setting that follows establishing realistic expectations, goal-oriented skills, and student preparation as they prepare for university to workforce transition (Hambly & Bomford, 2018; Tudor, 2018). Lai (2025) identified the significance of positive coaching relationships, structure in career coaching processes, and specific career goal setting to contemporary coaching and practice, as it can develop positive coaching outcomes.

Mentorship in Higher Education

Mentorship opportunities arise in all facets of life, as they can develop in diverse settings based on mentee needs (Deng et al., 2011; Marcellino, 2011). Specifically, mentorship can be implemented in academic institutions, industries, businesses, governments, and beyond (Treasure et al., 2022). For the purpose of this study, “mentorship is focused on the growth and accomplishments of an individual and may include several forms of assistance and broad forms of support (academic, professional, career); it is personal and reciprocal” (Law et al., 2020). In workplace settings, mentorship has expanded to 70% of Fortune 500 companies adopting or incorporating formal mentoring programs in practice (Deng et al., 2021). Mentorship overlaps with career coaching, as they both offer workplace-related career advancement and professional development opportunities (Ayyala et al., 2019). However, mentorship and mentoring programs have been more widely used in higher education (D’Abate & Eddy, 2008). In higher education, mentorship and mentoring programs have been identified as effective career outcomes in students, such as improved self-efficacy and stronger goal commitment (D’Abate & Eddy, 2008; Morey et al., 2023; Sorrentino, 2007). Higher education mentorship programs are directly aligned with following a strategic plan, allowing support, training, purposeful participant pairing, and continuous evaluation between the mentor and mentee (Docherty et al., 2018; D’Abate &

Eddy, 2008; Ghawji et al., 2017). This postulates the significance of mentors in regard to their providing advice, support, feedback, and coaching strategies for student development (Ayyala et al., 2019; Docherty et al., 2018).

Higher education alumni-student mentoring programs are rising in popularity, specifically in academic research (Wisner, 2022), as positive student experiences are correlated with the presence of an effective mentor (Docherty et al., 2018). Mentoring incorporates mentor-mentee relationships that are reciprocal and personal; mentor sharing of wisdom, support, and assistance of mentee's desired development; and development, growth, and accomplishment of mentee through the mentoring process (Priest & Donley, 2014). Mentorship underscores individual growth and advancement of mentees as mentors utilize specific strategies to guide their mentee (Lambert et al., 2010). University alumni can duplicate mentorship, as they often share perceptions, goals, and potential worldviews with university students (Abney, 2020; Baier et al., 2016; Gallo, 2021). Alumni mentoring programs have been identified as a way to enhance student academic performance, career-related skills, and self-confidence (Skrypek, 2022). A research study on an alumni mentoring program in a university business capstone course utilized alumni-student mentoring engagement (Vieregger & Bryant, 2020). Mentorship and alumni engagement were perceived as innovative learning strategies for students, according to survey results - survey findings also illustrated students become more interested in professional careers of alumni following participation (Vieregger & Bryant, 2020). Alumni are willing to volunteer their time to assist current students in personal career development (Ghawji et al., 2017). Findings of this study exhibit the importance of alumni mentorship for university students, and how alumni engagement through such programs can foster positive perceptions and commitment in students as they take initiative towards a career (Dollinger et al., 2019; Kurian & Nair, 2023).

Within the scope of the presented study, alumni mentoring programs portray the significance of matching participants strategically to allow students to effectively develop career goals and expectations that are explicit (Skryzpek et al., 2022). Structured programs that implement goal setting leads to facilitation of realistic and understood expectations and can increase the likelihood of successful outcomes (Abney, 2020; Martin et al., 2022). However, while alumni participation in mentorship programs is often successful, many mentorship programs in higher education do not partner with alumni associations or other areas with a strong alumni presence (Abney, 2020). Lack of resourceful alumni presents fewer opportunities for students to build trusting relationships and effective mentorship experiences with effective alumni (Larsson et al., 2022). Although university alumni-student mentoring programs are growing in popularity, little research has been done to explore alumni participation in these programs to gather perceptions, reflections, and impacts (Dollinger et al., 2019). Alumni mentoring programs rarely partner with alumni associations for support; however, programs that utilize this tactic are just as important as more widely established programs (Abney, 2020). Alumni impact on these programs is significant and should illustrate why alumni mentoring programs should be more readily available in higher education (Priest & Donley, 2014). Engaging alumni in higher education alumni mentoring programs can enhance self-efficacy, purpose, commitment, and motivations as university students work towards their future career goals (Hall et al., 2018; Morey et al., 2023; Sorrentino, 2007).

Goal Setting Theory

Goal setting theory (GST) is an effective tool for achieving goals through precise self-regulation, feedback, goal motivation, and goal setting (Komarraju et al., 2010; Travers et al., 2015). Goal setting involves taking action towards an intended outcome from a person who is

confident, committed, motivated, and knowledgeable (Eckhoff & Weiss, 2020). Goal setting GST requires persistence, effort, and choices rooted in specific, high goals, illustrating GST as a method for performance or goal attainment (Latham et al., 2008). High goals are related to promoting motivation, effort, and strategy in achieving goals (Clements & Kamau, 2018). Setting high goals through the foundation of GST also leads to higher performance and persistence towards goals until attained (Latham et al., 2008). A key component of assisting goal setting involves goal orientation (Lunenburg, 2011). Positioning orientation of goals specifically is significant in mastering challenging goals and validating desired competencies - goal orientation focuses creativity, optimism, and adaptability which are desirable traits of the workforce (Lunenburg, 2011; Luthans, 2011). GST is composed of progression of goal setting, motivation, commitment, and self-efficacy - students who set specific, and complex goals tend to perform and achieve goals at higher levels compared to students who lack goal setting behaviors (Friedman & Mandel, 2010; Gyepi-Garbrah et al., 2023; Locke & Latham, 2002).

Tactics related to GST can have favorable effects on university students who utilize them (Friedman & Mandell, 2009). Mentors in Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) Mentoring Program at the College of Staten Island utilized GST for developing students (Sorrentino, 2007). The study by Sorrentino (2007) lacked alumni and career development components, but incorporated GST components, as the program allowed students to establish specific, modified, challenging, and attainable academic goals. Mentor selection is important, as they are directly influencing a student's development (Ghawji et al., 2017; Sorrentino, 2007). Fostering effective steps towards goal performance and achievement is significant for providing feedback and reflection to students (van der Baan et al., 2024; Camp, 2017; Xu et al., 2019). Qualitative results of this study illustrated that utilizing GST through mentoring promoted

commitment, self-efficacy, grade point average, and understanding of goal significance (Sorrentino, 2007). The current study posits the successes of GST when implemented in a higher education mentorship program and may be essential for gaining new insight of GST when used within our program.

GST was selected as the theoretical framework for evaluating the CASS Career Coaching Program, as the program follows GST's foundation of students establishing specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely, and challenging goals with the assistance of a mentor/coach (Sorrentino, 2007; Weintraub et al., 2021). Creating meaningful and challenging goals have been identified as a way to increase effort within students who seek career goals (Dobronyi et al., 2019). GST has guided students towards enhanced motivation to achieve career goals, based on the process of goal setting and fulfillment of goal attainment (Komarraju et al., 2010). The CASS Career Coaching Program was the first alumni career coaching program, under the specific construct of career coaching under a mentorship lens, to utilize GST; results also aimed to help future qualitative GST studies, as quantitative methods dominate GST research (Travers, 2022).

Evaluations of Higher Education Coaching and Mentorship Programs – Alumni

Contributions

Mixed methods and quantitative assessments dominate mentorship program research surrounding evaluations (Marcellino, 2011). Reassessment of how mentoring programs are evaluated is essential (Law et al., 2020), as higher education evaluations often do not go beyond cursory assessment of teacher/mentor behavior and effectiveness (Crisp, 2009; Nesbitt et al., 2022). Deeper evaluations of mentor perceptions are needed to truly examine a program qualitatively (Crisp, 2009). A study by Fernandez et al. (2022) evaluated the effectiveness of faculty-student mentoring. This study examined both mentors and mentees, where it was done by

utilizing a scale (Fernandez et al., 2022). Results noted that comprehension on mentor-mentee relationships lacked individualized perspective - if a student identified positive outcomes, mentors would not have the opportunity to share a rich perception of how they lead their mentee to success (Fernandez et al., 2022). Similarly, a study by Wolf and Brenning (2023) evaluated the STEM mentoring program on women at a university, where proper evaluation structure and appraisals for examining mentorship programs was lacking. Moving forward with mentoring program evaluation, deeper comprehension of the mentor through testimonials and proper evaluation structure will be necessary.

Evaluation of mentoring programs are typically mixed methods or quantitative, where quantitative approaches tend to dominate (Sorrentino, 2007). However, qualitative approaches have been identified as an essential tool for gathering deeper evaluations of mentors in mentoring programs (Jiang et al., 2022; Marcellino, 2011; Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). Qualitative evaluations (i.e., interviews) foster more personal approaches to evaluating perceptions, characteristics, and outcomes of participants (Deng et al., 2022). Emphasis has been placed on personalized descriptions of how mentors enrich and enhance mentoring relationships with their mentee (Crisp, 2009). Literature suggests the need for more qualitative studies to address higher education mentorship programs, especially programs that utilize alumni mentorship (Skrypek et al., 2022). There is a noticeable gap in the literature between mentoring programs and qualitative mentor perceptions.

Literature Review Gaps

Higher education holds the capacity to establish alumni mentoring programs, as they are essential bridging alumni and employer networks with the university. While research on mentoring programs in higher education remains robust, little is known or understood about

career coaching in higher education under a mentorship construct that incorporates goal setting theory for guidance. In addition, few studies utilize qualitative methods to evaluate alumni mentoring programs. Currently, there are no studies that evaluate and explore career coaching programs through the alumni coach perspective. This illustrates the substantial gap in understanding the effectiveness of career coaching programs, as well as an evaluation of participants. For these reasons, the current study presents a novel program model incorporating the concepts of mentorship, coaching, and goal setting, the CASS Career Coaching Program. Intended implications of the study are to provide academic and professional institutions with enhanced information about an alumni career coaching program under a mentorship lens through perceptions of alumni participants in the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program. Data collected aims to establish an enhanced understanding through alumni coach perceptions, while also aiding with evaluating the program.

This study aims to fill the gap between comprehending alumni coach perceptions and their participation in the CASS Alumni Career Coaching Program, where GST and impacts of alumni engagement in the program process is understood. To build upon disparate but successful mentoring and coaching models to contribute to new models of career coaching approaches in higher education. Raising awareness of familiar practice of evaluating these programs is important, comprehending that expanding on qualitative approaches on alumni perceptions is needed in higher education alumni career coaching program studies.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore alumni coach perceptions of a pilot alumni career coaching program effectiveness. Additionally, the research sought to understand the significance

of alumni involvement in a university career coaching program, such as the CASS Career Coaching Program.

Research Questions

The research questions of the study were to:

1. Explore alumni perceptions of mentorship and coaching within the CASS Career Coaching Program.
2. Identify alumni motivations for participating in the alumni career coaching program.
3. Explore alumni self-perceptions of themselves as career coaches.
4. Explore alumni perceptions of program successes and challenges.

