



TURNING THE PAGE: ATPA STUDENT RAFAEL UBIERA REWRITES HIS STORY

Student Rafael Ubiera finds success through time management strategies and a focus on building confidence: "In those times when I've questioned myself, my coach has reminded me how far I've come."

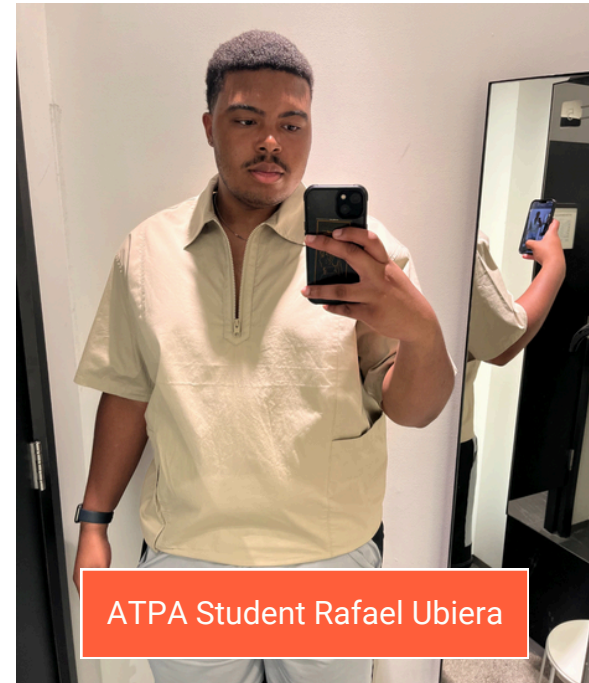
When Rafael Ubiera returned to Montgomery College in 2023 after a previous effort at MC in 2020, he could never have imagined the transformation he was about to undergo. With the support of ATPA and the guidance of his coach, James Washington, he went from doubting his ability to succeed to earning all A's, gaining confidence, and pursuing a bright future.

After graduating high school in 2020, Rafael attended MC in the fall of 2020, but it was short-lived: "There were lots of things going on in my life that made it hard to be successful, a combo of my maturity level and problems focusing, combined with all the things I was dealing with." He decided to take a break in Spring of 2021 and tried many things to get back on track, stating "I was lost for a little bit." He got a job working as a server, which sparked a change in him: "It was scary for me, being a server, because I was a more introverted person. I learned that once you're put in the fire you have no choice but to perform. It was stressful, but that job taught me not to over-analyze things and not to be in my own head so much."

With newfound confidence, Rafael then pursued a certificate program in which he learned how to troubleshoot computers as a pathway to employment. "I didn't end up getting my certificate, but the program found some local recruiters and one of them hired me for a 6-month contract. It was the first time I'd worked a real 9-5 job, and I was thankful to have that experience early on, before I'd finished college." In 2023, after working hard developing new skills, both technical and social, he decided to give Montgomery College another try, but he was hesitant due to how he'd left his record in 2020: "I didn't have the best foundation to come back to. My GPA was bad, I had academic restrictions, and I couldn't get Financial Aid at first. I didn't think I'd do very well coming back." Then, I saw a flyer for ATPA, I got on an orientation call, and it sounded like something I really wanted to do and I felt like could help me."

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ATPA Student Rafael Ubiera

"My mentality has changed a lot. I'm more focused on my goals, and I'm no longer settling for the bare minimum. It's crazy how far I've come. My transcript tells a story. A good support system has been everything for me."

Rafael speaks about how Coach Washington helped him set and reach new goals: “There were lots of ups and downs in my journey, but I was determined to get A’s. Coach Washington helped me a lot with juggling things and reminded me what I am capable of. One time close to finals, I remember talking to him about whether I could get all A’s, and I was doubtful. One of the things we did was use a goal-setting sheet, with all the goals I wanted to achieve and how I’d feel if I accomplished them. It helped me put things into perspective and gave me a final push.”

As Rafael met his goals, his academic restriction was lifted, allowing him to take more classes, going from one course per semester to a full course load. Rafael continued to build up his support system, working closely with his coach and utilizing the resources around him, taking his GPA from a 0.54 when he returned to a 4.0 in Spring 2024, earning all A’s across the board. “My mentality has changed a lot. I’m more focused on my goals, and I’m no longer settling for the bare minimum. It’s crazy how far I’ve come. My transcript tells a story. A good support system has been everything for me.”

