



A Different Kind of Coach

Academic Coaching and Learning at Cannon

Academic coaches Mrs. Sarah Miller, Mrs. Jessica Kulp, and Mrs. Jenny Weakland gather to plan the week ahead.

When you hear someone say “ACC,” you’re likely to think of athletes who hail from a university like Clemson, Duke, or Florida State. Here at Cannon, however, ACC means something very different—although there are coaches involved.

Academic Coaching at Cannon, or ACC, is an innovative twist on an old Cannon idea. For years, Upper School teachers have done grade checks throughout the year. Any student whose grades had slipped to a certain point were assigned to a mandated study hall, in which he or she was required to spend drop periods working in a quiet room, studying.

Mrs. Tere Hurtado, Upper School Learning Specialist, and Mrs. Jessica Kulp, Upper School Learning Support Coordinator, knew that there had to be a way to help these students that felt more aligned with the Cannon School mission. Inspired by a program they learned from visiting

another school, they created ACC. It works like this: students who are struggling are identified and referred to the program. (This may be due to lagging grades, but also if the student has experienced a long-term absence due to illness or extenuating circumstances.) The student and one of the seven “coaches” create a support plan together, identifying goals they would like to accomplish. Then the student meets with a coach during every one of his or her drop periods for the next three weeks.

The academic coaches are an essential piece of the puzzle. Made up of English teachers Mr. Richard Smith and Mrs. Sarah Miller, math teachers Miss Eriqye Berry and Mrs. Jenny Weakland, and language teacher Mrs. Claudia Velandia—as well as Mrs. Hurtado and Mrs. Kulp—these faculty members are in a unique position to help. One of them facilitates every single one of the student’s sessions, so that child is never relegated to an empty room to chip away at homework. At the beginning of a cycle, a coach talks to the student to really understand his or her needs. “We’ve found that often, the real issue is not necessarily that someone is struggling with chemistry, but instead he’s having a hard time with executive functioning skills, like organization or planning,” said Mrs. Hurtado.

Each day, a coach is in room 606—the Academic Coaching Center—to help the student. One glance inside, and you’ll know immediately that this is no ordinary classroom. Two cozy armchairs flank one wall bordered by colorful student artwork. A massive drafting desk is tucked into a corner. Bar-height tables are lit by hanging pendant lamps, while several large, round tables occupy the middle of the floor. The entire place feels inviting. And that’s exactly how it was designed—to feel like a space you’d want to enter. Everything about the design was intentional, and coaches work with students to decide what part of the room would be best to use if they were highlighting notes or spreading out flashcards. “We want the kids to understand the best way to get things done and choose where that work happens,” said Mrs. Hurtado.

At the end of the three weeks, the coaching team confers with the student’s teachers and advisor to decide if more help is needed. That’s a shorter duration than in the past and can be especially helpful if the student had been deemed arts or athletics ineligible. Mrs. Hurtado said that they find most students can return to their regular course of study and credits this to the relational approach of the coaches. “The old system of just sitting in a study hall wasn’t relational. There was no nurturing, no journey of growth,” said Mrs. Hurtado.

“With academic coaching, our kids have one more person who is 100% behind them. These coaches are just phenomenal people. When each student finishes the three-week cycle, a coach sends them a note of congratulations, saying ‘great job—and we’re still here if you need us.’”