Methods

This study sought to comprehend the perceptions of alumni coaches in a university alumni career coaching program. The study research questions aimed to evaluate alumni coach perceptions and evaluate a university career coaching program effectiveness. Research questions include alumni coach perceptions of mentorship and coaching, themselves as an alumni career coach, motivations to participate, and the program in general.

CASS Career Coaching Program

The CASS Career Coaching Program is a nine-month program that operates through one academic year. CALS students signed up prior to the start of the program to begin taking initiative toward their future career. One CALS student was matched with one CALS alumni based on various criteria, including participants' majors, field of work, interests, and other characteristics, for one year of individualized career coaching. Within the CASS Program, coaching can be operationalized through students setting, striving, and achieving goals with their coach's support (Müller & Kotte, 2020). A foundational component of both coaching and the

CASS Career Coaching Program specifically are SMART Goals. Nevertheless, mentorship can be present in the CASS Career Coaching Program because personal relationships can organically flourish between coaches and students while in the program. More personalized support can be fostered by coaches through the program as well, which highlights a function of mentorship. However, in contrast with coaching, mentorship can function with or in the absence of goals (Lunsford et al., 2017).

To initiate the program, a virtual Zoom training was held where each coach/coachee pair was in the same training. Program training for CASS included: running through specific coach and coachee expectations that had to be followed, going through Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time bound (SMART) Goals and action plans, and leaving room for questions (Weintraub et al., 2021). Program facilitators provided the training using a formal PowerPoint, beginning the session by covering the foundation of the CASS Career Coaching Program and conducting an icebreaker activity. Prior to training, all alumni coaches were provided the “How to be a Good Coach” handbook, which covered components of being a good coach, SMART Goals, National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) competencies, action plans, and other important information. Coaches were encouraged to utilize their handbook during the training session. Program expectations, such as meeting at least once a month, were clearly articulated to coaches and were also provided in the handbook. In correspondence with students, coaches were given an in-depth overview of SMART Goals, action plans, and examples of both to help solidify how to guide students through their own goal setting in the program. Coaches were also taught how to effectively communicate with their students and were encouraged to reach out to program facilitators for additional support during the program.

The last 30 minutes of training consisted of a time for breakout rooms, where each pair was sent into their own room to meet one another, talk through goals, plan future meetings, and set individualized expectations. During breakouts, program facilitators entered each individual breakout room to provide an opportunity for participants to ask questions. Program facilitators urged pairs to begin working through SMART Goals; however, alumni coaches saw individual breakout sessions as a way to get to know their students. Succeeding breakout sessions, all participants were brought into the main Zoom room to conclude the meeting. The training session lasted approximately one hour to an hour and a half in duration. Since time was an obstacle, not all pairs were matched during the August-early October timeframe. The final few pairs that were matched after early November were required to watch a recorded training session that was created by the program facilitators before meeting with their coach or coachee.

Succeeding the required training, it was expected that each pair work toward the coachee's SMART Goal by following the action plan students established with their alumni coach. Meeting once a month, each pair worked together to set and attain short- or long-term goals by the end of the program year. During the program, the program lead team sent three check-in emails that were sent out to all participants. Check-ins, which were sent via a Google Form, provided various questions about progress, successes, resources, and other important information. While these check-ins were not a requirement, they were a useful tool for further promoting and improving the program.

Procedures

Design and Participants

This study used a qualitative research design, along with program evaluation of a pilot program. Participants included coaches who participated in the 2023-2024 CASS Career

Coaching Program. At the start of the program, there were 39 alumni serving as a career coach. Due to personal and professional conflicts, five pairs dropped the program. Out of the 34 alumni coaches, eight coaches participated in the interview process. Although 10 participants was the target number, eight coach interviews resulted in data saturation. Coaches were selected for individual interviews through an online generator (Maxwell, 2012). In particular, each coach/coachee pair was placed collectively in one category in the generator, ensuring that each coach and coachee would be selected simultaneously by the generator. Subsequently, coaches were invited to participate in the interviews and were provided with a consent form. If the researcher failed to receive consent from pairs, the consenting coach still participated in the interview. Additional coaches were recruited for interviews following cases where both coach and coachee pair could not participate after a minimum threshold of two pairs were interviewed. An equal number of interview participants from both research groups was desired; however, data saturation was reached at eight coach interviews.

Participant Description

A total of 34 alumni coaches were invited to participate in the study, as they all completed the entirety of the program. Of those invited, eight participated in the semi-structure interview process. Each participant is represented by a number to maintain anonymity. Participant numbers are presented as follows: P1-P8 (Participant one through eight). The initial coding process includes assigning participant numbers during the organizational process. To establish anonymity, information shared in interviews and program descriptions aim to offer a brief overview of the research group. Study participant college graduation years range from 1976 to 2023 with a variety of degrees across CALS.

Data Collection

Preceding permission granted by the NC State Institutional Review Board (27106), the researcher contacted and began research with coach participants. The initial phase of data collection included emails sent individually to each CASS participant that consented to participation. The first email contained important information for interview participation, including: participant confidentiality, IRB and researcher contact information, and a Doodle Poll for planning coach interviews (Appendix B). Data collection procedures also included individual, semi-structured interviews with a duration of 30 minutes to one hour. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility and capacity for participatory elaboration of their experiences without constraint (Weaver et al., 2021). Two months following the conclusion of the program, coaches completed interviews with the researcher through Zoom. Interviews were conducted on Zoom to accommodate coaches who are not in geographic proximity to the researcher. Although each coach started the CASS Career Coaching Program at different times throughout the Fall 2023 semester, each coach ended their coaching relationship on the same date. An overview of the exit interview protocol questions can be found in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Research Questions, Interview Protocol Questions, and Supporting Literature.

Research Questions	Protocol Questions	Citations
Explore alumni perceptions of mentorship and coaching within the CASS Career Coaching Program.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do you define mentorship? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Can you describe past mentorship experiences that influenced your definition? 2. How do you define coaching? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Can you describe past coaching experiences that influenced your definition? 3. How would you describe any similarities between mentorship and coaching? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. How would you describe differences between mentorship and coaching? 4. How do you see mentoring and coaching both working within the CASS Career Coaching Program? 	<p>(Nesbitt et al., 2022)</p> <p>(Vieregger & Bryant, 2020)</p> <p>(Lai, 2015; Nielson & Biswas-Diener, 2010)</p> <p>(Skrypek et al., 2022)</p>
Identify alumni motivations for participating in the alumni career coaching program.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Prior to this program, what made you take initiative towards helping CALS students? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What made you want to participate in this program? 6. Prior to this program, had you ever helped anyone else towards career advancement? 8. What was your main motivation for participating in this program? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Can you describe a specific example? 	<p>(Dollinger et al., 2019)</p> <p>(Lambert et al., 2010; Sorrentino, 2007)</p> <p>(Komarraju et al., 2010)</p>

Table 3.1. (continued).

<p>Explore alumni self-perceptions of themselves as career coaches.</p>	<p>8. Can you describe your experience serving a CALS student as an alumni career coach?</p> <p>9. To what extent have you perceived your ability to impact your coachee and their career trajectory?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Were you able to provide you with the knowledge and tools necessary for your coachee to reach their career goals? <p>10. What were your initial perceptions of being a career coach in the program as both an alumni and expert?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. To what extent have those perceptions changed during your time in the program? b. To what extent would you consider alumni as effective career coaches? 	<p>(Martin et al., 2022)</p> <p>(Vieregger & Bryant, 2020)</p> <p>(Dollinger et al., 2019; Kurian & Nair, 2023; Sorrentino, 2007)</p>
<p>Explore alumni perceptions of program successes and challenges.</p>	<p>11. Can you describe your experience participating in the CALS Career Coaching Program?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. What successes have you experienced in the program? b. What challenges have you experienced in the program? <p>12. To what extent have you seen your coachee achieve their goals you helped them set for themselves at the beginning of the program?</p> <p>13. What recommendations do you have for us as we implement the second year of the program?</p>	<p>(Camp, 2017)</p> <p>(Ko & Zhadko, 2022; Sorrentino, 2007)</p> <p>(Marcellino, 2011)</p>

Table 3.1 reflects information for the coach interview protocol. The entire interview protocol is located in Appendix B.

Analysis Process

Data collected from interview Zoom recordings were transcribed verbatim by a transcription service (Temi) after being exported digitally. Interview recordings were then rewatched to take field notes and make connections among the data. Thematic analysis was utilized for coding coach interview data. According to Creswell, thematic analysis involves the researcher identifying themes that participants tell during the interview (2016, p. 69). Open coding and axial coding were performed by the researcher for thematic analysis. Open coding allowed the researcher to recognize major categories among the data, followed by performing data aggregation and the meaning-making process. Axial coding surfaced from open coding results, where the focus remained on one open coding category, also known as the core phenomenon. Themes emerged by going back to the data and crafting categories around the core phenomenon (Creswell, 2016). Themes were further justified by triangulation data pulled from program check-in emails. Check-ins were an important part of the CASS Career Coaching Program and were voluntarily answered by participants who wanted their opinions heard. Check-in data provided further comprehension to coach perceptions of their participation in the program, assisting the researcher in interpreting the subsequent interview results.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through individual interviews, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing of thematic codes, audit trail, and triangulation by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through individual interviews, as a safe space was created for participants to share their unique experiences. To ensure participants felt comfortable and safe during the interview process, a clear description of participant privacy concerns was thoroughly discussed before each interview. Additionally, contact was maintained between the researcher

and all participants throughout the 2023-2024 CASS Career Coaching Program. The researcher built and promoted rapport with the majority of participants prior to the research study, as the researcher facilitated synchronous program trainings and frequent email conversations with participants. The researcher and independent reviewer allowed sustainability of frequent and valuable discussions regarding coding strategies and emerging themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Succeeding peer debriefing and consistent data analysis procedures, the primary researcher developed a codebook to establish an audit trail for review. The developed audit trail crafted shared meaning and understanding among the researcher and reviewers, verifying that accurate and thorough themes emerged from coding procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within each theme and subtheme, quotations and definitions were included. Development of codes emerged through thematic analysis from the raw data and each interview question. The primary researcher used codes to establish themes, build relationships among themes, and craft theme labels. Analyst triangulation was used by the researcher to further justify interpretation of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed that with the use of prolonged engagement, peer debriefing of thematic codes, audit trail, and triangulation, a researcher produced trustworthiness; all of which was utilized by the researcher of this study.

Ethical Considerations

Data collection of this study was composed of semi-structured interviews conducted and recorded on Zoom, where they were electronically transcribed with (artificial intelligence) AI software (Temi) and supplemented with field notes of the interviewer. Ethical concerns were raised for participants in regard to audiovisual recording procedures, Zoom records both their audio and face which can often be a personal identifier. However, participants were encouraged to build rapport with the interviewer by leaving their camera on during their individual interview.

To verify privacy, the researcher ensured that participants were aware that the researcher was the only individual that would access the audiovisual recordings. Additionally, participants were made aware that the video portion of the recording would be deleted immediately succeeding their interview. Ethical considerations were clearly communicated to participants, as they were asked to consent to audiovisual recording prior to the start of each interview.

