

EMPOWERING STUDENTS TOWARDS SUCCESS THROUGH COACHING: EXPLORING STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT LEHIGH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Attending college can be a transformative experience for many students where they have the opportunity to flourish both academically and socially. However, anecdotally, we know that many students at Lehigh who belong to a complex or culturally 'othered' identity may feel that existing resources are not culturally attuned, therefore having an impact on their success and well-being.
- When referring to "a complex or culturally 'othered' identity," this encompasses a wide range of students including first-generation college attendees, those from low-income backgrounds, international students, and members of the LGBTQ+ community, each of whom may face unique challenges and experiences in their academic journey.
- After collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from students, which included 75 surveys and 11 interviews, we discovered that students who identify as being culturally 'othered' face specific challenges. These challenges include loneliness, cultural and identity issues, financial difficulties, and language barriers. Notably, each of these challenges is uniquely influenced by the students' cultural backgrounds.
- We also found that to feel more successful, heard, and understood, they desired (a) active listening and engagement, (b) emotional support, validation, and healing, (c) feedback and recognition, and (d) consistency.
- To guide Lehigh students through the challenges they may experience, we propose coaching techniques and services that are grounded in principles of self-responsibility, respect, integrity, and acceptance, which can be further enhanced by a commitment to sensitivity and awareness around the unique experiences of those with 'othered' identities, including but not limited to culture.

RECOMMENDATION

Coaching is distinguished from other approaches with its client-centered, collaborative nature and its emphasis on individual potential and personal transformation. By guiding clients to explore various aspects of their identity and values, coaching empowers clients to navigate their unique path toward self-discovery and growth.

“A coach helps clients open up to new ways of believing, acting, and interacting with themselves, others, and the larger social context. Coaching involves deepening self-awareness, expanding repertoires of choice, and taking new steps forward to create a better life and world”

- Dr. Angelina Rodriguez

Assistant Vice Provost for Global Learning;
Teaching Associate Professor, College of Health

Passmore's (2010) fundamental principles of coaching set a strong foundation for the practice. His principles are listed below:

- Self-responsibility
- Respect
- Acceptance
- Confidentiality
- Integrity
- Transparency
- Flexibility
- Neutrality

Transitioning from these core principles, we have integrated additional elements such as:

- **Client-Centered:** The coaching process is focused on the client, respecting their individuality and tailoring the approach to their specific needs and goals.
- **Goal-Oriented:** Coaching is typically structured around clear, achievable goals set by the client, with the coach facilitating the process of goal clarification and development.
- **Empowering:** Encouraging self-discovery, fostering confidence, and supporting clients in taking responsibility for their actions and decisions.
- **Reflective:** Through the process of encouraging clients to reflect on their experiences, beliefs, and behaviors, this reflection can lead to greater self-awareness and insight, which is essential for personal growth.
- **Action-Oriented:** Coaching emphasizes the importance of action where the coach helps clients translate their plans into concrete actions and steps towards their goals.
- **Continuous Learning:** Coaches are committed to their own professional development and learning, continually improving their skills and knowledge to provide the best support to their clients.

Coaching must transcend its foundational principles to embrace a broader acceptance and sensitivity towards those with different 'othered' identities or cultures. This attunement is crucial in recognizing and valuing the intricate identities of students from diverse backgrounds. This approach will address the gap in current coaching practices that often overlook cultural factors, ensuring that students of all backgrounds are understood,

supported, and empowered to achieve personal and professional growth within the university setting. Coaching at Lehigh should acknowledge the richness of diversity, enabling students to leverage their cultural strengths and navigate their personal academic, and professional aspirations with confidence and support.

