

Creating an Integrated Coaching Culture in Higher Education

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Abstract

In higher education, it is a common ask to do more with less while delivering high-quality, holistic service to students. Coaching has been shown to produce significant gains in strengthening self-efficacy, improving GPA, and increasing retention through graduation (Alzen et al., 2021; Capstick et al., 2019; Catchings, 2014; Grover & Furnham, 2016; Losch et al., 2016), therefore making it a logical program to target for growth. To expand the impact of the University of Kentucky's academic coaching program, in 2020, leadership modified the Appreciative Academic Coaching framework (Bradley & Reynolds, 2021) into Integrated Success Coaching with the intent to build a coaching culture across campus. This modification created a two-pronged approach to serving students, faculty, and staff across our campus: (a) training for professionally certified International Coaching Federation (ICF) coaches across six domains, including academic life, career, finances, wellness, leadership, and identity (e.g., First Gen) to directly serve students, and (b) training in foundational coaching skills for faculty, staff, and student leaders to incorporate into their daily practice. The evolution of this coaching model has allowed for holistic support of students and immersive coaching values and practices for faculty, staff, and student leaders that have led to improved retention and better GPA outcomes for students on probation and a culture of coaching care among faculty, staff, and students.

Keywords

Appreciative Academic Coaching, Integrated Success Coaching, higher education, coaching

As student populations grow in diversity, so do their needs. To meet the diverse individual needs of college students, Transformative Learning (TL), the University of Kentucky (UK)'s centralized learning center, recognizes that students' needs must be addressed holistically as aligned with the University's four pillars of excellence: belonging and engagement, student health and wellness, academic success, and financial stability (Tracy, 2017). TL, housed within the Office of the Vice President for Student Success, has numerous programs such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, first-year experience coursework, and more that are designed to help students on their academic journey. Through various programming and experiences working with students, the Office of the Vice President of Student Success, which includes some of the authors, recognized that students' needs are complex, and support programming should reflect that complexity. Previous research has shown that academic coaching is associated with improvements in student goal attainment actions (Catchings, 2014; Grover & Furnham, 2016), decreasing melt, a phenomenon where otherwise eligible students enroll in college but then choose not to attend (Bradley et al., 2021), improving GPA (Alzen et al., 2021; Capstick et al., 2019), and increasing retention through graduation (Alzen et al., 2021; Capstick et al., 2019). Thus, TL reimaged its Appreciative Academic Coaching program to support students throughout their time at the university through a community of certified coaches and trained campus partners who share in the desire to support students across a variety of student support dimensions.

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To expand the impact of TL's coaching program, in 2020, TL leadership modified its Appreciative Academic Coaching framework (Bradley & Reynolds, 2021) into Integrated Success Coaching with an intent to build a coaching culture across campus. The Integrated Success Coaching program expanded upon previous programming that solely supported students with academic life skills by encompassing coaching related to six student dimensions: wellness, career exploration, financial wellness, leadership, and identity (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Integrated Success Coaching Student Dimensions



Note. This figure demonstrates the six student dimensions on which integrated success coaches are trained.

To accomplish this initiative, each coaching program on campus developed a training focused on their specialty to cross-train all campus coaches in the foundational coaching skills of their respective specialties. This training, which is accredited by the International Coaching Federation (ICF), was incorporated into our Appreciative Academic Coaching framework, and is now referred to as *Integrated Success Coaching*. Rather than students meeting with various coaches across campus based on a single area of expertise, such as academic life coaching or career coaching, an Integrated Success Coach could now serve students holistically across these six student success dimensions. Working with a single coach instead of multiple coaches provides the student with consistent support throughout their college journey, which is further discussed in the following sections. In addition to providing a diverse group of coaches that reflects the range of ability, socio-economic, racial, and gender identities represented by our student body, this holistic approach allows for a more widespread coaching culture with coaches operating out of various departments and offices across student success services. Furthermore, Integrated Success Coaching is introduced to students early in the college experience by integrating group coaching sessions into courses designed for first- and second-year students.

To spread the impact of foundational coaching skills at the University of Kentucky and allow students to intercept with the positive outcomes of coaching, no matter who they encounter or what path they are on, the TL coaching team created an integrated three-pronged approach to serving students: Professional Integrated Success Coaches (ISC), Integrated Success Coach Advocates for faculty/staff (ISCA), and Integrated Success Coach Advocates for student leaders (ISCA SL).