Subjectivity Statement

Qualifications, Expertise, and Experience

As a novice researcher, actively performing this study was significant, as it addressed my passion for outreach, engagement, higher education, and helping others succeed. Although I lacked program management experience, other academic program experiences have allowed me to work directly with students. As an undergraduate Peer Career Coach, I worked one-on-one with students on professional materials, planned educational and informative events that catered to my undergraduate major, and supported other student-centered CALS events. My experience as a Peer Career Coach allowed me to develop skills engaging with higher education students generally and to aid in their success, while also learning to work with staff on creating development events and opportunities for students. My experience working directly with alumni was lacking; however, I utilized skills and methods I developed from past outreach and professional engagement experiences to efficiently work with alumni. While collectively lacking research experiences, I was confident in my past experiences and passion for helping others. Specifically, I reflected that my experiences and passions supported my study as I illustrated the perceptions of CASS Career Coaching Program participants, as well as evaluated the program.

Role of Researcher in the Research Process

Being an active listener was my role as the researcher, as it was my duty to listen and gather information from participants as they shared personal experiences in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Stakeholders and my graduate career were directly reliant on sustaining a successful program. Evaluating the program and understanding its overall effectiveness was done by studying participant perceptions and studying participant perceptions, which was positive for articulating the success of the program and the graduate student's role. The research instrument included gathering of themes from participant interviews, as the researcher facilitated interpretation of data, portraying data specifically through graphs, tables, and participant quotes.

Background Influences

Being both an NC State alumni and NC State student simultaneously identified me with the CALS alumni career coaches and the coachees. Holding the unique perspective of alumni and students provided me with a perspective to help all program participants and gain a holistic understanding of each end of both parties. Utilizing my positionality as a current alum and student was something I was excited about, as it had the potential to foster a deeper understanding of study participant experiences.

My research could have easily been influenced by my past and current experiences; however, identifying and acknowledging biases was significant in this study. In addition to being a white female, I played an important role in the implementation of the CASS Career Coaching Program as the graduate assistant. Roles and personal characteristics I held allowed room for participant bias when interpreting individual responses. Maintaining a successful program was also significant, as collecting positive and constructive participant responses was what program facilitators wanted to result from this study. Avoiding self-reflection on my ability to run a

program was evident, as it was my administrative role to look at the overall program generally to evaluate and utilize participant responses to improve future programs. Ensuring that I ethically conducted research and program through my administrative role was significant for creating true and coherent results and implications of the study. Further understanding the raw data would also allow certain information to surface as a way to improve the program for future cohorts.

Results

The results section is organized in the following manner: Research questions, along with their corresponding theme, present a formal demonstration of study findings. Five themes surfaced following thematic analysis techniques by the researcher, including open and axial coding. Direct participant quotes from interviews are representative of study results and findings.

Overview of Themes

The coding process yielded five themes. Theme one was *Mentor v. Coach*, where participants discussed their perceptions of mentorship and coaching. Two subthemes surfaced from this main theme. Alumni coaches saw *Mentor as a Guide*, where the *Importance of relationships and personal development* was highlighted. A second subtheme was *Coaching Provides Goal Attainment*, where participants saw coaching as *Succeeding with goals, Student development and career advancement, and Tactical*. Participants also noted *Similarities* between mentorship and coaching as a subtheme. The second theme illustrated the misconception of mentorship and coaching, known as *Term Slippage*, where participants misused mentorship and coaching terminology. The third theme discussed *Motivations* for serving as an alumni coach, which were directly linked to *Altruistic Motivations*. Among motivations to give back, participants noted their motivations were rooted in *Motivation through connection to college/alma mater* and *Motivated by student development*. The fourth theme was *Coach Effectiveness*, where study

participants discussed *Program Experience Dependent on Relationship with Student, Self-Perceptions, Characteristics of Alumni Coaches, and Connections and Networking Provide Opportunities*. Notably, *Initial anxiety about serving as a coach* surfaced as participants talked about *Self-Perceptions*. The fifth theme was *Program Overview*, where subthemes surrounding *Successes and Challenges*, specifically *Logistical challenges*, were discussed.

Research Question 1: Explore alumni perceptions of mentorship and coaching within the CASS Career Coaching Program.

Theme 1: Mentor v. Coach

Mentorship constructs are significant in coaching literature, as they are often used interchangeably. Program participants identified mentorship constructs within CASS, although it is a career coaching program. Understanding how coaches view mentorship and coaching and their experiences in the program aims to advance our understanding of the CASS Career Coaching Program foundation and benefits. Study participants presented distinctive perspectives on how past and current mentoring and coaching experiences influenced their understanding of the program, mentorship, and coaching.

Mentor as a Guide

In reference to interview question two (Appendix B), study participants articulated coaches guide students in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Notably, coaches provide an individualized definition of mentorship and metaphors to describe their role, while also describing their experiences between their coach/coachee pair. Specifically, many participants also described the significance of alumni in the position of guidance. P2 described how they saw mentorship, stating:

I think mentorship in general is someone who can just provide not only experience, but a guide and kind of someone to challenge you, help you look at things from a different perspective, and help hold you accountable. [...] So mentorship is really about being available as a guide, not necessarily someone to provide tons of advice, not necessarily someone to chart the way, but someone to ask questions to put together, to challenge thoughts, encourage thoughts provide alternative opportunities and paths for someone to consider but also someone to just be a sounding board. That's kind of, to me, what mentorship experiences that I've had. And certainly, it's been part of what made me able to succeed in my career and my family and all of those things. [...] So mentorship I see more as a guide, whereas coaching is more teaching and development oriented.

Participants discuss how alumni are in a unique situation for providing guidance, as they have once walked the campus their student currently attends. P5 aligned their view of mentorship based on their own past experiences, saying:

Mentorship seems more like overall guidance, [...] sought out guidance. [...] [My mentor] knew I wanted to be an extension agent, and I knew that from the beginning. And so even though we were working on stuff, like we weren't doing extension work all summer, he made sure that I was learning from the perspective of the farmer, of like what an extension agent might could help them with. And that was really helpful, like just offering the flip side of the perspective that I needed, and I really appreciated that. And so just developing that like relationship there to guide those like questions. So then when I do call up, it's like, they have different perspectives than I do and it helps me kind of see the flip side of the coin, if that makes sense.

P7 mentioned that nearly anyone more experienced in an area can be a mentor, as they are able to provide guidance as an active listener, stating:

[...] mentors I guess could be anybody. So, any of us who are willing to step up and kind of help out and guide your path. I think mentorship is going to be someone who, I guess not necessarily is older than you, but maybe just more experienced in an area or a subject matter that's kind of willing to provide advice or guidance or just listen when you need it.

Importance of Relationships and Personal Development

In addition to overall guidance, coaches proceeded to underscore how they viewed mentorship in the program by describing the significance of how involvement between mentor and mentees can shape the relationship dynamic. Specifically, participants highlighted the importance of relationships and personal development of students. P1 described their mentorship definition as developing others, saying:

[Mentorship is] a way to develop others. I'm trying to make this sound like a good definition here, but I truly just think in a simple way, it's the development of others. I think my keyword here would just be the development of others in a positive way.

P4 further described mentorship as building relationships:

I had that mentorship relationship, but also, I have been with stellar rockstar coworkers and leaders that I've really admired. So, I have personally experienced [mentorship], and I think it's incredible.

Furthermore, P8 described a personal mentorship experience they had while at NC State, and how that was pivotal to where they are currently, saying:

I have been really fortunate to kind of take mentorship under a couple different people during my time at NC State. And I had a lot of great internships that I had mentors at for

the companies I worked with, and I stayed super connected with them. So being that I was a recent graduate, I can honestly say that I am where I am a hundred percent because I had amazing mentors and coaches and through my time at NC State that gave me opportunities and that's a hundred percent why I'm here, where I am now. And they've always ingrained in me that mentorship doesn't matter where you're at, if you have something to provide that is relevant to the conversation, you should definitely just help somebody out when you can.

Coaching Provides Goal Attainment

In reference to interview question three (Appendix B), participants saw coaching in the program as goal attainment for students, as each student was in the CASS Career Coaching Program to set and reach specific career goals by the end of the academic year. Participants articulated their coaching experience in the program, suggesting how their coaching may have enhanced their coachee's goal attainment.

Succeeding in Goals

Participants postulated that goal-related success was indicative of goal setting, progression, and attainment. P1 richly described their student's goals, and how they were able to achieve set goals, stating:

I think we knocked their goals out of the park, not because of anything special that I did, but one of [student's] goals was to get an internship this summer and they're serving as an extension intern. So, to me that's an awesome goal that [my coachee has] achieved. Another goal that [my coachee] had was to become more involved in [a CALS] club, which is a student-led organization within the [...] department. Not only did [my coachee] get more involved, they were able to obtain an officer position and like part of the

responsibilities of that officer position was social media. [...] And [my coachee has] done that and, along with their fellow officers, built up a really awesome social media program and even started a podcast with one of our beloved professors.

P3 described their more hands-off approach to supporting their student in their personal career goals:

For me [coaching] was, 'I'm here if you need me,' I'll be any resource I can, you know, and [my coachee] did ask a few questions. It was like, our goal right now is for me to try to get this summer internship because that was the step to their final goal of once they graduate. For me, it was a pretty good match in the fact that they, they had a plan and an idea, and I could help them achieve that goal. And versus being something where I'm just really trying to help them more with the thought process of how do I get there versus the reality of this is this is my next step, and then I'm helping them with the steps versus helping them with the plan. [...] [Coaching involves] giving a realistic review perspective [and] feedback on things.

Participants also shared experiences exterior to the program - P6 illustrated how they related past coaching experiences to how coaches are there to see individuals succeed, stating:

Coaching is helping your individual achieve a goal that they have set. Something that you are trying to achieve and assisting to make that goal a reality. Every coach from, I mean personal sports to a coach and professional to professors, they want you to achieve a set goal. As far as coaching, I think that role, every coach that I've had, whether there was like a good connection or not, [...] they wanted me to be successful and they did the thing, they did the things that they needed to, to make me be able achieve that. And you can get involved or be as hands off as you want to be.

Student Development and Career Advancement

In accordance with coaching literature, coaching encompasses personal and professional development traditionally in the workplace. Similarly, career coaching in the CASS Career Coaching Program was identified as a tool for developing students personally and professionally, while fostering career advancement. Participants identified how past experiences with workplace training and coaching underscored the importance of engaging in coaching, P2 specifically discussed this saying:

Primarily training in the workplace and coaching employees and trying to help them develop and grow and give them the opportunities to learn from experience, but while at the same time, giving them a kind of a safety net to not go too far down the path and make big mistakes. And that's something that I saw in myself. Particularly I was better prepared for the workforce than many of my peers entering the workforce when I came out of college.

P3 described how they utilize their understanding of coaching to implement positive coaching strategies with their student. Specifically, P3 reiterates the significance of maintaining and reaching goals, using personal experiences and lessons learned to personal develop students to where they want to be post-program, saying:

Coaching to me is just a big awareness of, you know, what can happen. What actual steps are you taking to reach your goals? [...] It's just a matter of me trying to use my on-the-job training as feedback for them. It's something they haven't had experiences in that I've had. This is my way of giving them some insight on those experiences [to my coachee].

