

COMMENTARY

Comment: To reach college finish line, students need a coach

Coaches help executives develop skills and stay focused; why shouldn't we do the same for students?

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By Neil Peterson

Washington State University President Kirk Schulz recently told a forum I attended in Seattle that only 42 percent of the 25,000 students at WSU graduate in four years and only 67 percent of WSU students graduate in six years. WSU is not an outlier – and actually outperforms the national average six-year college graduation rate of 59 percent. Meanwhile, almost 20,000 Washington high school seniors – 20 percent – will not graduate with their classes this year.

Thousands of students are not completing the diplomas and degrees that form the most reliable way to get out of poverty. While may focus on education funding, it's not enough. Scholarships don't guarantee or even predict completion and graduation. Something is missing.

We're in the middle of graduation season, with 59 percent of Washington state grads looking toward attending college. As these starry-eyed youngsters anticipate their futures, I worry they won't hit the finish line, that too few will earn the college diploma they're striving for. And too many are left behind without even completing high school.

It's not because they're unintelligent or lazy. It's because their executive functioning attributes – like persistence, resilience and organizational skills – are inadequate, often due to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). They need some help to get through.

Speaking as an executive with ADHD and the father of two children who take after me, I believe a crucial support that students need is to have a coach.

I started the Edge Foundation in 2005 with the idea that coaches will help kids improve their executive functioning skills – the ability to plan, prioritize, focus, follow through, adjust to setbacks, persevere. These executive function skills in turn will assist students in developing agency – the ability to own their own decisions and make good decisions, both in school and in life. We know now that this improves their learning - and their ability to graduate. Our results over the past decade show that when young people have coaches, they do not drop out.

I'd like to see all incoming high school students and incoming college freshman have access to a coach. Just as executives hire coaches, students should have coaches available to help them navigate high school and college – because we know what happens if they fail to navigate these milestones.

I'm happy to heed the advice of those more successful than I. Former Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt told Fortune that the best advice he ever received was: "Have a coach."

When Google board member John Doerr suggested he get a coach, Schmidt questioned him. "Why would I need a coach? Is something wrong? He said 'No...Everybody needs a coach...Every famous athlete, every famous performer has somebody who's a coach, somebody who can watch what they're doing...They can give the perspective.'...A coach really, really helps."

At times during my career a weekly meeting with my coach helped me set and meet goals, discuss priorities and next steps, and helped me overcome challenges. The coach didn't tell me what to do, but rather allowed me to think through what I needed to do to develop my own strategies and solutions and steps that I wouldn't do myself because I was too busy with other things. A coach helped me think through what I was doing, why I was doing it, and what I would do in the future. It's unbelievably helpful and makes me much more productive and more effective.

If an executive coach makes sense for CEOs, then it makes sense for every student who wants to graduate.

[[Neil Peterson](#), former chief executive of public transportation systems in Seattle, Oakland and Los Angeles and founding CEO of Flexcar, which was acquired by Zipcar, founded the [Edge Foundation](#), a local nonprofit that provides executive-style coaches for young people who have executive functioning challenges. Reach him at npeterson@edgefoundation.org, www.edgefoundation.org.]