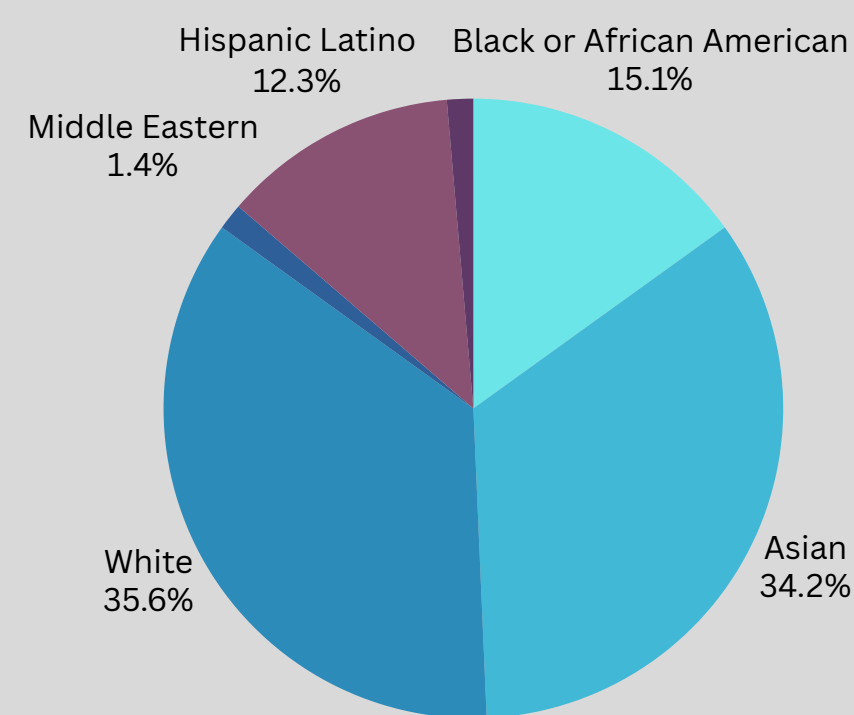
INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Originating from the field of sports in the 1960s, to evolving into business throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and then diversifying more in the 1990s, today coaching is used for personal development in various fields such as life coaching, executive coaching, and career coaching (Passmore, 2010). It can be used on the individual level, team level, and organizational levels. With the current complex global interconnectedness but also “volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) characterized by constant change, including dangerous ruptures and positive innovation” (Johansen, 2007; Bernstein, 2014 as cited by Abbott & Salomaa, 2016), cross-cultural coaching has emerged with its focus on “a commitment to the sensitive treatment of relevant cultural beliefs, dimensions, preferences, orientations and practices” (Abbott & Salomaa, 2016). Passmore and Law (2015, as cited in Abbott & Salomaa, 2016) propose a ‘pragmatic implementation model’ for cross-cultural coaching, “continuous professional development, appreciation of the cultural environment, coach fluidity and capacity for integration, cross-cultural emotional intelligence, and communication methods and feedback mechanisms”.

Coaching is commonly utilized in the corporate business fields to build on leadership skills for executives. Coaching programs in college settings exist but many do not incorporate aspects that acknowledge the role of culture. They tend to focus primarily on academics (Capstick et al., 2019) or mental health and well-being (Beauchemin et al., 2021; Atad & Grant, 2021), often creating a gap in addressing how culture or other complex aspects of identity may play a dynamic role in how students can overcome their challenges.

From July through August of 2023, our team conducted 75 surveys and 11 interviews with undergraduate and graduate students at Lehigh University. The initial survey was used to capture a snapshot of how students were feeling. The subsequent interviews were used to further dive into the challenges students were experiencing and to identify the needs and desires of students to feel and be more successful. The survey and interviews both provide evidence of the need for coaching at Lehigh and provide some context of how coaching can help benefit students.

Survey Demographics



We were successful in capturing the responses of a diverse population through surveys. Below lists the specific races and ethnicities that students identified themselves with.

- **Asian**
 - Asian
 - Asian Indian
 - Asian American
 - Asian, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander
 - Asian/Nepali
 - East Asian/Chinese
 - South Asian
- **Black or African American**
 - Black/African American
 - Black/African American and Hispanic
- **Hispanic or Latino**
 - Hispanic
 - Latino
 - Latin American
 - Mexican
 - Puerto Rican
- **Middle Eastern**
 - Egyptian/Middle Eastern
 - Middle eastern
- **Other**
- **White**
 - White
 - White/European Caucasian
 - Eastern European
 - Slavic

Students at Lehigh listed several aspects of their identity that they felt lacked a space for expression:



Here are some of the explanations students provided when they were asked whether they feel their identity is culturally complex and/or othered in anyway:

- “Although my parents are Asian, I was born in America. I don’t really conform to Asian standards nor do I look like what an American would look like.”
- “I’m not sure if this is considered “culturally complex” but I am a part of the LGBT community which makes me feel “othered” frequently.”
- “I grew up as a Chasidic Jew and my family is still practicing but I am not. I also am Israeli and American so I have conflicting cultures at play in my life.”
- “Foster child, grew up with abusive parents/in poverty, first-generation.”
- “I am nonbinary, bisexual, and polyamorous in a country that actively looks to criminalize these things.”