Prong #1: Professional Integrated Success Coaches

The first step of this approach was to identify who would serve as professional coaches. These coaches are divided into two camps: (a) full-time professional coaches and graduate TAs, who are responsible for serving at least 150 students each per semester through both individual and group coaching sessions as needed and (b) the “Integrated Success Coaches in the Wild” (ISCW), who are staff trained as professional coaches, even though coaching is not their full-time responsibility (see Table 1). ISCWs are expected to coach at least five students throughout the semester, however, some coach more students, depending on their full-time workload responsibilities. Although these coaches serve all students, they often specialize and serve students whose most significant need is in their area of expertise, such as veteran’s affairs, wellness, or leadership. Additionally, both ISCs and ISCWs commit to rigorous, ongoing training to earn coach certification.

The key component to the success of our Professional Integrated Success Coaches comes from the partnership that UK holds with the International Coaching Federation (ICF), which is recognized worldwide as the gold standard in coaching accreditation and certification. UK acknowledges that impactful coaching requires high-quality training, feedback, and practice. Therefore, the UK coaching team decided to develop their own ICF-accredited training for all of UK’s professional coaches. The first iteration of the training, *Appreciative Academic Coaching* (Bradley & Reynolds, 2021), evolved from the Appreciative Advising framework (Bloom et al., 2008), which is comprised of six phases: (a) *Disarm*, (b) *Discover*, (c) *Dream*, (d) *Design*, (e) *Deliver*, and (f) *Don’t Settle*. Through the first iteration of the training, we recognized the need to expand the Appreciative Academic Coaching framework to address students' needs more holistically.

To illustrate, many students previously were required to meet with multiple coaches to address their needs. One such example is a student named “Cory.” Cory was a college student seeking to maintain straight A’s, get better sleep, and run for student government. Thus, in the previous coaching ecosystem, this student would be expected to meet with an academic coach, a wellness coach, and a leadership coach. Cory’s experience, and other students like him, led us to evolve our Appreciative Academic Coaching framework into the ICF-accredited Integrated Success Coaching model.

To design the Integrated Success Coaching model, coaches from across campus shared their expertise to cross-train each other in each of the following dimensions: academic life, career, financial, identity (e.g., people with disabilities, first-generation, veterans), leadership, and wellness. We then wove this added content into the Appreciative Academic Coaching framework. This programmatic design allows students such as Cory to work with one professional coach who can meet multiple coaching needs throughout Cory’s college experience. Additionally, the ISC coaching program can now fully meet its mission “to partner with each student to inspire them to maximize their *whole student* potential” (Bradley & Reynolds, 2021).

Table 1*Comparison of the Three Prongs of ISC Participation at UK*

| Prongs | Who? | Training Level | Training Funding Source |
|---|--|---|---|
| Prong #1: Professional Integrated Success Coaches (ISC and ISCW) | Full and part-time professional coaches who partner with students in one-on- one and group coaching sessions. | 1. 60-125 hours of ICF- accredited training through UK 2. Minimum of 10 hours of mentoring with a professional coach, provided at UK 3. Minimum of 100 hours of coaching practice 4. Work toward & attain ICF Certification | University of Kentucky, Office of Student Success, Department of Transformative Learning, Integrated Success Coaching |
| Prong #2: Integrated Success Coach Advocates, Faculty & Staff (ISCA) | Faculty and staff interested in utilizing foundational coaching skills in their practice | 3 hours of ICF-accredited training through UK | University of Kentucky, Office of Student Success, Department of Transformative Learning, Integrated Success Coaching |
| Prong #3: Integrated Success Coach Advocates, Student Leaders (ISCA SL) | Students interested in utilizing foundational coaching skills in their interactions with peers and near- peers | 3 hours of ICF and CRLA- accredited training through UK | Partnership between the UK START Program and University of Kentucky, Office of Student Success, Department of Transformative Learning, Integrated Success Coaching |

In addition to individual appointments, professional Integrated Success Coaches also offer group coaching sessions. Group coaching sessions provide an opportunity for up to 30 students to work on coaching activities and develop the skills necessary for college success, while simultaneously learning from both the coaches leading the session as well as their peers' insights and experiences. Group coaching sessions are focused on one of the six dimensions and are typically delivered within the context of campus student organizations and coursework. One of the goals of the group coaching sessions is to encourage students to pursue one-on-one appointments by making Integrated Success Coaches seem more approachable to otherwise hesitant students.