Rafael Rebuilds to Success

First Semester at MC (2020)

Leaves MC with .054 GPA

Gains first 9-5 work experience

Returns to MC (2023)

Joins ATPA (2023)

Academic Restriction Lifted (2024)

Earns 4.0 GPA (2024)

“When I feel like procrastinating or have self-doubt, I remind myself that someone can really benefit from my story. I was a completely different person just even last year. Now, I’m more outgoing, confident and doing so much. I wanna be that inspiration for others or those folks who are struggling. The road is hard but doesn’t mean it’s impossible.”

THE COACHING JOURNEY WITH PROFESSOR JAMES WASHINGTON



James Washington with fellow ATPA coaches Dr. Soheila Ebrahimian and Jane Smith at the Association for Coaching and Tutoring Profession Annual Conference

When James Washington became Rafael’s coach, he worked to build trust and find a common bond: “I saw Rafael as an introverted student, not too much different from myself. [...] He was very open about the challenges he faced many years ago. He had experienced some pretty significant life changes that caused him to withdraw from the College.”

To encourage Rafael, James praises both his actions and his results: “I show him huge accolades for the progress and improvements that he’s made. I praise him for reaching out to the STEM Learning Center or other students and professors. He’s working to build his support network when he does these things.”

When Rafael doubts his abilities, James reminds him of his previous successes: “Rafael was expressing anxiety about preparing for the final exam in one of his courses. I assisted in connecting him with [in person] and virtual tutoring going into those exams. He was expressing his doubts and fears about passing the course, so I asked him about [his past semester] grades, and he said “They were pretty good.” I said “Well, what’s pretty good mean?” and he said, “All A’s” and you could see the smile on his face.”

James has a background in federal government and experience as a management consultant and business owner. He’s been an adjunct professor at MC since 2017 and a personal academic coach with ATPA since 2019. Reflecting on the positive changes he’s seen in students as a coach, James shares, “I’ve seen significant benefits in terms of students, not just graduating, but making improvements in their academic lives. I hope others in the College see this, and we’re able to continue to provide this service which contributes so much to student success.”

When goals and support align...



Student Rafael Ubiero

What strategies or techniques have you learned from being in ATPA?

Don't be afraid to reach out for help and know when you need to seek help in your studies. Have a plan for each day and each semester. I write down what I need to accomplish every day for each class. This helped me a lot with my procrastination! In those times when I'm questioning myself, people have helped me out; a good support system has been impactful for me.

How do you work with your coach to help manage your time and prioritize tasks?

My coach has helped me with study plans and figuring out what I should do first in every situation. He's super flexible with me about when and how often we meet, too. He's always communicating with me.

How would you describe your relationship with your coach?

My relationship with my coach is unique because my coach is so genuine and authentic. We speak casually, and I can talk candidly. He doesn't look down on me. I can be honest and tell him I've been slacking a bit, and he just supports me and offers help instead of judgement.

Coach James Washington

How do you describe your coaching philosophy?

My coaching philosophy is seeking opportunities to understand where some of students' challenges are and where I can empathize with a common experience. I base my work on mutual trust, following up on my commitments, and demonstrating integrity.

How do you measure success?

It's easy to measure academic success by just looking at grades. I feel that grades aren't the total picture. In the broader social context, I measure success based on how my students demonstrate taking responsibility, showing initiative, taking timely action in their academics, and demonstrating maturity.

How do you connect with students?

I seek opportunities to find common ground despite the differences between me and my students. Sometimes this may come from an experience a student shares, or a similar attribute we have.



Behind the Scenes with Nik Sushka, Director of ATPA



Nik Sushka with ATPA Student
Yaphat Abraham, Class of 2023

Although I didn't initially set out to lead an academic support program with a mission to achieve the promise of higher education for every student, the twists and turns of my educational and professional journey uniquely prepared me for this rewarding role.

Tell us a little about you.

My first job in higher education was as an adjunct instructor in English and Women's Studies. As I taught those courses, I became interested in helping motivate and empower students to learn in ways that were authentic to their goals and interests. Then, I came to Montgomery College, and for ten years, I served as a service-learning coordinator in the Office of Student Life, fostering partnerships that connected community organizations with the College. I enjoyed that role tremendously, building programs like Impact MC and MC Votes and being a part of the Student Life team that helps students grow, learn, and lead on campus and in their communities.