In congruence with P3, P6 utilized a personal experience they had as a college student to further support their student with their endeavors, ensuring their coachee was taking the right path to success, saying:

Just talking [my coachee] through that process of like what it was like for me and like what I did, because I did have several internships while I was at state and just sharing kind of my experiences, but also helping [my coachee], like all the components that go into that. I was, I would say more protective. When [my student] talked about a few of the places that they were looking at, I was like, 'Oh, like are you, you know, maybe ask this or get this more clearly defined because you want it to be a learning experience.

You're not cheap labor. You want this to be something that you have a true value add.'

Because I had internships where I was truly just another worker.

Tactical

Participants described coaching as tactile, as the CASS Career Coaching Program embodies setting clear goals and objectives to navigate throughout the goal attainment process. Coaches particularly discussed coaching in this manner by comparing coaching and mentorship constructs. P2 described how coaching in the program involves specific objectives that students must achieve to reach their goal, saying:

Coaching I think is a little different than mentorship because typically coaching, you have some specific objectives of things or behaviors you're trying to influence or improve particularly in a work setting. Or it can be with a student or a child or there's specific things you're trying to teach. Really, it's about helping them advance their goals in some ways you know, felt like a little bit of a guidance counselor, so to speak, of trying to help the student discern what, and flesh out those career goals.

P4 acknowledges the interchangeability between both mentorship and coaching, identifying that coaching is more tactical, stating:

I think they overlap quite a bit, but I do feel like a mentor is a longer-term relationship. Just in my mind coaching, it feels like there's this more tactical and there's this specific task at hand that we're trying to get to a finish line with.

P8 discussed how coaching relationships involve collaboration, as collective feedback is necessary for reaching goal objectives, much less overarching goals.

Or coaches sometimes just thoughts on a project or, you know, being coachable, being able to have that relationship back and forth. But I also think in a coaching relationship there's a lot of feedback both ways where in a mentor relationship, you're more like knowledge transfer, giving some wisdom that you have from your experiences and not really the feedback on both sides.

Similarities

Although coaching and mentoring are independent of each other, coaches identified as both working collaboratively in the program to an extent. Specifically, coaches discussed how mentoring and coaching involves guidance through leading goals, relationships, or professional opportunities. Several participants noted that they saw mentoring and coaching fundamentally functioning in the CASS Career Coaching program throughout interviews. P2 described their experience in the program and a pathway indicative of mentorship and coaching constructs, stating:

You [guide students] in a way that provides some guidelines for them either to discover it on their own or to give them an opportunity to give them more specific opportunities to develop and improve. I can speak just from my one-year experience in the program.

Some of it is listening to the student and hearing about their goals and challenging them to evaluate all the opportunities available to them. Some of those I'm not sure that I provided so much as I questioned it in a way that, maybe it had allowed [my coachee] to be open to new ideas that they were exposed to throughout the semester. [...] How are we going to get there? How do we get to this path? How do you learn what you need to learn? How do you know what you need to know? [I think those collective constructs] led [my coachee] to have some conversations that adjusted their short-term plan and led, I think, led to this internship.

P5 described how personal experiences underscore how mentorship and coaching can be dependent on your needs and overall situation. P5 illustrated that mentorship and coaching are important for the program, saying:

I think that [mentorship and coaching] is a super important thing because I remember being in undergrad and if I liked things I ended up working out because I talked too much and then called everybody and, you know, sought out my own advice. And so, there's nothing wrong with having to ask for advice and seek stuff out. If we just have one person to call, I mean, I'm an extension agent, so that's what we're all about, is helping people, right?

P8 identified reflected on their past coaching and mentoring experiences and how those influenced how they saw them both working in the program, stating:

I think obviously there's a lot of similarities there. You know, situations like that where sometimes you just, they seem so simple but it's nice to just have a reminder that those opportunities [provided by mentors and coaches] are there. And then I was fortunate to

have mentors and coaches both kind of be like, let's take a step back. So, I think both work really well in the coaching program.

Theme 2: Term Slippage

An unanticipated finding of this study was term slippage, with involved misuse of coaching and mentorship terminology. In particular, alumni coaches used mentor, mentee, and mentorship terms when asked specific questions regarding coaching and the CASS Career Coaching Program. Term slippage underscores the misinterpretation of significant program constructs involving the relationship between mentorship, coaching, and the program. When asked about personal experiences in the career coaching program and with their student as an alumni coach, P3 discussed mentorship when asked specifically how they view the CASS Career Coaching Program, stating:

I think maybe that's where, like you were saying, some of the younger CALS mentors will need some of the feedback they need to get from this is, you can't make a mistake.

P4 utilized mentorship terminology when referring to how they saw themselves as an alumni career coach in the program:

So, I just think I have a lot of improvement and exciting opportunities ahead to become a better coach, to become a better mentor. I look forward to developing my skills with that aspect as well. I know my mentee was very clear that she wanted an internship and she's a freshman. I think that going forward, like this is more on me, I need to ask the mentee to take more initiative to set things up rather than me just creating a standing meeting.

In congruence with other participants, P5 discussed the program in a way that suggests they considered the CASS Career Coaching Program to be mentorship-related, stating:

The level of mentorship that each of these needed is drastically different, right? [...]

Versus like my friend who was a mentor [in CASS], she could have told you within one meeting of her student that this student needed help that maybe she couldn't provide, and it was going to be like a much longer-term type situation.

Research Question 2: Identify alumni motivations for participating in the alumni career coaching program.

Theme 3: Motivations

University institutions offer various ways to engage with both the college and university of alumni. While alumni engagement often incorporates voluntary opportunities for graduates, many engagement-related activities are encouraged by monetary incentives to the respective university, college, or department. Alumni coaches in the program identify motives that are unaffiliated with donating monetarily, but voluntarily and altruistic instead.

Altruistic Motivations

In reference to interview question eight (Appendix B), participants reflected on personal experiences as a college student, depicting ways to provide that to others experiencing the same situations they once endured. Participants specifically reminisced on how valuable support systems at NC State and their individual department were to their overall development and success. P1 pondered over people who poured into their life as an NC State student, stating:

I've just always had a strong sense of wanting to [be a developer]. And this opportunity through, you know the backstory of the alumni board wanting to work more closely with current students and helping as alumni. I still remember some of the challenges of being a student and I think some of the most valuable things I got from my time at NC State were people that poured into me and wanted to see me do well. Some of the most valuable

things I got from my time at NC State were people that poured into me and wanted to see me do well. It was very attractive to me to want to hopefully do that for other students [through this program]. Some students don't have a strong family support system and those are not things that people have on their name tag. Having been a student with challenges, I want to help current students navigate those. If those of us who are actively in the industry are not taking the time to help and stand up our next generation of agricultural leaders, we are not going to leave our industry better than we found it.

P2 further underscored the significance of their departmental alma mater in congruence with their overall collegiate experience, stating

I had such an excellent experience in the College of Ag and Life Sciences and wanted to give back. So, I just wanted to be available to give back. Wanting to be able to be available to a broader set of students. All that I felt like CALS had done for me [I want to do for other students].

Furthermore, P4 described how they wanted to give back to CALS:

We need to give back to our youth, and to our peers. I'm very grateful for what CALS has done for me, and I want to give back. I needed some experience to then be able to say, I have opinions on certain topics, or I have certain things that I can help you with. So now I feel like it's my turn to get involved. I think that, if anything, we just need to encourage our students to give back in the same ways and just create broader networks.

Motivation Through Connection to College/Alma Mater

Moreover, study participants noted enhancing connections with their college and alma mater as another specific motivation for participating as an alumni coach. P4 described how they were motivated to participate in the program because they thought it would be enjoyable, noting they

desired to continuously aid the support and improvement of CALS based on past and current experiences, stating:

Understanding where you can go with your knowledge is super fascinating to me. I was doing it for selfish reasons as well, for the students, but I just think it's fun to be honest and something that I can do and, you know, why not? I think I also learned what the CALS program could improve on as well, and some of our students, some of the skill sets that we should be developing for this generation.

P5 discussed a prior CALS program that kept them engaged in the past and how they gained networking opportunities from the program that allowed them to continuously stay connected:

I mean, just reflecting on how many people have helped me and how much that has [benefitted my journey]. I had really benefited from the program that [a career services employee] had ran in the past. And I don't know if it's still there or not, but like matching me up with like, it was an internship, so it's very different. And I was, you know, it, it was a summer thing, and I had a job, but I gained a mentor out of that program.

P6 illustrated their unique alumni perspective in giving advice and how sharing about their experiences in CALS and NC State builds upon their current connection, stating:

I mean, that's a college that I graduated from, of course. Like that is just, I mean, who knows it better than the people who have been there?

Motivated by Student Development

Comprehensively, participants highlighted the significance of student development in relation to their main motivation for participating as an alumni coach. P1 described their involvement with CALS and how they were pleased with the program and how it can support students, stating:

I tend to be very open-minded about how things are gonna work because I think we can make most things work as long as our hearts are in the right place and it's towards a good purpose. I think anytime that we are preparing our students for the big scary world out there, I think it's an awesome thing to do. I think if you've got alumni that are signing up for [the CASS] program and have that interest, I mean as long as I've been serving on the CALS alumni board in some roundabout way, a program like this has kind of been asked for. It was cool to watch those thoughts come together in making this program because in general I think I would say that most alumni would want to see students successful.

P3 described their motivation as being correlated with how helping others succeed can keep you motivated, illustrating how student success is imperative to university-led programs, saying:

Seeing somebody just succeed, be able to succeed, be confident, and so, you know, that kind of feedback, just anything positive, it kind of keeps you motivated.

P8 discussed that they are motivated in developing others, specifically students through this program:

I also think that it just shows how much I want to be involved with people's development. As somebody who wants to be a people leader one day and wants to grow in my company, I think this is a really good opportunity to show that I'm willing to put in some extra effort [developing my coachee] and help people out where I can.

Research Question 3: Explore alumni perceptions of CALS alumni as career coaches.

Theme 4: Coach Effectiveness

Individuality of coach/coachee teams establishes uniqueness among participants in higher education career coaching. Adding alumni into career coaching can help further serve students as they navigate college and post-graduation life. Little research is available surrounding alumni

career coaching programs or alumni perceptions in such programs, portraying the need for alumni perceptions and effectiveness to be investigated. Alumni coaches were given the opportunity to self-reflect on their role as an alumni coach in the program, detailing their own significant effectiveness.

Program Experience Dependent on Relationship with Student

In reference to interview question nine (Appendix B), participants discussed their experience in the program, while defining how they saw themselves in the CASS program. As previously mentioned, each coach/coachee team was unique, articulating those experiences of participants revolved around the relationship with their student. Participants highlighted key components of their experience in the program and with their students. P1 explored how they enjoyed the program and helping their student through the CASS Career Coaching Program, saying:

Well, it has been enjoyable. My student is really cool. We have a lot of shared interests and our academic goals. I have really enjoyed watching [my coachee] meet these goals. So, I think we're going to go through the program again [next academic year]. I'm excited to see what their next set of goals are because [my coachee is] definitely achieved the ones from this year. I think that you make time for the things that matter. And to me, in my experience, this matters to me.