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Problem and Cause

The data from our team's electronic survey and participant interviews reveals that students at Lehigh with culturally "othered" identities face distinct challenges. These challenges, rooted in their unique cultural contexts, may seem ordinary at first glance but are often complex and nuanced due to the significant role their culture or identity plays in shaping their experiences.

In 11 interviews with Lehigh students, prevalent themes emerged highlighting the barriers they face when adapting to Lehigh. The most common, mentioned in 15 instances, was loneliness, isolation, and lack of sense of belonging, indicating a significant struggle with emotional disconnection and alienation. Close behind, with 14 mentions, was culture and identity, reflecting difficulties in expressing and gaining acceptance for their unique cultural identities. Financial challenges were also a notable concern, brought up in 9 interviews, pointing to economic hurdles impacting student experiences. Lastly, language barriers were identified 8 times, underscoring communication struggles that further exacerbate these challenges. These themes collectively paint a picture of students grappling with diverse and complex issues while trying to adapt to life at Lehigh.

Methods of overcoming barriers

We also further investigated what methods students utilize to overcome such barriers to adapting to Lehigh. The most mentioned method was connecting with other students alike, having been mentioned 14 times in total. Students repeatedly brought up the importance of bonding with other students with similar experiences in their well-being, suggesting the positive effect of social support.

Moreover, persevering alone, which is when students decide to work through their challenges alone because they feel that no one can understand and help or when they proceed without solving the issue, was the second most repeated theme. This indicates students' tendency to avoid facing their challenges.

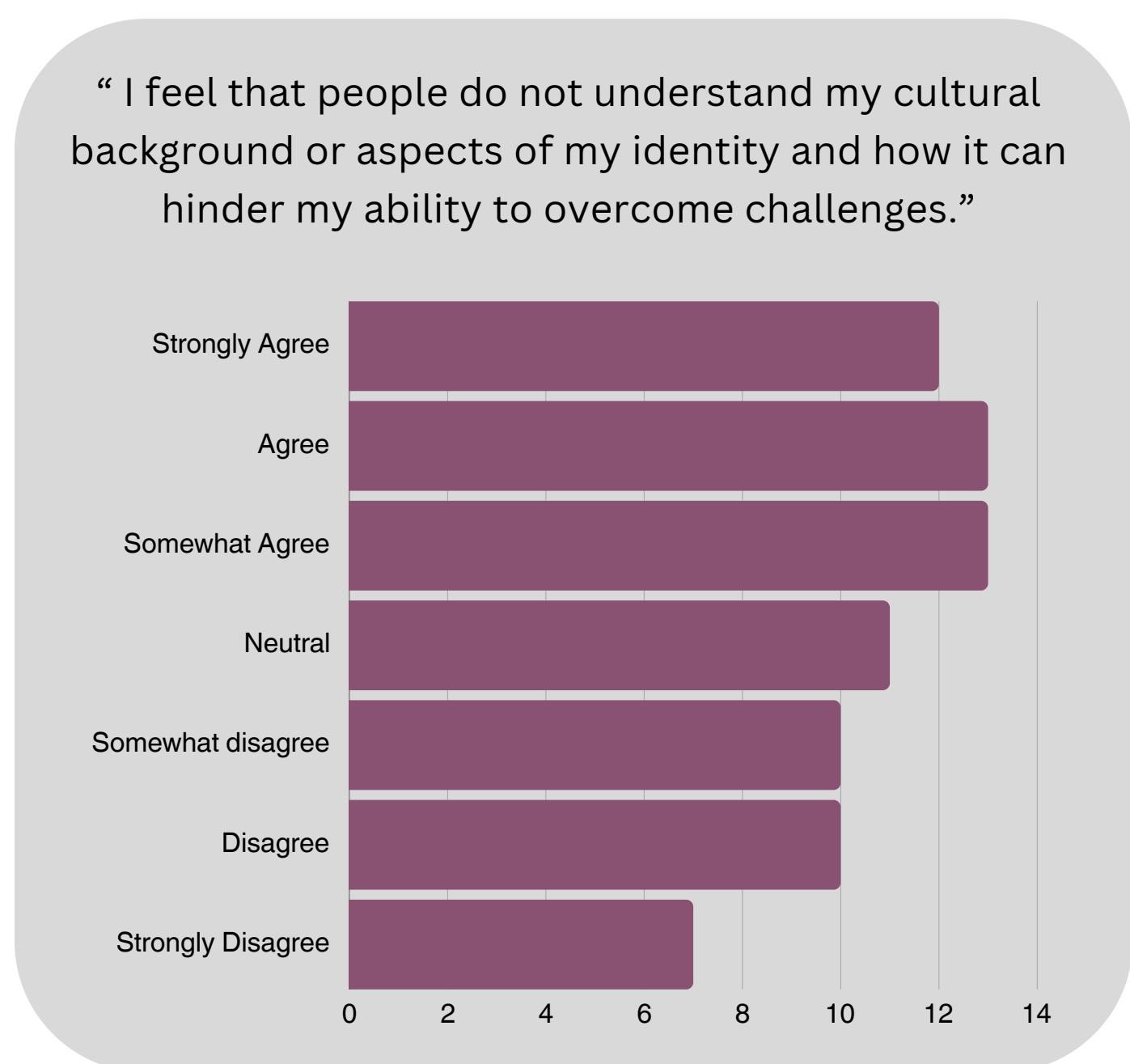
Other common themes we have identified were discussing and sharing culture and adapting to culture, each mentioned 8 and 3 times respectively. One is defined as introducing their own cultures to others as a method for a more positive experience, and the other is defined as the tendency to keep their culture to themselves and/or assimilate into the new culture around them, which has a negative connotation among students. This highlights the fact that we need to encourage students to talk about their cultures as it may create a more positive experience for them.