What brought you into this work?

I became the director of ATPA in January 2021, and it's been a total privilege to work with this great team of staff and coaches to support the students we serve. I sought the role for a chance to use my skills and experience in new ways at MC, and it's been wonderful returning to my interest in fostering positive learning experiences, while also focusing more deeply on equity in education and supporting students to identify and reach their goals. I've also been able to leverage my previous experiences building partnerships across MC to support students both inside and outside the classroom, and I've discovered that evidence-based coaching strategies resonate deeply with my values as an educator. Although I didn't initially set out to lead an academic support program with a mission to achieve the promise of higher education for every student, the twists and turns of my educational and professional journey uniquely prepared me for this rewarding role.

When you were a student, how would you have benefited from coaching?

My first semester at the University of Texas at Dallas, I struggled almost immediately. I was a pre-med major with an academic scholarship, living hundreds of miles from home and totally overwhelmed. After poor grades in chemistry and micro-economics, I received an academic warning and was pushed to re-consider the STEM field. So, I dropped out of Honors and focused on not losing my scholarship. Uncertain about my future goals or options, I changed my major to Literary Studies while still taking biology electives. Looking back, I know meeting with an academic coach after failing that first exam might have helped me try different learning strategies, while connecting with other women in STEM could have countered those internal and external voices questioning my abilities. Today, I help students pause, reflect, and regroup when facing a tough situation. I ask questions and listen so I can better understand their situations. And most importantly, I remember the power of an educator's words, to discourage or encourage. I'm grateful to offer students a space where they can process challenges, ask for help without judgement or stigma, make intentional choices instead of struggle in silence, and have the opportunities, tools, and assistance to succeed.

How do you describe your approach to coaching?



I try to be genuinely curious when I'm coaching. I want to understand each person's journey, goals, and interests. I focus on listening well, asking thoughtful questions, and being a guide as we look together for insights that support their progress. Participating in coach training with MC's ELITE staff and earning coaching certificates through programs like InsideTrack has benefited my approach to coaching immensely, especially practicing a conscious shift away from an instructor or manager mindset to a coaching approach when able. I'm learning to resist immediately providing answers or giving advice, while asking the question, "What does this other person need from me right now?", whether I'm working with a student in a drop-in coaching session or meeting one-on-one with a staff member.

How are academic coaching skills useful in other roles in higher education?

Coaching can be useful in so many settings, from the classroom to the conference room. Taking a coaching approach where you listen deeply, try to understand others, and prioritize empowerment over giving directions can support everything from critical thinking to goal setting to team building to problem solving. Because coaching emphasizes progress over perfection and reframes challenges as opportunities for growth, it can also help people build on their current skills, strengths, and understanding, while focusing on whatever next steps they are able and willing to take. For instructors, encouraging students to reflect and choose their own next steps can help them build self-confidence and problem-solving abilities, while managers who foster a staff member's ownership of their work and truly value their skills, strengths and perspectives are much more likely to build teams motivated and empowered to perform well. I see value in this approach for everyone, from instructors to staff to student leaders, as well as managers.