P2 explained their unique relationship with their student, including they supported their student in reflecting on their intended goals and reevaluate how those goals should be achieved, stating:

It was a great experience to get to meet another student. I think with, you know, Zoom calls and phone calls, we did check in several times throughout the course of the program, and we met in-person a couple of times but would've loved to have been able to

do more of the personal side. My student has some really large goals so trying to help level set that and understand that it's not gonna come all at once. I felt like [my coachee] kind of shifted gears slightly and how [my coachee] wanted to reach their goals, but their goals didn't change. Just the path did a little bit. I think watching my student kind of come to the realization that some of his goals may not have been well, I don't wanna say realistic, that's harsh. It was more that he needed to adjust in order to fulfill his goals more readily.

P4 expressed how they enjoyed the program and were able to support their student:

Describing my experience with a CALS career coach? It was great. I enjoyed it. [...] [My coachee] had a really clear goal, which was great, and we worked towards that goal together and tried to provide them some resources that had helped me and thinking about like, 'okay not only do you need to think about what job, and what they want out of it but you need to think about what you want out of the job, making sure it's the right fit both ways.' So, I think that was our experience. We met a couple times, really tried to get to know them as a person. And then yeah, I tried to get [my coachee] some resources both asynchronously and when we met on the phone. We had verbally agreed on it, but week to week it was kind of variable.

Self-Perceptions

Although not asked to formally reflect, several participants self-reflect on their role as an alumni and coach on the program when asked about their experiences in the program and how they view alumni as career coaches. P4 stated:

I've learned from hard lessons from people that I've worked under that I wish had been stronger leaders. The earlier on that you get that, the fewer hard lessons are learned. I

think you don't have to learn the hard way of striking out and having someone be that person to help you navigate through it is easier. [...] I get excited about things, so it's easy for me to deep dive into topics, but I think this is a really good learning experience for me to be like, 'Okay, you know, what are the time constraints that we're working in? What are we, you know, trying to accomplish?' I think they have remained intact. I think I've learned about what I can improve on. I just think I have a lot of improvement and exciting opportunities ahead to become a better coach, to become a better mentor. So, I look forward to developing my skills with that aspect as well. But I'm glad that I could participate. I'm glad to be included and hopefully have a positive footprint on not only the program reputation, but my particular student.

P6 reflected how they enjoyed the program and serving as a coach, hoping they made a lasting impact on their coachee, saying:

Serving a student as a career coach has, I mean, I truly have enjoyed it. It's something that I would like to continue to do - whether that be you decide to continue with the program. [Maybe] you stay with that student and watch them grow throughout their tenure or if that is an annual basis, a semester basis, however it is, and you rotate through; it's going to be, again, the most that each person makes of it. But I mean, I truly enjoyed it. I would like to think that was beneficial. And that I helped [my coachee].

P8 stated how their view of alumni as career coaches changed after participating in the program. P8 noted that they hold a unique perspective as a young alumni, stating:

I would definitely say [my perceptions of alumni as career coaches] changed because I could see that, you know, where other older alumni were able to talk about like all sorts of life experiences they've had, I was able to talk about some things that I'm still figuring

out and that myself [as a coach], like those [university] resources I mentioned, still being connected, still talking about the resources because those are resources I'm still using.

Initial Anxiety About Serving as a Coach

While many coaches were positive about self-views of alumni career coaches, it was accompanied by initial doubt of program participation and their overall role in the program. P3 noted how they had initial anxiety coming into the program, stating:

As a coach I had more not anxiety, but, and concern that I was gonna be holding a hand more than I did. And so maybe I don't know whether I lucked out or not.

Similarly, P7 expressed how they were nervous about being a coach and having the ability to guide their student, saying:

I guess overall I was kind, honestly, I was kind of nervous about if I was gonna be good at it or of any real use to the student. [...] I became less nervous as it went.

P8 also experienced anxiety as they entered the program, uncertain if they had the capability to support their student through their program journey:

I was a little bit worried going in because I just didn't have a whole lot of knowledge. I think that it was a little bit intimidating [to see] amongst the other alumni, for instance, who are part of this program [and years of experiences they had to offer].

Characteristics of Alumni Coaches

In reference to interview question 11 (Appendix B), participants added individualized perceptions of alumni as career coaches in accordance with effectiveness being resourceful for students and providing them with valuable insights. P1 briefly included that alumni can have control over how effective, or not, they can be, stating:

I think in theory they are [effective]. I think most CALS alumni would be good career coaches if they want to be one.

Congruently, P5 expressed how alumni can be a positive connector for students to gain opportunities and learn how to navigate their intended career first-hand, stating:

I feel like this program can fill that void for students that are curious about other options and just need a connection to like kind of flesh that out with [...] I was still connecting the dots [with my student in the program]. But it was, I was putting one more step in between [my coachee] and who they actually needed to talk to, if that makes sense. [Alumni] should be effective mentors because they have that direct hands-on experience, and they also should have some recent connections on campus to be able to help them and also just connections in their field to kind of reach out to be like, 'Hey, maybe you don't need to talk to me, but you can talk to so and so because they are doing [...]. So hopefully they're effective mentors.

Additionally, P6 shared how alumni can share insight, like they did for their student in the program, saying:

I think I was able to share what I know now to what I didn't know then for [my coachee] being that I have been through it and saw the way things have played out and just the different seasons that you go through, I was able to provide that insight from somebody that not that far removed.

Connections and Networking Provide Opportunities

In reference to interview question 10 (Appendix B) and when discussing alumni effectiveness, participants identified alumni as effective career coaches by their ability to establish connections and networking, leading students to new opportunities. P2 elaborated on

their own program experience, highlighting how their career-related guidance fostered the opportunity student growth for their long-term career goals, stating:

Naturally, engaging with the students is always refreshing. Particularly seeing what they're doing in their studies and the types of goals that they have, then watching that evolve even in the short few months that we were together in that program going from a skeleton of an idea to a [firmer] idea to having some concrete plans in place to reach some goals [...]. Watching [my coachee] come to that conclusion and make the connections on campus that they needed to make to determine how to go about meeting their long-term goals was very fulfilling. It was really fulfilling to see that and kind of just be there to provide guidance, ask questions, you know, be in some ways in my specific case the student felt like setting some accountability helped [my coachee] achieve what they were trying to do. Having to kind of stretch a little bit to make sure I was providing some expertise and some guidance for them, and that's good for me as well. So, helping [my coachee] get to the point that one, that they understood that and two, that they had the right career path both for time availability and earnings to start small and then grow into their long-term plan.

P4 discussed how NC State faculty once connected with them as a student, changing the trajectory of their current career positively. The significance of relationship building and fostering connections to their coachee as an alumni was noted as an important skill for students to excel, stating:

Navigating the school environment, it gave me good nostalgia to go back there, but also to be able to connect with a student on that level. And encourage people to just be open to just talking to somebody like way outside their comfort zone. Maybe not necessarily like

in the exact field that they're wanting to do. Just to broaden that horizon a little bit and broaden the NC State alumni like power network. I'm here as a resource [and] if you want to talk. They've really guided me and making those connections has changed my career over time. And especially for people that I really believe in, those indirect relationships are so important. Those indirect relationships really excel your career. It's not the direct relationships of like your innermost circle because there's too much at stake there.

P8 described how alumni can offer a unique perspective of navigating post-graduate life, providing resourceful support through personal connections, saying:

I feel that, you know, being only one year out post-grad and you know, still being pretty early on in my career as a whole, I felt that I was able to talk about a lot of resources that [my coachee] didn't know were available to them because I was so freshly graduated, I talked about CALS career services, I talked about just reaching out to alumni who are in a field that you want to be in. And I think that's what ultimately helped [my coachee] get their goal accomplished. [...] I think that it is very important for us to be involved through our alumni because I mean the theme throughout this whole interview is the fact that I've had a lot of alumni who coached me through my time at State. I think that connection is so important because, me being in sales, I'm always looking for ways to build relationships and that's a great way to start off a relationship. But I think that it's a fantastic idea and I really hope to see more of it in the future because it did so many wonderful things for me that I hope that I can continue to do that for another student.

Research Question 4: Explore alumni perceptions of program successes and challenges.***Theme 5: Program Overview*****Successes**

In reference to interview question 12 (Appendix B), alumni coaches notably discussed program successes being rooted in their students' success. Alumni coaches reference student goals that were set through the program and how they were achieved or are on course to be reached. P1 elaborated on successes they identified in the program, stating:

Well, to me, my successes within this program are the successes that [student] is having, because my career has started, and you know I'm moving along as best as I can survive. I say that in a joking way, but I think that my successes in this program are a direct reflection of if [student] is having successes and I think that [they are].

P4 expressed the strive their student had for reaching goals through the program. P4 discussed that they utilize their coachee's successes as their own successes in the program, saying:

I think my success was that I passed on some knowledge that really helped me think about what I wanted in a job. So, from personal experience, I tried to do the same thing. It's very hard to get an internship in a freshman to sophomore summer, but [student] did it. I'm proud of [my coachee] and like the initiative that they took to get a coach to get their resume and to get all these things in order. So, I am tapping [my coachee] as a success. But I think it was more prop store towards them. [My coachee is] a hustler and they got the interviews and did all the things.

In congruence with other participants, P8 articulated their success as their student reaching their specific career goal - an internship:

The biggest success I think is that we were able to accomplish my coachee's goal of getting an internship. And I think that was a huge success along with just like I mentioned before [that] I connected with them on LinkedIn, [showing] I'm still there to be their hype man and that sort of thing. I think that shows a level of engagement and just excitement I have for [my coachee's] career and letting them know that there's still people in their corner.

Challenges

Overarching challenges discussed by participants include physical distance mainly, confusion and program, and making a meaningful connection with their coachee. These obstacles at the beginning of the program were challenges that weakened coach/coachee relations, outcomes, and progress.

Logistical Challenges

P2 discusses being further away from NC State's campus, stating:

My being a little further away because I live three hours away made it difficult to be as engaged as I would like. I think being distant makes it difficult, but technology helps with that. [...] I think distance again would be the largest [obstacle]. The other would be just the follow up and making sure that we were meeting.

P3 articulated the challenge of making a realistic connection between themselves and their student - knowing when they are overreaching or not reaching out enough, saying:

I think the challenge for myself, and my student was trying to set up a realistic connection. Goals. Do you just text each other once a month? I mean, who's going to text first? I don't want to have to call him again. I don't want to be a dread. I want it to be something that's doable and that's like us trying to have lunch. That was hard to do just to

get lunch, you know, where I'm pretty flexible where I say that I haven't been in the last two months, but it's as far as me getting to Raleigh.

P7 illustrated the initial misconception of program expectations and how to communicate that to their coachee, saying:

If there are expectations, I want to ensure that those expectations are met or exceeded.