Last but not least, asking for help/seeking guidance, which includes times in which students start pursuing

external assistance was mentioned 6 times in total by our interviewees. Strikingly, it was common for students to persevere alone first and then ask for help after running out of personal resources and reaching exhaustion level.

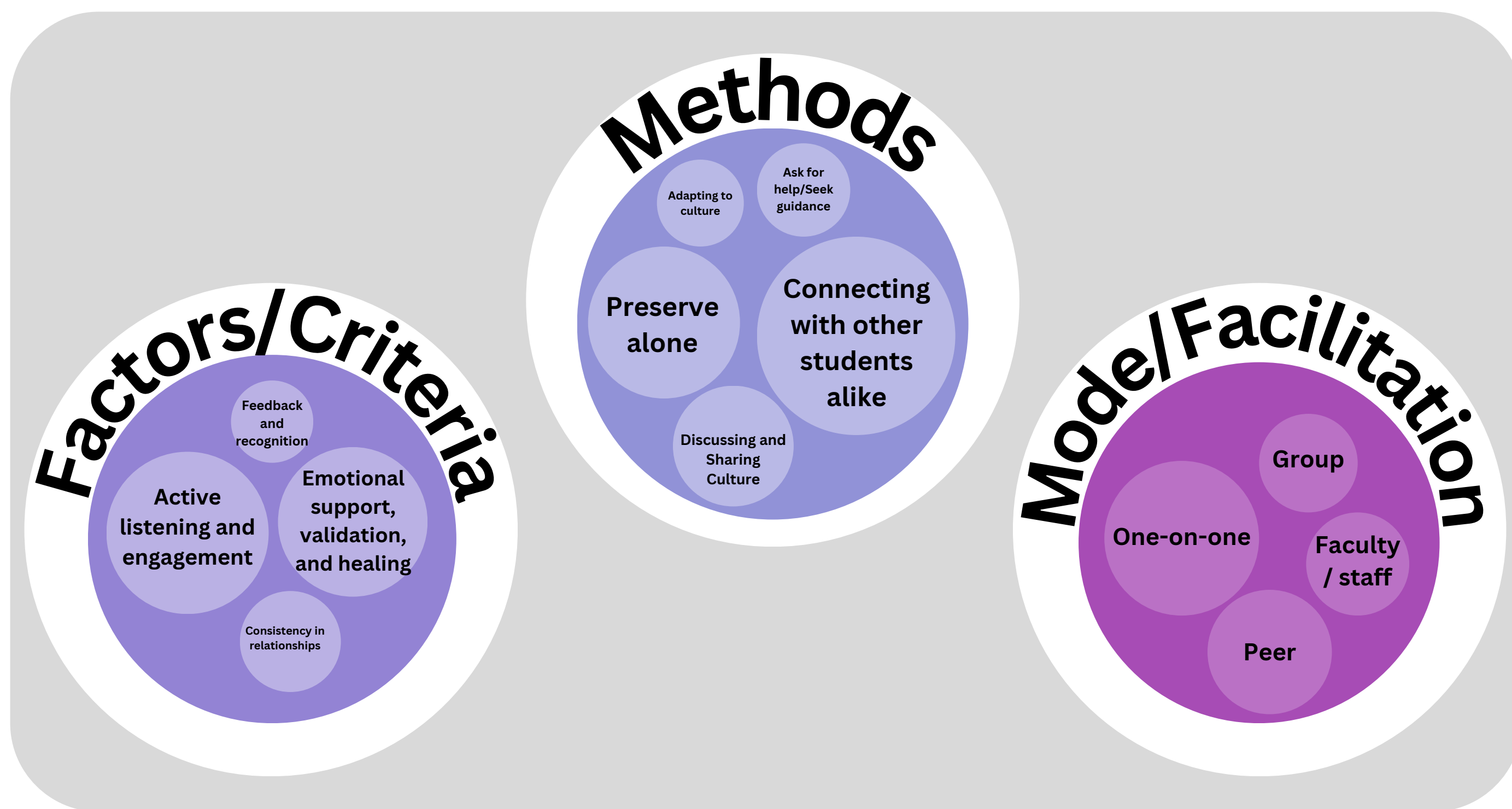
What does this mean?