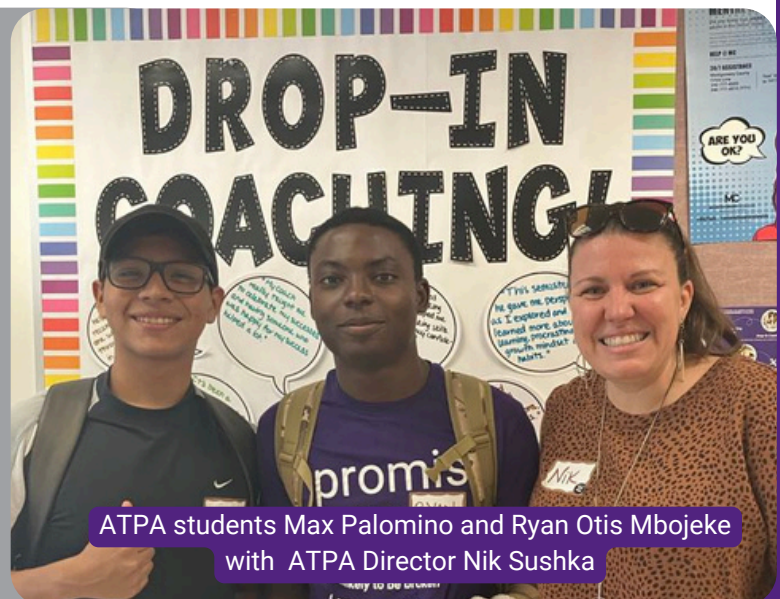


How do you stay connected to students and ATPA's coaches, staff, and partners in their day-to-day activities?

I try to show up for colleagues and students, whether attending an event one of our faculty coaches is hosting with a student club, cheering on a student's presentation or big project, or advocating for the resources or improvements we need to do our best work. When coaches, students, or partners come to me with ideas or feedback, I lean again on that coaching mindset: I try to listen and truly understand, and whenever possible, I avoid saying, "We can't do that" and instead ask, "What can we do?" Every day, I challenge myself to listen, to do better when I know better, and to stay open to ideas and opportunities.



Today, I help students pause, reflect, and regroup when facing a tough situation. I ask questions and listen so I can better understand their situations. And most importantly, I remember the power of an educator's words, to discourage or encourage. I'm grateful to offer students a space where they can process challenges, ask for help without judgement or stigma, make intentional choices instead of struggle in silence, and have the opportunities, tools, and assistance to succeed.



ATPA students Max Palomino and Ryan Otis Mbojeke with ATPA Director Nik Sushka



THE CHRYSALIS OF COACHING

by Embedded Support Coordinator Andrea Herman

As any butterfly will tell you, transformation is hard work. When we see a Monarch flitting around, sipping nectar from our zinnias, we might recall its earlier iteration as a vibrant, earthbound, leaf-munching caterpillar. All along, that caterpillar had the potential to fly—some caterpillars even have rudimentary wings—but was not ready to do so. Not yet.

What's more remarkable than the caterpillar or the butterfly, though, is what happens in the liminal space between them. Taken from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold, liminal space can refer to a physical space, but it can also refer to a state of mind. Liminal spaces are especially suited for transition, transformation, between-ness, openness.

What happens in a liminal space can be messy. For the caterpillar-becoming-butterfly, the liminal space is a chrysalis filled with enzymatic ooze. What happens inside the chrysalis is hidden from sight until just a few days before the butterfly emerges, when the chrysalis becomes transparent.

Inside our hours, days, and weeks with students, inside the chrysalis of our coaching sessions, are the ideal elements for growth and transformation: trust and vulnerability, powerful questions and deep reflection, self-awareness and self-acceptance, goals, plans, support. If we watched this process unfold as an observer, like in a time-lapse video, we would miss all of the small moments.

Within the chrysalis of coaching, we meet students where they are, as they are, while also fostering change and growth. We may witness a kind of metamorphosis in them, and even in ourselves. Our insider perspective and nuanced observations pick up on the slow shedding of old habits and behaviors and tentative steps toward new ways of thinking and learning: from apprehension to confidence, disconnection to engagement, confusion to clarity, disorganization to intentionality, stress to mindfulness, failure to persistence. Transformations don't have to be dramatic and showy, after all.

When you notice a student making a small adjustment, exhibiting a brief moment of courage/vulnerability, engagement, or connection, point it out. Recognize their specific, effortful behaviors, process and progress over outcomes. This kind of affirmation helps students develop a growth mindset and emphasizes the importance of hard work, practice, and completion as keys to success.

Thank you for working in service of our students. Your transformative impact can help them reach their unique potential, unfurl their wings, and take flight.

