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Integrating External Coaching at a Public Research University
A Coordination Program

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T he Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Affairs (OVPUA) at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) is establishing formalized partnerships with non-profit organizations that house transition coaching programs. These partnerships are under the direction of the Office for First-Year Initiative (OFYI). The goal of this program is not only to integrate the work of external organizations to strengthen student support, but to do so in a way that increases UIC's efficiency. Integrating external partners that already support students should help the OVPUA to maximize resources in an effort to better support UIC students.

What is Transition Coaching?

As K-12 begins to look at college graduation rates as a key performance indicator, high schools, districts, and nonprofit organizations have begun supporting students as they transition from high school and during their first year of college. This type of transition coaching involves *personalized and uninterrupted coaching that provides students with support while they are both preparing for and adjusting to college* (Thrive Chicago). The students at UIC receiving this support are overwhelmingly graduates of Chicago Public Schools. The supports offered by transition coaches include a range of services that are intended to increase the probability that students will return to UIC for their second year. Examples of services include FAFSA workshops, emergency funding, emotional support, transitional

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funding, and alternative housing support. Typically, students use support from transition coaches to supplement other support systems, including formal supports, such as college academic advising and informal supports available from family members and friends.

Transition Coaching at UIC

At UIC, external transition coaches must navigate a complex, decentralized system of student and academic support services to ensure that their students receive the assistance and guidance they need. If the coaches are unfamiliar with the campus, it can be difficult and inefficient for them to find existing opportunities and supports for their students. As the number of students using transition coaching grows, it will be increasingly important for transition coaches to be able to support their students at UIC as efficiently as possible.

To increase the efficiency and effectiveness with which UIC students are supported by transition coaches, the OVPUA is developing an effort to embed a liaison office at UIC that will serve as a hub for transition coaches. This hub will be the OFYI. The OFYI will direct transition coaches to the existing campus resources that best align with student needs.

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Theoretical Motivations

Design of the OFYI program is funded by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and takes its theoretical foundation from managerial economics (Grady, 2009; Hill, 1990; Williamson, 1979). It will involve partnerships with four organizations: two charter schools and two non-profit organizations. The program is designed to organize and streamline how external transition coaches access existing UIC support systems so that efforts to increase student retention at UIC can be coordinated efficiently. While the program will include only four organizations during the first year, the OVPUA hopes to learn how UIC can better support external transition coaches so that the program can be scaled up in the future. A successful program should positively impact both retention efforts and UIC's reputation as an institution committed to student support. Further, the program should be implemented in a manner that increases transactional and financial efficiencies.

The program design was inspired by similar efforts at other universities, particularly at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. The OVPUA built on these existing designs by grounding the UIC version in theoretical frameworks that will guide our organizational decisions and frame what we have learned in the context of higher education policy.

Given the fiscal and organizational context at both UIC and many public, urban universities nationally, the OVPUA has decided to emphasize efficiency in the planning and design of the coordination program. As existing student supports at UIC are spread across campus in multiple decentralized administrative units, this can be transactionally inefficient for UIC's central administration when setting university policy because efforts to organize activity must be coordinated among all of these decentralized units.

Although external transition coaches do not have a formal affiliation with the campus, part of their role is to help UIC students navigate the supports and resources that are available at UIC. This creates a potential difficulty because while much of the information provided by transition coaches is specific to UIC, it might be sensitive to administrative and organizational changes on campus. Since UIC students find transition coaches to be a helpful supplement to existing supports, the OVPUA seeks to coordinate transition coaches' interactions with campus resources to maximize the transactional effi-

ciency with which these coaches can support UIC students.

Efficiency

The OVPUA looked to efficiency literature sources in managerial economics to guide the design of the program. Two distinct notions of efficiency emerged: transactional efficiency, rooted in Transaction Cost Economics, and Managerial Technical Efficiency.

Transactional Efficiency

When organizations have many decentralized units, coordinating these units can be difficult. There are costs to this coordination, such as the time spent organizing many units for meetings, as well the difficulty of reaching consensus and sharing information. These costs are known as transaction costs. Transaction costs are a feature of every organizational design, and can be of particular concern when coordinating activity in large organizations with multiple units, such as universities.

In large universities, hierarchical structures help solve internal coordination issues; however, universities also interact with many external partners. The internal mechanisms for coordination are often not effective for these external partners. In small or relatively centralized universities, this is less of a problem because external partners can simply coordinate with the central administration when they seek to partner with the university.

In large, decentralized universities like UIC, coordination can be more challenging for external partners who need finite sets of

information (a bundle of resources) that can only be accessed by contacting several different administrative units (see Figure 1). Additionally, external partners might not know which unit(s) can provide the bundle of resources they need to appropriately support their students. For instance, if a student approaches a transition coach about a need for course-specific tutoring, the coach might have trouble identifying the appropriate unit(s) on campus that offers this service.

