ABSTRACT: College enrollment, persistence, and attainment rates continue reflect racial, socioeconomic, and geographic inequalities. Meanwhile, among mission-driven high schools, nonprofit organizations, and programs within higher education that attempt to alter these outcomes, a consensus appears to be emerging as to how to intervene. College access and persistence coaching models have quickly proliferated. However, while we have some early evidence from quantitative evaluation studies that coaches improve critical student outcomes, we know little about how they do so, to what long-term ends, and what the possible unintended consequences of such interventions may be. In this presentation, I will present preliminary findings from the first half of a year-long, mixed-methods study that follows 31 average-achieving students from three south side Chicago high schools who are enrolled in such a coaching program from high school graduation through their first year of post-secondary experience. I present three related sets of early findings that demonstrate some of the limits of coaching as an effective intervention. Specifically, I present evidence that the core contribution of coaches lies in the mitigation of administrative burdens associated with college application, matriculation, and persistence processes. Yet despite this necessary role, much still remains in order to ensure that first-generation, low-income students are able to access their respective institutions as full community-members while also participating in a means-tested poverty program as Pell Grant recipients. I argue that understanding how these burdens make achieving the stated goals of college—learning, connection, and career preparation—more difficult is critical to ensuring more equitable outcomes.

1 From The Beatles’ 1965 song “Help”