And I think that was a difficult measurable for us because it's, and I don't know, that's one question that I had to follow up. I mean, what were your measurables, how were you deciding what was deemed as successful? Did we totally miss it? Like, did we go through this program, and we totally went rogue and didn't go about it the way that you thought? We didn't go through the process that was intended. Was it intended that way? You know, I'm just curious to see, I guess us specifically, how did we do? [...] I don't know if I had a lot of impact because we stopped meeting, but I hope it was positive. Ours, I guess was just communication and continuing regular meetings. We had a lot of trouble with scheduling, just forgetting meetings a lot and that sort of thing, making time to meet up. So that was a bit of a problem.

Summary and Conclusions

Exploring how coaching and mentoring coincide may be imperative for guiding alumni coaches in the CASS Career Coaching Program by clearly defining their roles and responsibilities. Coaches in the first CASS Career Coaching Program cohort shared both unique and comparable experience. Generalizing findings of this study should not extend beyond the coaches who participated in this qualitative study.

The intent of research question one was to investigate how coaches utilize their program experiences to identify how they perceive mentorship and coaching in the CASS Career

Coaching Program. Data stemming from this research study illustrated coaches perceived mentorship as guidance and coaching as goal attainment. An unanticipated result embodied misuse of coaching and mentoring terminology, specifically referred to as term slippage - term slippage occurred approximately 30 times between all interviews, where P5 misused coaching terminology eleven different times during their individual interview. Throughout literature, mentoring and coaching terms are often used interchangeably (Lai, 2015; Yates, 2019). Study findings support Goh & Kim (2023) and Morey et al. (2023), which reflect mentorship as a successful tool in higher education that provides guidance. Findings related to Docherty et al. (2018) also identify mentoring relationships as a significant contributor to positive outcomes and development related to student participation. Similarly, findings connect to Abney (2020), as career coaching embodies the goal setting process. Although Lai (2015) identifies mentoring and coaching as separate constructs, findings surfaced the overall misconception of mentoring and coaching in relation to term slippage.

The goal of research question two was to determine what motivated coaches to participate in the CASS Career Coaching Program. As coaches reflected on their motivation to voluntarily serve CALS students, participants expressed their altruistic desire to give back to the college/university that once poured into them as students. While alumni motivation to participate in alumni mentoring and related programs is lacking, study findings echo the significance of alumni engagement with the college, university, and students in their alma mater (Gannod et al., 2010; Skrypek et al., 2022; Vieregger & Bryant, 2020). Findings from Dollinger et al. (2019) suggest that alumni utilize their unique experiences and perspectives to guide students. Alumni hold the knowledge and resources necessary to guide students (Larsson et al., 2022) and participate in such programs if they strongly desire to do so (Emery, 2024). Fundraising and

satisfaction efforts in alumni engagement is frequently studied in higher education research, where alumni show their gratitude through monetary gifts (Emery, 2024; Osborn et al., 2015). Alumni willingness to voluntarily participate in such alumni mentoring, or career coaching, programs illustrate alumni are more than likely motivated to give back to their alma mater beyond annual monetary donations (Emery, 2024; Osborn et al., 2015; Vieregger & Bryant, 2020).

The purpose of research question three was to explore how alumni perceived their role and effectiveness as an alumni career coach in the CASS Career Coaching Program, adding to qualitative literature surrounding similar programs. In each participant interview, coaches reflected on their effectiveness and how their experiences were dependent on their relationship with their coachee. Study findings are parallel with results from Abney (2020), articulating alumni can foster relationships with students through support and development, while sharing perceptions, goals, and worldviews. In congruence with Vieregger & Bryant (2020), study findings underscore the effectiveness of alumni in their ability to promote innovative learning and student development. Alumni involvement in alumni mentoring, and related programs can enhance students' self-purpose, self-efficacy, commitment, and motivations, as they provide unique insights (Hall et al., 2018; Morey et al., 2023). Findings from Dollinger et al. (2019) and Skrypek et al. (2019) further justify the effectiveness of alumni in relation to study findings, suggesting that alumni engagement can foster positive perceptions of students and expand their support, networking, and professional connections.

Research question four guided participant perceptions of individualized successes and goals, based on personal experiences in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Notably, each participant identified their personal success with successes their coachee's were experiencing through goal

attainment, while also sharing challenges. Findings reflect Ebner (2021), which indicates career coaching as a resource and support for developing career goals, implementing goal attainment strategies, and reflecting on progress and support. The overarching goal of career coaching, and the CASS Career Coaching Program, is to foster success of specific career goals students set at the beginning of the program (Skrypek et al., 2019). Findings related to Cheesebrough et al. (2020), suggest that career coaches aim to develop a plan around a coachee's goals to ensure each goal is achieved. Unexpectedly, findings illustrated a lack of building connections between several alumni coaches and their respective students. Throughout literature, students often build a stronger connection with alumni versus faculty, as they often share insights, experiences, and interests (Fernandez et al., 2022; Gannod et al., 2010).

Goal setting theory was the theoretical framework for this study (Locke & Latham, 2006). GST embodies goal setting, striving, and attainment, which is the foundation of the CASS Career Coaching Program and related to program outcomes (Locke & Latham, 2019). SMART Goals are foundational to GST and the CASS Career Coaching Program, which allowed alumni coaches to coordinate with their student to set specific career goals for the program (Weintraub et al., 2021). Alumni coaches provided support, guidance, and resources for student goal setting, as they aimed to reach their specific career goals by the end of the program. In mentorship settings, mentors collaborate with their mentee to establish goals that are specific, tailored, challenging, and attainable (Sorrentino, 2007). The components of goals directly relate to the foundation of SMART Goals and how alumni coaches fostered goal setting behaviors in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Results of this study illustrate that incorporating SMART Goals and alumni coaches collectively can be an effective component of higher education career coaching programs. Study findings support existing literature and add to them, as this was the

first higher education career coaching program study that incorporated mentorship constructs and used GST as the foundational framework. Furthermore, these findings add to higher education studies that focus on student goals while utilizing GST as the framework.

Implications

This study provides several implications for higher education research surrounding alumni career coaching programs (Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). This study provides individual accounts of participant experiences in the CASS Career Coaching Program to evaluate the effectiveness of both the program and alumni engagement. There are currently no studies exploring career coaching programs through the alumni perspective, illustrating the significance of the current study's findings. Additionally, evaluation of mentoring and related programs typically utilizes mixed methods or quantitative methods, with quantitative approaches dominating (Sorrentino, 2007). This study further adds to the literature by gathering a deeper evaluation of an alumni career coaching program through qualitative methods. Study results can provide insight to the pilot cohort of the CASS Career Coaching Program, providing an enriched understanding of how alumni coaches perceive mentorship and coaching, motivations for serving as a coach, alumni as coaches, and successes and challenges of the program.

Furthermore, assessing alumni perceptions of their experiences and the program can inform the CASS Career Coaching Program facilitators, and facilitators of similar programs across higher education, on how to improve upon current and replicate future programs. Evaluation data gleaned from participant interviews, regarding motivations and successes, has implications for investigating alumni engagement and how they perceive monetary and voluntary acts of altruism related to giving back to their university community. Additionally, findings related to motivations and successes can also inform program facilitators and other colleges and

universities on how to effectively recruit alumni to participate and engage in alumni career coaching programs.

Study findings could inform other colleges, universities, and other stakeholders about the program's effectiveness, how to adopt a similar program, or how to improve a current program. While alumni mentoring programs are common, there is a unique construct of career coaching that can offer specific personal and professional development opportunities for university students. Understanding alumni perceptions of their program experience can further justify impacts of alumni engagement in university programs that cater to student success.

Recommendations for Future Practice

To enhance the alumni experience, effectiveness, and overall CASS Career Coaching Program, program facilitators should assess personal recommendations participants shared in interviews in efforts to strengthen the program for future cohorts. Participants articulated the need and desire for more in-person opportunities to improve the program. Providing more in-person opportunities could build rapport between participants, while also enhancing their overall experiences. For example, P2 noted: "I would've liked to have done a lot more in-person than we were able to do." It is also recommended that the program provide multiple opportunities for in-person engagement, such as a mid-year event and in-person training.

Including more in-person events, in addition to the in-person training, could further promote rapport between alumni coaches and their students, as well as strengthen their connections to the college and with other program participants. Sharing challenges, setbacks, successes, and coaching strategies can promote alumni coach effectiveness and motivation to continue volunteering in the program.

To advance participant experience post-program, it is recommended that program facilitators provide more guidance on what participants should do after the program concludes. Coaches noted they desired to hear feedback from their students and wanted to know how students' progress following their participation in the program. Additionally, coaches recommended program facilitators establish a strong list of resources coaches can share with their students as they exit the program.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher recommends conducting a replication of this research with a larger sample size to comprehend the extent of the program's effectiveness. Since this study was conducted on a pilot program, there was a limitation to reaching substantial numbers of study participants. Collecting specific characteristics of program participants, including age, demographic prior to college and post-graduation, and participation in NC State club organizations, can further justify how alumni engagement in the CASS Career Coaching Program is influenced by specific characteristics of alumni coaches. The addition of focus groups at the end of the program could further evaluate how alumni coaches view their perceptions of the program and allow program facilitators to understand the collective experience. Collecting diverse perspectives, coaching styles, and experiences would help underscore how different alumni coaches prioritize alumni engagement at the voluntary level, specifically looking intergenerationally among coach/coachee teams.

Although the majority of program participants completed the program, this study does not evaluate why some coach/coachee pairs halted their participation in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Expanding the study to conduct true exit interviews to alumni coaches who dropped the program would be significant in investigating and understanding why coaches remove their

participation. Discovering personal, professional, or program-related reasons could further support program efforts to increase coach retention and enhance their overall experience.

The researcher also recommends looking into how coaches personally and professionally develop by participating in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Grasping what coaches gain from the program could further promote the ability for program facilitators to promote program marketing, alumni experiences, and overall retention. The majority of study participants identified they were motivated to participate in this program for altruistic reasons; however, gathering skills, competencies, and strategies learned through the program could help articulate additional reasons for being an alumni coach beyond giving back.

CHAPTER IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

To study the pilot cohort of the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching program, qualitative methods through semi-structured interviews were employed. Additionally, journal article one sought to understand perceptions of students in the program and how it contributed to student success and goal attainment, while journal article two sought to understand the significance of alumni involvement in a university career coaching program. Individual interviews of alumni coaches and students in the program aimed to understand the perceptions of coaches and coachees in the program and further use those perceptions to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Participants were provided with the opportunity to participate in the exit interview process as part of this study following the 2023-2024 program via email. The basic qualitative methodology consisted of individual interviews with participants who consented to participate. Coaches were asked 15 questions while coachees were asked 16 questions during the interview process. The researcher used thematic analysis to code data through open and axial coding, following the completion of transcripts. The researcher implemented Lincoln and Guba (1985) constructs of trustworthiness by utilizing prolonged engagement, peer debriefing of thematic codes, audit trail, and triangulation; all of which was used by the researcher of this study. Coaches and coachees completed their individual interviews during Summer 2024, following program completion. Information identifying participants was removed from reported responses to ensure confidentiality.