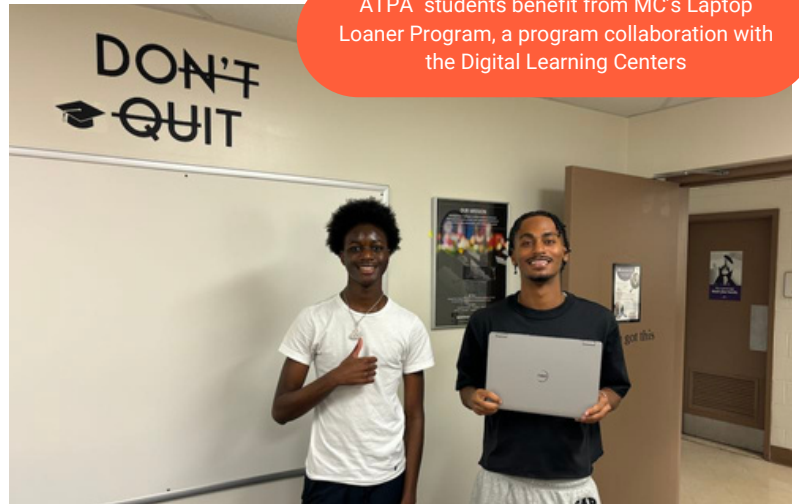


ATPA Coaches at the Fall 2024 Coaches Institute

STRIVING FOR OUR B.E.S.T. (BELONGING, EMPOWERMENT, SUPPORT, AND TRANSFORMATION)



ATPA students benefit from MC's Laptop Loaner Program, a program collaboration with the Digital Learning Centers



My Academic Coach, Professor Jinhua, played a significant role in helping me understand the subjects for my BIOL 150 class. I appreciate how she began by focusing on the areas where I was struggling and gradually built my understanding of larger concepts that might be covered on the exam.



Professor Zia Hassan, a researcher focused on the future of education in an AI-powered world, promotes AI as a coaching tool at ATPA's Fall 2024 Coaches Institute



MC and ATPA alumni present about student leadership at community colleges at the Maryland United & Youth Conference (Morgan Terry, Amanda Espinoza, Nik Sushka, Stephen Soza)

Dr. Fermo is an amazing coach. He really takes the time out to help us understand concepts. He challenges me to try physics problems on my own and encourages me when I feel down about the class.

I really appreciated [my coach's] advice when reviewing for exams to go back and look at my notes, the professors slides, the textbook all at the same time, and focus specifically on understanding the figures in the book and what they mean. The W questions were very useful.



ATPA student Saif Munir discusses his research paper for English 102 with embedded academic coach Lisa Nevans-Locke



ATPA Coach, MC alumni, and biomedical researcher Juan Esparza-Trujillo participates in MC event, Latines in STEM: Celebrating Our Local Pioneers



Bringing Learning to Life

Students, coaches participate in ATPA's Student Learning Community

Each year, ATPA's Student Learning Community promotes student belonging and academic achievement by offering engaging and accessible opportunities to develop academic skills, habits, knowledge, and mindsets while connecting with other ATPA students.

This fall, students and coaches participated in virtual and in-person activities, such as ATPA's annual retreat, AI Skills for Academic Success workshops, and MC's Humanities Days. Student-led Learning Community Hours and the ATPA GroupMe chat provided further opportunities for student leadership and engagement, as student assistants hosted sessions such as "How to Make the Most of Academic Support" and "How to Make the Most of MC."

Further self-paced opportunities like StudentLingo success workshops helped students and coaches explore topics that fit each student's goals, needs, and experiences. During the Fall 2024 semester, students completed 260 StudentLingo workshops, a 300% increase over Fall 2023.



Students explore the importance of belonging and inclusion during ATPA's annual retreat

A key takeaway from the retreat was the importance of setting clear, actionable goals. Hearing from peers about their journeys inspired me to refine my own goals and approach them with a more strategic mindset.

(Virtual Student Retreat Feedback)



Exercise Science major Ryan Jones shares the indigenous history and global impact of Lacrosse with students during Humanities Days.

The collaboration with History Professor Michael Petty and tory of Sports class was sponsored by ATPA's Student Learning Community.

E.Y.E.S. on the Promise Team Creates Supportive Spaces and Promotes Belonging

ATPA continued to focus on reaching and supporting specific student populations through E.Y.E.S. on the Promise (Equity Yields Excellence for Students) gatherings. Offerings included a pre-Transfer Fair workshop, Francophone Corner meet-ups, Sister Circles, Latine Listening Sessions, and Eritrean and Ethiopian Buna Tetu ("Come, let's have coffee" in Amharic) events. These often informal yet intentional activities help coaches build trust and safety in tailored spaces where students are explicitly welcomed and invited to co-create academic communities that center their unique experiences, needs, and contributions.