In the survey, of the 75 students who were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement "I feel that people do not understand my cultural background or aspects of my identity", 16% of participants strongly agreed, another 16% agreed, and 17% somewhat agreed. This totals to approximately 49% of the respondents expressing some form of agreement, which is notably higher than the combined 36% of participants who disagree, strongly disagree, and somewhat disagree with the statement. This data paired with data gathered from the interviews suggest a need for more culturally sensitive and inclusive resources and support systems within predominantly white institutions to better accommodate the diverse needs of all students.



STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR NEEDS AND DESIRES FOR SUCCESS

During interviews, we explored students' needs, desires, or expectations for success, by asking them questions such as, "Can you define the capacity in which someone can positively influence your abilities and potential or help you move towards your goals?", "What makes you feel heard and understood?", and "What kind of support might help you accomplish your goals and further develop yourself?". The four themes that emerged among responses were (a) active listening and engagement, (b) emotional support, validation, and healing, (c) feedback and recognition, and (d) consistency.



Active Listening

The theme that occurred most was ‘active listening and engagement’. We characterized this as the student expressing their desire for someone to closely listen to what they have to say and to completely understand what the student is saying before they offer any feedback. Active listening and engagement came up eleven times. Examples of how students expressed their desire for active listening and recognition include the following quotes:

- “I just need to express what I'm going through. Not that I need to hear the person giving me advice. I just need to externalize. It works because I have the sense that someone else is supporting my thoughts.”
- “You can tell by their response if they're like responding to what you said or just talking about something [...] then they talk about their own thing, and then you realize that they're not talking to you. They're talking at you”

Emotional support, validation, and healing

The next theme to occur most frequently was ‘emotional support, validation, and healing’ among students, emphasizing the significance of empathetic connections. This theme emerged repeatedly as students expressed the lack of opportunities to communicate emotions with others and their desire to release the emotions and thoughts going through their minds. Emotional support, validation, and healing came up seven times. Examples of how students expressed their desire for emotional support, validation, and healing include the following quotes:

- “I just need to express what I'm going through. Not that I need to hear the person giving me advice. I just need to externalize. It works because I have the sense that someone else is supporting my thoughts.”

Feedback and recognition

The third most frequently mentioned code in interviews involving the needs of students is ‘feedback and recognition’. Students’ desire to receive different perspectives and assurance in their direction in both academic and personal environments is included in this theme. Students repeatedly expressed their need for external support and validation and emphasized the importance of such acknowledgments in their confidence, sense of achievement, and motivation for their further success. Feedback and recognition came up four times.