Research question one sought to explore coach and student perceptions of mentorship and coaching in the program. Qualitative results across both studies illustrated that although mentorship and coaching overlapped, foundational components of mentorship showed that mentoring involves guidance, and coaching encompasses achievement of goals. Notably, alumni

coaches and coachees demonstrated term slippage, where they used mentorship terminology when asked directly about coaching and the CASS Career Coaching Program. The goal of research question two was to explore motivations alumni coaches and students had for their participation in the program. Students stated their motivations were rooted in taking initiative for their own success by learning from the vast experiences of alumni coaching and fostering career advancement. Coach motivations directly related to student success, as their altruistic motivations articulated their desire to further their connection to the college and alma mater and promote student development. Overall, both alumni coach and student motivations revolved around student achievement and development.

Research question three sought to explore how students viewed alumni as career coaches and their effectiveness in the program and explore how alumni coaches perceived their effectiveness as alumni and experts in the coaching role. Findings across both studies illustrated that quality of experiences in the program were dependent upon the relationship between coach and student. Students specifically identified alumni as effective coaches, as they share unique perspectives and promote career advancement. Additionally, coaches shared initial anxieties about serving as a career coach in the program as they reflected on their experience. However, alumni articulated their effectiveness in the program by sharing positive characteristics of alumni coaches and how they provide prestigious opportunities for students to connect and network with others. Research question four sought to explore successes and challenges coaches and students experienced in the program. Collectively, alumni coaches and students related their successes with student success and their ability to achieve their intended career goals through the program. Students further described the successes and effectiveness of the CASS Career Coaching Program, illustrating it led students to reshape their future career aspirations and encourage the program as a resource

for students. Coaches shared successes rooted in student successes, while describing logistical challenges including physical distance and making meaningful connections with their students. To conclude, both alumni coaches and coachees described their positive experiences in the program, revealing the effectiveness of the program.

Overall, qualitative results of the two studies aligned and justified the effectiveness of the CASS Career Coaching Program towards student success. Additionally, study findings illustrated the significance of alumni engagement in volunteer opportunities that cater towards student success and overall development. More information is needed to fully understand motivations of alumni coach's involvement, as it is lacking throughout the literature. Collectively, both alumni coaches and coachees were focused on the successes and outcomes of students, which underscores the goal of the CASS Career Coaching Program. The qualitative results between both studies complemented each other in further exploring the perceptions of coach and coachee participation in the program.

Conclusions Related to Theoretical Framework

Goal setting theory provided the framework for this study (Locke & Latham, 2006). GST encompasses the foundation of the CASS Career Coaching Program, as it involves goal setting, striving, and attainment behaviors related to program outcomes (Locke & Latham, 2019). Through the program, students practiced goal setting, striving, and attainment by crafting specific career goals they wanted to achieve by the end of the program. According to Travers et al. (2015), GST is one of the most popular theories utilized to assess motivation and performance. This study directly sought to understand motivations of participants to take part in the CASS Program and explored performance in correlation with program goal attainment. GST provided structure for students to establish specific and challenging goals that fostered

commitment towards goals, feedback, and task complexity (Locke & Latham, 2006; Sorrentino, 2007). SMART Goals are a foundational component of GST - students utilized the SMART Goals method to establish their specific career goals with the help of their alumni coach (Weintraub et al., 2021). Additionally, stronger connections between goal and performance enhances individual commitment towards goals and enables for more direction and motivations towards goal attainment (Locke & Latham, 2019; Locke & Latham, 2002). Alumni coaches catered to students in their goal setting by providing support, guidance, and resources as they set their career goals through the program. In mentorship and related settings, mentors coordinate with their mentee to develop specific, tailored, challenging, and attainable goals (Sorrentino, 2007). This directly aligns with the foundation of SMART Goals and how alumni coaches practiced goal setting in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Qualitative results indicated that students were motivated to reach their goals and were successful overall in attaining their intended goals. Findings suggest that utilizing the SMART Goals method, along with the support of an alumni coach, is a core, effective component of the CASS Program. GST could be further embedded into the CASS Career Coaching Program as continued development for coachees specifically and the program generally.

Implications

Collectively, the two studies in this thesis research provide several implications for program facilitators to consider when working towards improving the program for future cohorts. This work provides individual accounts of alumni coaches and students in the CASS Career Coaching Program to understand their perceptions and evaluate program effectiveness. Program facilitators can use qualitative findings to strategically identify how coachees and alumni coaches perceive the program, and how the CASS Program and alumni engagement foster student success.

Specifically, this research provides implications for facilitators to understand how CALS students and alumni coaches perceive mentorship and coaching, motivations for professional advancement, alumni as coaches, and successes and challenges of the program. In addition, motivations of alumni coaches and students can inform program facilitators about effectively recruiting and engaging alumni in voluntary acts of service and how to best cater to students in the program.

Findings provide additional implications for higher education literature surrounding alumni career coaching programs (Wolff-Eisenberg & Braddlee, 2018). There are few studies that collect student perceptions of participating in a university alumni career coaching program, and there are no studies that explore career coaching programs through the alumni perspective. Additionally, evaluation of mentoring and related programs are typically mixed methods or quantitative, where quantitative approaches tend to dominate (Sorrentino, 2007). Study findings can add to university alumni career coaching program literature generally, and qualitative studies exploring alumni perceptions specifically.

In addition to the literature, this study has implications for assessing the significance of term slippage. Coaching is specifically founded in goal setting and goal attainment (Müller & Kotte, 2020). Mentoring can function with or without goals, as they are not a foundational component of mentorship (Lunsford et al., 2017). Understanding operational functions, foundations, and definitions of coaching and mentoring can be pivotal to designing a program (Jones & Smith, 2022). Although mentoring and coaching are often used interchangeably, their foundational differences can enhance higher education in evaluating progress and designing components of mentoring and coaching programs (Inzer & Crawford, 2005; Jones & Smith, 2022).

Colleges, universities, and other stakeholders hold unique perspectives on relative research of university alumni career coaching programs. There are implications that go beyond CALS college, students, and alumni, as results can inform other colleges, universities, and stakeholders about the CASS Career Coaching Program effectiveness. Findings encompassing career advancement, student success, alumni effectiveness and engagement, and program effectiveness can offer additional support to justify the significance of alumni involvement in a program that fosters student success. While alumni mentoring programs are common in higher education, there is a unique construct of career coaching that can offer specific personal and professional development opportunities for university students. Understanding first-hand perceptions of students and alumni coaches of their experiences in the CASS Career Coaching Program can further evaluate the program and its effectiveness, amplifying the positive impact it has on the college, university, students, and alumni.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several areas for additional research on participants in the CASS Career Coaching Program to further enhance and support the program. One study could expand the study to include a more substantial sample size. Collecting age, demographic, academic year, and other specific characteristics could generate how students at different levels are impacted by the program and alumni coaches. Gathering this demographic information could additionally justify how specific characteristics of alumni coaches supports alumni engagement in the CASS Career Coaching Program. Identifying details of alumni coaches and students could improve the coach/coachee matching processes.

Participants were given the opportunity to voluntarily share their perceptions in the program through three check-in emails and one exit interview. Additional research could include a pre-

and post- survey interview to assess how students view their personal successes before and following the completion of the program. Findings could underscore the significance of participating in a university alumni career coaching program as a student. End-of-year focus groups catered to alumni coach evaluation could further justify alumni involvement in the program.

Another study could utilize alumni coach focus groups, allowing program facilitators to understand how alumni coaches view their perceptions of the program, as well as the collective experience. Gathering more robust information from both alumni and student participants could support program effectiveness and underscore how alumni view voluntary alumni engagement by working intergenerationally in the program.

An additional area of research is evaluating student career-ready competencies that prepare individuals for the workforce. Understanding competencies of student success gained from students in the program, which include academic, critical thinking, communication, self-management, collaboration, adaptability and resilience, digital literacy, and social and emotional awareness, could support how alumni career coaching programs promote career readiness, employability, and readiness in students.

Additional research could also explore competencies alumni coaches gain from their participation in the program. Specifically, a post-survey could collect skills, competencies, and strategies learned in the program, illustrating personal and professional development. Understanding how alumni coaches develop in the program could promote marketing, experiences, retention, and motivations.

Furthermore, this research could be expanded by investigating participant program attrition. This would require the study to go beyond participants who completed the program; thus,

surpassing the requirements of participating in this study. Conducting exit interviews immediately to participants who drop the program would be significant in understanding reasoning for removing their participation entirely. Findings could inform program facilitators how to avoid future attrition, as well as increase retention and positive program experiences.

Moreover, it is recommended that the primary researcher intentionally communicate program findings to other program facilitators and key stakeholders in effort to improve the program. The primary researcher had the most experience with participants and research content, making the primary researcher the most knowledgeable of study findings specifically and participants generally. The primary researcher can present findings through a formal Zoom meeting, in-person presentation, or informal discussion with program facilitators and stakeholders.

Intentionally communicating to all program facilitators could additionally enhance a holistic understanding and knowledge of the CASS Career Coaching Program that can be passed down to future program facilitators. Additionally, presenting study findings to stakeholders could further justify why their support of the CASS Career Coaching Program is significant and needed in the future. Communicating results could also expand more opportunities to share about the CASS Career Coaching Program with funding sources, the college Department Head, and other influential organizations and individuals.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Coachee Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Thank you, [name] for taking the time to talk with me today. I really appreciate your time and willingness to provide your perceptions of the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program.

In interviewing you, I would like to understand your perceptions of your involvement in the CALS Alumni for Student Success (also known as CASS) Career Coaching Program, and your perceptions of the overall program. I would like to emphasize that I am interested in learning more about how you perceive mentorship and this program, so please answer provided questions as honestly as possible and as open as you feel comfortable. This interview will take 30 minutes to one hour and will consist of 16 questions.

(read through consent form)

After thoroughly reading through the consent form that was sent to you prior to this interview, do you consent to your participation in this interview and the audio recording? Please let me know if I can answer any of your questions.

During the interview, I will be recording both audio and visual through the Zoom recording feature. The visual portion of this recording will be deleted immediately following the interview. The Zoom recording will not be shared and will only be used to accurately transcribe the answers you provide to the questions. Pseudonyms will be utilized, making answers confidential but not necessarily anonymous.

Do you have any questions?
Let's begin!

Interview Questions:

Coachee Interviews: This interview will be focused on the perspectives of CALS coachees in the CASS Career Coaching Program and will address Coachee Research Questions.

1. To start off, can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Research Question 1: Explore student perceptions of mentorship and coaching within the CASS Career Coaching Program.

2. How do you see mentorship?
 - a. Can you describe past mentorship experiences that influenced your definition?
3. How do you see coaching?
 - a. Can you describe past coaching experiences that influenced your definition?

4. How would you describe any similarities or differences between mentorship and coaching?
 - a. How would you describe differences between mentorship and coaching?
5. How do you see mentoring and coaching both working within the CASS Career Coaching Program?

Research Question 2: Identify student motivations for participating in the alumni career coaching program.

6. Prior to this program, what made you take initiative towards your future career?
 - a. How sure were you of what you wanted to pursue post-grad?
 - b. What made you want to participate in this program?
7. Prior to this program, had you ever looked for other resources for career advancement?
8. What was your main motivation for participating in this program?
 - a. Can you describe a specific example?

Research Question 3: Explore student perceptions of CALS alumni as career coaches.