All Integrated Success Coaches participate in the UK's ICF-accredited coach training and are either certified or in the process of being certified by the ICF. The ICF-accredited training is offered in person annually to select Student Success professionals at the UK who have a background in coaching or a related field and have time to coach the required number of students per semester based on their ISC or ISCW designation. The training consists of 60-

125 hours of instruction, weekly mentoring check-ins, and regular reviewing of recorded coaching sessions with feedback provided by an ICF-certified Integrated Success Coach. Additionally, professional coaches must accumulate at least 100 hours of coaching experience before they can apply for certification. The cost of the training and individual certification is covered by UK.

Feedback from the ISCs' and ISCWs' experiences with training and the coaching process has been positive. One ISC professional stated:

The ISC training gave me so many more coaching tools to help my students. I feel like we can support the students better because we can explore more openly about what is on the student's mind and what is really impacting their success instead of sticking to academic skills only.

Another ISCW described their experience stating, "I got into student success because I wanted to impact students' lives in a powerful way, but I felt like something was missing. This training gave me that ah-ha moment. This is what I signed up for."

Prong #2: Integrated Success Coach Advocate Training for Faculty and Staff

As the knowledge of the successes of professional coaching has spread across campus, so has faculty and staff interest in gaining coaching skills to best support students. All faculty and staff contribute to supporting students, but not everyone on our campus has the time or space to become a fully certified professional coach. To meet the interests of our UK employees, and to build a powerful coaching culture across our campus, we expanded our accredited training to include a three-hour, foundational coaching skills training called "Integrated Success Coach Advocate (ISCA) Training" for faculty and staff, which was later extended to the third prong of student leaders (see Table 1).

ISCAs are UK employees who positively engage students while following compassionate referral guidelines and foundational coaching practices. An ISCA is committed to our UK students and shows that commitment in their actions, language, and dedication to their own professional growth. Although the ISCAs are not certified coaches, they are UK employees who are deeply committed to our students and practice foundational coaching skills of questioning, listening, and understanding mindsets when engaging with students. All Integrated Success Coach Advocates embrace the ISCA Value-Action Statement, "I will ensure each student I interact with feels heard, gains skills, and feels valued. I will take ownership of ensuring the student has the needed information and connection with the intended person or resource" (Transformative Learning, n.d.).

The ISCA training is offered multiple times per semester both in person and virtually at no cost to UK employees. To date, approximately 75% of those employed by the Office of the Vice President for Student Success have completed the training. Feedback from the training has also been uniformly positive. One UK staff member said of the ISCA training, "I wish I had this training so much earlier in my career!" Another UK faculty member shared, "This training opened my eyes to how I can more intentionally interact with students." Completion of this training results in three ICF-accredited hours toward coaching certification.

Prong #3: Integrated Success Coach Advocate Training for Student Leaders

For the third prong, the Integrated Success Coaching team partnered with the UK's STEM Through Authentic Research & Training (START) program to identify student leaders