- “I just need motivation, like saying ‘Okay, you're doing good. Just keep going.’”

Consistency

Lastly, we identified 'consistency' as another emerging code. This code, as we defined it, revolves around an ongoing relationship between the student and someone they look for guidance, which continues to develop over time. With consistency, the student can rely on this person who exhibits consistency for meaningful interactions. In this, each interaction builds from the previous one. Consistency came up three times. An example of how students expressed their desire for consistency include the following:

- "And then consistency because like you can have really one good conversation with someone, but it might just be the last conversation”

STUDENT PREFERENCES ON COACHING MODE AND FACILITATION

To determine students’ preferences when it comes to coaching sessions and their settings, we included a section inquiring what types of sessions

students would feel comfortable participating in both in our interviews and surveys. The main categories were one-on-one vs group sessions and sessions with faculty/staff vs peer coaches.

One-on-one vs group coaching

In both the surveys and interviews, most students expressed their preference for a one-on-one setting, which involves only a coach and a coachee, primarily due to the benefits of privacy and personalized feedback. Specifically, 49.3% of our survey respondents chose individual sessions while 34.2% chose group sessions. It is worth noting that some students lean towards a group setting, involving multiple coachees, as they find it offers a broader range of insights and a sense of companionship.

- “Sometimes you have something private you don't wanna share, one-on-one sessions are helpful at that time.”
- “If you are in an auditorium talking about how you should express your feelings, I'll never open my mouth.”
- “I think I would see myself being a lot more open if it's just one-on-one.”
- “Groups, I'll be a lot more quiet but I would like to listen to other people, like similarities, and also what I can learn from them.”

Faculty/staff vs peer coaching

Sessions with faculty/staff or peers were equally favored by students with their different advantages and disadvantages. Students expressed that they would feel more comfortable with faculty/staff coaches as it is more productive and confidential. On the other hand, peer coaches are preferred because it can be less formal and more engaging. However, some students also expressed their skepticism about productivity and confidentiality in peer coaching sessions.

- "I think peer would be the best because [...] I think those [conversations with peers] are very necessary when it comes to understanding different cultural perspectives."
- “I would definitely feel comfortable as long as the other peer is as well equally responsive.”
- "I feel more comfortable talking to an adult. If I have some issues or questions, I feel comfortable talking to the office because I think that's quicker and more efficient."
- “I would say one-on-one sessions with, for example, good professors [who] really care. I have a list of professors that I think they would listen to me and they would pay attention and they would try to help.”

SOLUTION (WHY COACHING):

Given the comprehensive data and narratives gathered from the students at Lehigh, it is evident that the implementation of a robust coaching program that takes cultural differences is not just beneficial, but imperative. Coaching, grounded in the principles of respect, acceptance, and flexibility, provides a tailored approach to support students from diverse cultural backgrounds, addressing the unique challenges they face such as loneliness, cultural integration, and financial stress. It offers a structured yet personalized framework that empowers students to navigate their academic and social landscapes with confidence. By fostering an environment of active listening, consistent support, and cultural sensitivity, coaching stands as a pivotal tool in transforming the educational experience into one where all students can thrive and succeed. Therefore, instituting a coaching initiative, aligned with the students' expressed needs, is a strategic step towards ensuring their success and well-being at Lehigh.

DID YOU KNOW?

Coaching programs in college settings do exist, in both small and large schools. Although the following coaching program does not exclusively focus on overcoming personal challenges and working through how complex identities may play a role, it demonstrates that coaching can be successful in college settings.

To improve success among college students, Dr. Rita DeBate and Dr. Jennifer Bleck at USF College of Public Health collaborated with two of their MPH students, Jessica Garcia and Amy Gatto, to create a health and wellness coaching program for students at the University. A total of 499 students expressed interest in the program with 120 responding to a retrospective survey about their experience. With 81 students who attended an initial meeting with a coach, most struggled with managing time and stress.

Most students attended an average of 4 coaching sessions, attributing this to increased confidence and motivation. The coaching program was overall successful as students reported an improvement in self-efficacy toward behavior change and achieving their goals. When asked specifically about their relationship with the coach, students described feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness which influenced motivation, confidence, and readiness for behavior change. At the end of the program, 96% of students said that they would recommend the program to a friend.

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