9. Can you describe your experience with your CALS alumni career coach?
10. To what extent do you feel your experience with your alumni career coach has already or might impact you and your future?
 - a. Have they been able to provide you with the knowledge and tools necessary to reach your career goals?
11. What were your initial perceptions of having a CALS alum as a career coach in the program?
 - a. To what extent have those perceptions changed during your time in the program?
 - b. To what extent would you consider alumni as effective career coaches?

Research Question 4: Explore student perceptions of program successes and challenges.

12. Can you describe your experience participating in the CASS Career Coaching Program?
 - a. What successes have you experienced in the program?
 - b. What challenges have you experienced in the program?
13. To what extent have you been able to achieve the goals you set for yourself at the beginning of the program?
14. In what ways has this program changed your feelings about the college or the university?
15. After going through the program, in your future career, is this something they would like to do?

16. What recommendations do you have for us as we implement the second year of the program?

Appendix B. Coaches Interview Protocol

Introduction:

Thank you, [name] for taking the time to talk with me today. I really appreciate your time and willingness to provide your perceptions of the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program.

In interviewing you, I would like to understand your perceptions of your involvement in the CALS Alumni for Student Success (also known as CASS) Career Coaching Program, and your perceptions of the overall program. I would like to emphasize that I am interested in learning more about how you perceive mentorship and this program, so please answer provided questions as honestly as possible and as open as you feel comfortable. This interview will take 30 minutes to one hour and will consist of 15 questions.

(read through consent form)

After thoroughly reading through the consent form that was sent to you prior to this interview, do you consent to your participation in this interview and the audio recording? Please let me know if I can answer any of your questions.

During the interview, I will be recording both audio and visual through the Zoom recording feature. The visual portion of this recording will be deleted immediately following the interview. The Zoom recording will not be shared and will only be used to accurately transcribe the answers you provide to the questions. Pseudonyms will be utilized, making answers confidential but not necessarily anonymous.

Do you have any questions?
Let's begin!

Interview Questions:

Coach Interviews: This interview will be focused on the perspectives of CALS alumni career coaches in the CASS Career Coaching Program and will address Coach Research Questions.

1. To start off, can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Research Question 5: Explore alumni perceptions of mentorship and coaching within the CASS Career Coaching Program.

2. How do you see mentorship?
 - a. Can you describe past mentorship experiences that influenced your definition?
3. How do you see coaching?
 - a. Can you describe past coaching experiences that influenced your definition?

4. How would you describe any similarities or differences between mentorship and coaching?
 - a. How would you describe differences between mentorship and coaching?
5. How do you see mentoring and coaching both working within the CASS Career Coaching Program?

Research Question 6: Identify alumni motivations for participating in the alumni career coaching program.

6. Prior to this program, what made you take initiative towards helping CALS students?
 - a. What made you want to participate in this program?
7. Prior to this program, had you ever helped anyone else towards career advancement?
8. What was your main motivation for participating in this program?
 - a. Can you describe a specific example?

Research Question 7: Explore alumni perceptions of CALS alumni as career coaches.

9. Can you describe your experience serving a CALS student as an alumni career coach?
10. To what extent have you perceived your ability to impact your coachee now and in the future?
 - a. Were you able to provide you with the knowledge and tools necessary for your coachee to reach their career goals?
11. What were your initial perceptions of being a career coach in the program as both an alumni and expert?
 - a. To what extent have those perceptions changed during your time in the program?
 - b. To what extent would you consider alumni as effective career coaches?

Research Question 8: Explore alumni perceptions of program successes and challenges.

12. Can you describe your experience participating in the CASS Career Coaching Program?
 - a. What successes have you experienced in the program?
 - b. What challenges have you experienced in the program?
13. To what extent have you seen your coachee achieve their goals you helped them set for themselves at the beginning of the program?
15. In what ways has this program changed your feelings about the college or the university?
15. What recommendations do you have for us as we implement the second year of the program?

Appendix C. IRB Exempt Status Letter

Dear Charity Stallings,

Date: 6/11/2024

Title: Examining alumni and student perceptions: A qualitative evaluation of an alumni career coaching program.

IRB#: 27106

The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been approved on 06/11/2024 as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations [45 CFR 46.104 (d)(2)]. Provided that the only participation of the subjects is as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review. This approval does not expire, but any changes must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

1. This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NC State University projects, the Assurance Number is: FWA00003429.
2. Any changes to the research must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
3. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days.
4. When all research activities (including analysis of identifiable data) are completed, please submit a study closure request.
5. As a part of routine best practices, the NC State IRB office engages in post approval monitoring activities. Please refer to the NC State University IRB website.

Please forward a copy of this letter to your faculty sponsor, if applicable
Thank you.

Sincerely,
NCSU IRB Office

Appendix D. Student Recruitment Email Protocol

Hi [insert name],

On behalf of the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Programs, we are pleased to inform you that you have been randomly selected to participate in an exit interview. While your participation is not required, your thoughts would be insightful into improving this program in the future.

We would conduct your interview through Zoom, and it will only last 30 minutes to 1 hour. In order to participate, please thoroughly read the Student Consent Form and reply “Yes” to this email. Replying “Yes” will show you want to participate in the study.

If you choose to participate, further information will be provided about potential dates and times for an interview. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to reach out.

Thank you,
Charity Stallings

Appendix E. Student Exempt Consent Form Protocol

Student Exempt Consent Form

Interviews, Focus Groups, and Benign Behavioral Interventions

Title of Study: Examining alumni and student perceptions: A qualitative evaluation of an alumni career coaching program.

IRB Protocol: 27106

Principal Investigator(s): Catherine Sanders, catherine_sanders@ncsu.edu, (919) 513-5936

Funding Source: None

Collaborating Researchers: Charity Stallings, cqstalli@ncsu.edu, and (252) 333-6821

You are being asked to participate in a research study about your participation in the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program. Participation is strictly voluntary. You must be 18 years of age or older, reside in the United States, and an alumni coach or coachee during the 2023/2024 program to participate in this study.

If you participate in this study, you will participate in an interview that will be held virtually over Zoom. Each participant will participate in only one interview, which will last 30 minutes to one hour in length. Generally, the content of questions asked will include: your idea of mentorship, participation in the program, motivations to participate, how you perceive alumni as career coaches, and strengths and weaknesses of the program. For the purposes of dissecting the data and confidentiality, the audio recording feature will be utilized on Zoom. We ask that you also leave your camera on during the interview, if you feel comfortable doing so. The video recording will be deleted immediately following the interview and will be used only to build rapport between interviewer and interviewee.

You can choose to not participate in the study or stop participating at any time by letting the researcher know that you no longer want to participate. As a participant, you can interrupt the researcher at any point during the interview to stop the research activity. After the interview process is complete, you also have the opportunity to remove your participation by emailing the researcher at any time. If you choose to not participate during the interview or afterwards, all data that we have collected from you will be deleted immediately.

While we ask everyone in the interview to keep what's said during our discussion private, we cannot guarantee confidentiality of your responses. Please only share what you're comfortable with others knowing.

Participants will be video, and audio recorded during the research activities. Video recordings will be deleted immediately following the interview and will be used only for building rapport. If you do not want your audio information collected, you cannot participate in this research. We would like to use these recordings for transcription only. We will keep these recordings until transcriptions have been verified, which will take at least four months.

There are minimal risks associated with your participation in this research. There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this research.

If you have any questions about the research or how it is implemented, please contact the student researcher, Charity Stallings at cqstallii@ncsu.edu and (252) 333-6821. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Catherine Sanders, at catherine_sanders@ncsu.edu and 919-513-5936. Please reference study number 27106 when contacting anyone about this project.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or are concerned with your treatment throughout the research process, please contact the NC State University IRB Director at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or fill out a confidential form online at <https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/compliance/research-compliance/irb/irb-forms-and-templates/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/>

If you consent to participate in this research study, please reply to the recruitment email with “Yes.” You will have the opportunity to give your verbal consent prior to starting the interview.

Appendix F. Alumni Recruitment Email Protocol

Hi [insert name],

On behalf of the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Programs, we are pleased to inform you that you have been randomly selected to participate in an exit interview. While your participation is not required, your thoughts would be insightful into improving this program in the future.

We would conduct your interview through Zoom, and it will only last 30 minutes to 1 hour. In order to participate, please thoroughly read the [Alumni Consent Form](#) and reply “Yes” to this email. Replying “Yes” will show you want to participate in the study.

If you choose to participate, further information will be provided about potential dates and times for an interview. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to reach out.

Thank you,
Charity Stallings

Appendix G. Alumni Recruitment Email Protocol

Alumni Exempt Consent Form

Interviews, Focus Groups, and Benign Behavioral Interventions

Title of Study: Examining alumni and student perceptions: A qualitative evaluation of an alumni career coaching program.

IRB Protocol: 27106

Principal Investigator(s): Catherine Sanders, catherine_sanders@ncsu.edu, (919) 513-5936

Funding Source: None

Collaborating Researchers: Charity Stallings, cqstalli@ncsu.edu, and (252) 333-6821

You are being asked to participate in a research study about your participation in the CALS Alumni for Student Success Career Coaching Program. Participation is strictly voluntary. You must be 18 years of age or older, reside in the United States, and an alumni coach or coachee during the 2023/2024 program to participate in this study.

If you participate in this study, you will participate in an interview that will be held virtually over Zoom. Each participant will participate in only one interview, which will last 30 minutes to one hour in length. Generally, the content of questions asked will include: your idea of mentorship, participation in the program, motivations to participate, how you perceive alumni as career coaches, and strengths and weaknesses of the program. For the purposes of dissecting the data and confidentiality, the audio recording feature will be utilized on Zoom. We ask that you also leave your camera on during the interview, if you feel comfortable doing so. The video recording will be deleted immediately following the interview and will be used only to build rapport between interviewer and interviewee.

You can choose to not participate in the study or stop participating at any time by letting the researcher know that you no longer want to participate. As a participant, you can interrupt the researcher at any point during the interview to stop the research activity. After the interview process is complete, you also have the opportunity to remove your participation by emailing the researcher at any time. If you choose to not participate during the interview or afterwards, all data that we have collected from you will be deleted immediately.

While we ask everyone in the interview to keep what's said during our discussion private, we cannot guarantee confidentiality of your responses. Please only share what you're comfortable with others knowing.

Participants will be video, and audio recorded during the research activities. Video recordings will be deleted immediately following the interview and will be used only for building rapport. If you do not want your audio information collected, you cannot participate in this research. We would like to use these recordings for transcription only. We will keep these recordings until transcriptions have been verified, which will take at least four months.

There are minimal risks associated with your participation in this research. There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this research.

If you have any questions about the research or how it is implemented, please contact the student researcher, Charity Stallings at cqstallii@ncsu.edu and (252) 333-6821. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Catherine Sanders, at catherine_sanders@ncsu.edu and 919-513-5936. Please reference study number 27106 when contacting anyone about this project.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or are concerned with your treatment throughout the research process, please contact the NC State University IRB Director at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or fill out a confidential form online at <https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/compliance/research-compliance/irb/irb-forms-and-templates/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/>

If you consent to participate in this research study, please reply to the recruitment email with “Yes.” You will have the opportunity to give your verbal consent prior to starting the interview