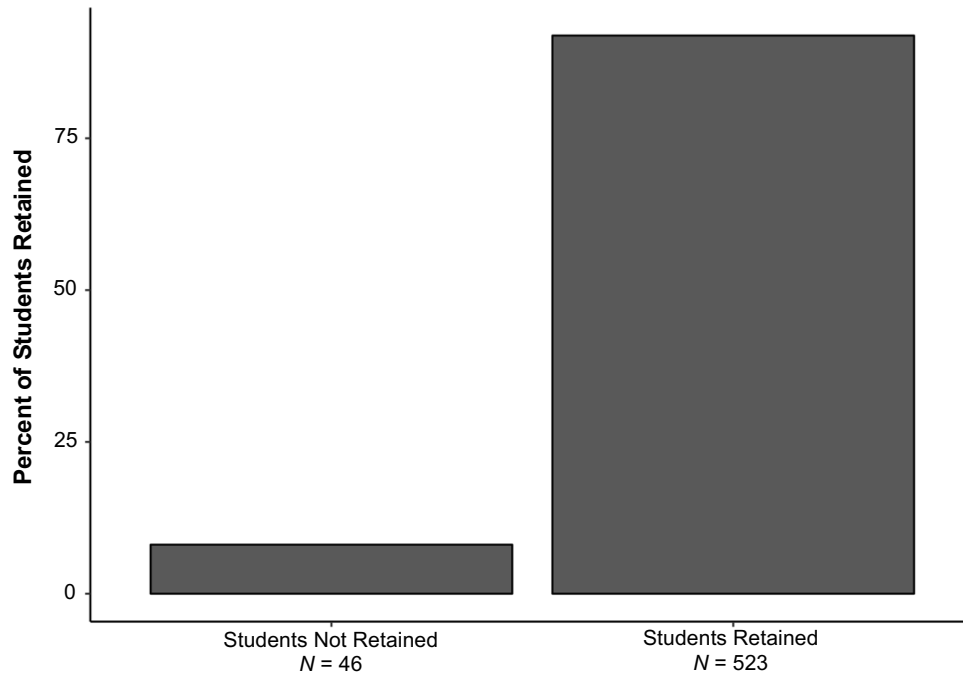
across campus interested in supporting their peers, particularly underrepresented students in STEM (Bradley et al., 2021). These students participate in a modified version of the ISCA training, which was specifically designed for students to guide their peers as well as near-peers (see Table 1). The modifications for this training include active learning strategies for undergraduate students, such as practice scenarios that are common in peer-to-peer coaching and how to identify resources. In addition, ISCA SL holds accreditation from the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA), so student leaders who participate in the Integrated Success Coach Student Leader (ISCA SL) training can also pursue their Level 1 Peer Educator certification in addition to three accredited hours from ICF toward coaching certification.

The expansion of student training is possible due to the partnership between the START program, a National Institute of Health (NIH) funded program, and ISC. The START program provides funding for one Integrated Success Coach Teaching Assistant (ISC TA). The ISC TA provides coaching directly and leads the ISCA SL training sessions for students across the UK campus as well as at partner universities of KY-WV LSAMP (Kentucky-West Virginia Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation) and the START program. Student leaders are chosen through participation with multiple program partnerships, such as the University of Kentucky Office of Undergraduate Research Ambassadors, the KY-WV LSAMP program, graduate programs, and groups identified by faculty and staff across campus. Our ISCA SLs work with undergraduate students, high school students, and middle school students. This model allows the START program and the University of Kentucky to gain valuable, trained peer-to-peer and near-peer ISCA SLs to support each other across campus and the larger community, which in turn, creates the mutual benefit of expanding the coaching culture throughout campus and letting students know they are valuable members of our community who have an important role to play in each other's success. Additionally, like the ISCA training, the ISCA SL training has received extremely positive feedback. An ISCA SL trained student mentor said, "I was hearing new information, so I felt like I truly absorbed everything, and I've been able to apply it as I continue to take on leadership roles."

Data Findings

Although TL's ISC and ISCA programs are relatively new, the coaching culture is steadily growing at the institution. To date, over 300 faculty and staff, more than 75% of the Office of the Vice President for Student Success, have been trained through ISCA. Another 75+ student leaders have been trained through the ISCA SL training. TL continues to grow in staffing of the ISC program, to support the growing demand for this service.

The Professional Integrated Success Coaches (ISC) support well over 1,000 students per semester, roughly half self-select and the other half are referred by a class assignments or probation status. Regardless of whether students self-select or are referred, the results of working with a coach show a positive impact on students. For instance, approximately 92% of the students in the Fall 2021 cohort who attended at least one ISC appointment were retained to the spring semester (see Figure 2).

Figure 2*Retention Rate for Fall 2021 First-Year Cohort Who Attended ISC*

During the Fall 2022 semester, 589 students self-selected to attend an ISC appointment. Additionally, ISC has developed a strong partnership with various probation programs on the UK campus. During the Fall 2022 semester, 418 students on probation attended ISC. Probation students who attended ISC had an average GPA increase of 0.39 compared to their counterparts across the Fall 2021 (0.36), Spring 2021 (0.48), and Fall 2022 (0.34) semesters (see Figures 3 and 4). Although one ISC visit is associated with an increase in probation students' GPA by an average of 0.39 points, at least one additional visit showed a relational increase in probation students' GPA by an additional average of 0.18 points across the three semesters in comparison to probation students' counterparts (see Figure 5).

Figure 3

Average GPA for Fall 2022 Probation Students by ISC Attendance

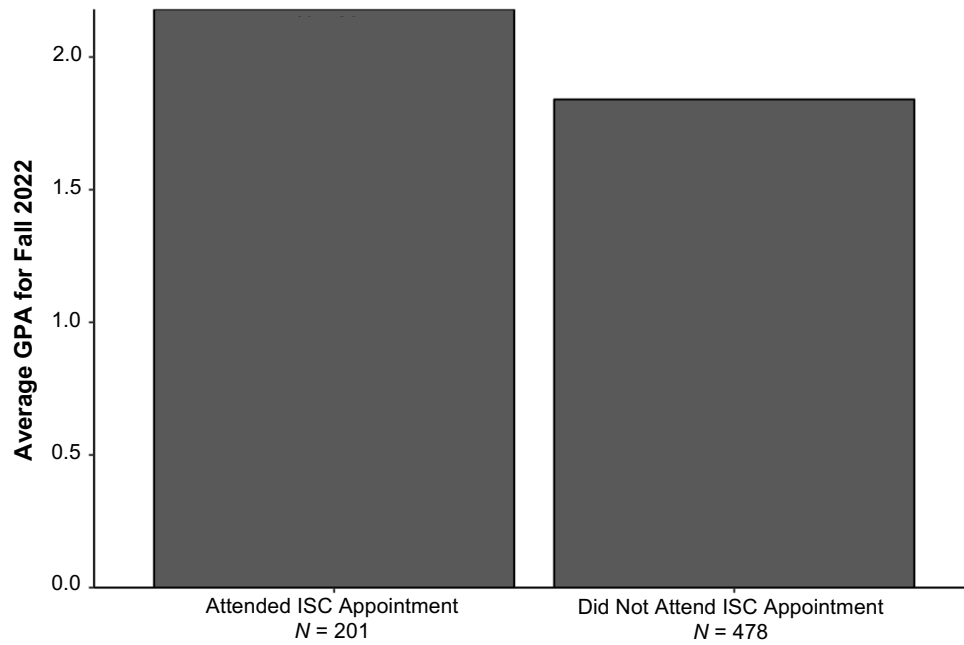


Figure 4

Average GPA for Fall 2022 Probation Students from Fall 2021 Cohort

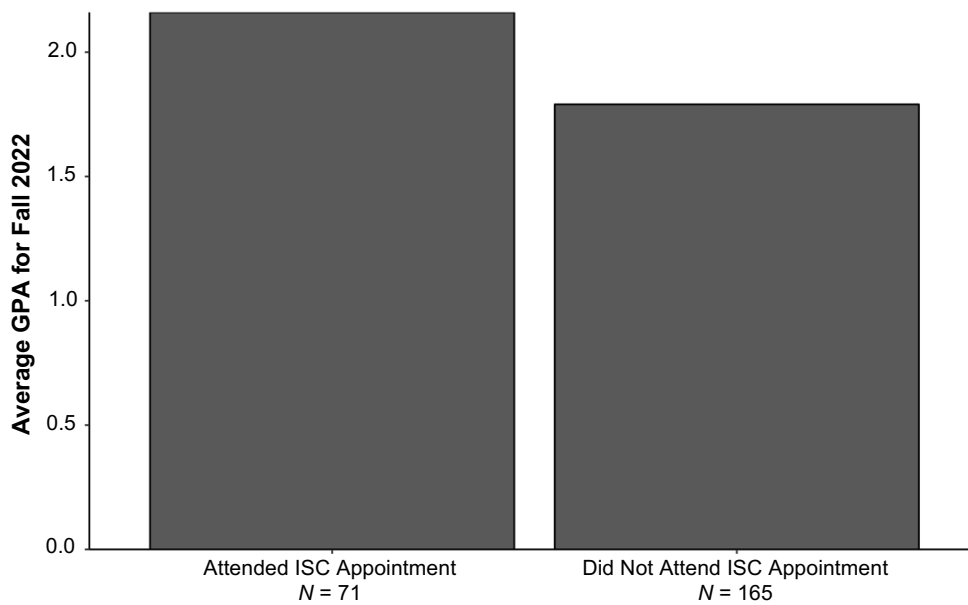
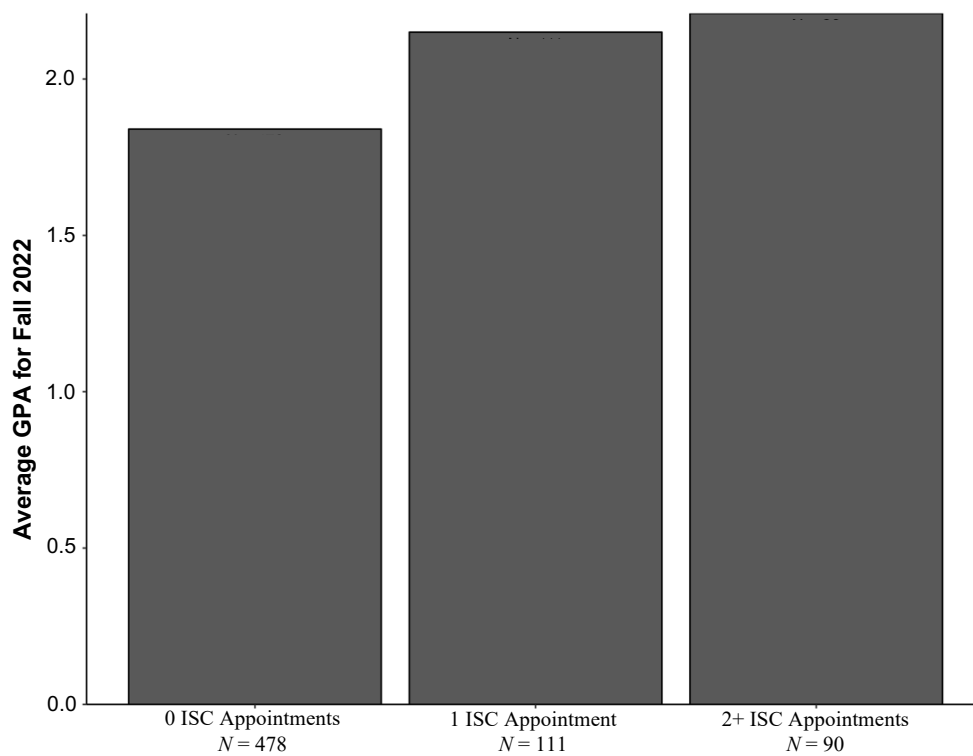


Figure 5

Average GPA for Fall 2022 Probation Students by Number of ISC Appointments



Conclusion

Coaching is successful at both the individual and the systemic level. Because student success offices are often dispersed across college campuses, effective work with students requires a shared language, tools, and vision. Advocates for coaching can further enhance and extend the benefits of coaching to the students and the university system. Participating in the advocacy program, which is rooted in the tenets of Appreciative Advising, invites a range of student success professionals and student leaders to the shared language and mission of Integrated Success Coaching. The more immersive coaching values and practices are applied across a range of higher education functions, the healthier and more goal-directed student success services can be. At a time in higher education when people are called to do more with less, institutions can capitalize on existing resources by providing additional professional development in the form of coaching and advocacy skills to student success personnel and student leaders seeking to instill a culture of care at their university.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this article provides valuable insights into the impact of Integrated Success Coaching on student outcomes at the University of Kentucky (UK), it is important to acknowledge its limitations. One limitation is our inability to provide comparison outcome data for students at UK who do not participate in the Integrated Success Coaching program. Integrated Success Coaching partners with probation programs across the institution, so the average initial GPA of student participants is lower than the average student GPA for an individual who is not on probation. Future research should be conducted on the changes in academic achievement, like GPA, between these two groups.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgements

Portions of this project are made possible by a Science Education Partnership Award (SEPA), Grant Number R25 GM132961, from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS) National Institutes of Health (NIH). Contents of this article are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of NIGMS or NIH.

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