To alleviate these types of transaction costs, the coordination program will designate a campus liaison for coaches in OFYI (See Figure 2). The liaison, who is familiar with the existing web of resources at UIC, will serve as the main contact for external transition coaches. With this structure, transition coaches will simply contact the OFYI, thereby reducing the transaction costs associated with organizing resource bundles on a decentralized campus.

Managerial Efficiency

The second theoretical framework that guided the design of the program is managerial efficacy, which involves maximizing institutional resources such that the ratio of output to input is optimized, i.e., maximizing student retention rates given the fiscal resources available at UIC (See Figure 3). As is the case with many public institutions, UIC's planning and budgeting efforts are increasingly con-
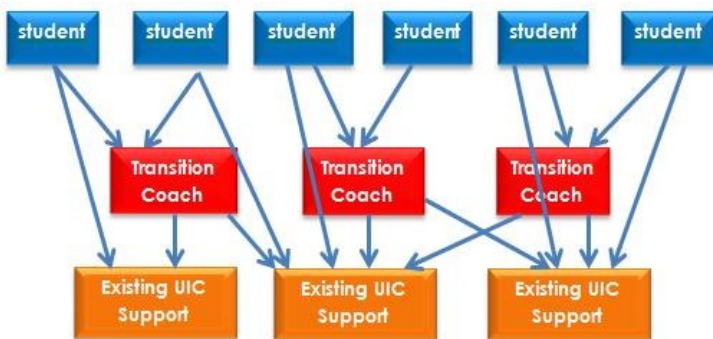

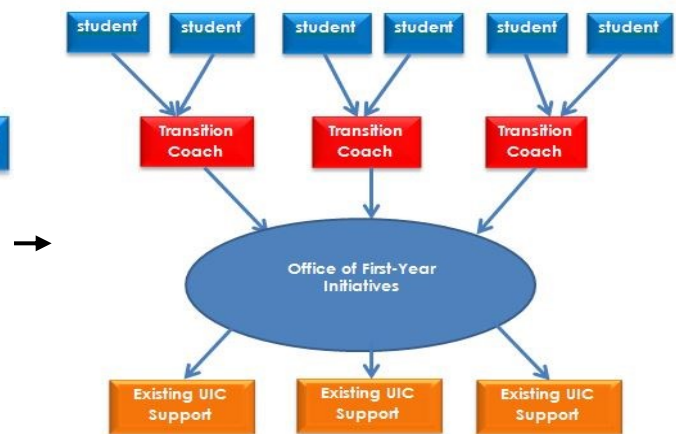Figure 1: Transaction Costs at UIC

Figure 2: Proposed Liaison Framework

strained by declining state resources. Thus, to improve student outcomes, financial efficiency will be essential. Thus, the OVPUA transition coaching program has been designed with both transactional and managerial notions of efficiency as guiding frameworks.
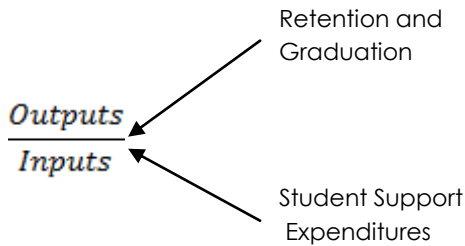

Figure 3: Model of Managerial Efficiency

Transition coaching programs have been successful at improving retention rates of UIC students. As such, the OVPUA recognizes the value of these additional supports for incoming students. Given the need for financial efficiency, we can maximize our resources by coordinating the support provided by external coaches rather than hiring UIC-employed transition coaches. Thus, this coordination program should increase output (number of students retained) with minimal increase to input (amount per student spent on student retention). We will implement two mechanisms to attain this efficiency improvement. First, the UIC liaison will help external coaches by connecting them with campus resources and facilitating secure information exchange about their students. Second, using a referral process built into student placement testing, first-year students at UIC will be eligible for transition coaching support through an external organization. By increasing students' access to coaches and coaches' connections to resources, we hope to increase student retention rates for first-year students.

To illustrate, OVPUA researchers compared UIC's relative efficiency to that of 44 of its peers at public, research-oriented universities in large cities (highly selective institutions were removed). When assigning efficiency scores to each institution in percentages, UIC finished 30th out of 38 peers because UIC's ratio of per student spending on academic

service/student support and the graduation rate of students of color is low compared with that of similar institutions (see Table 1). In fact, UIC is about 40% as efficient as Rutgers, UIC's most efficient peer.

Institution	Efficiency Score
Rutgers University-Newark	100.00%
University of Nebraska-Lincoln	100.00%
North Carolina State University at Raleigh	100.00%
University of Nebraska at Omaha	99.21%
University of South Florida-Main Campus	84.60%
University of North Carolina at Charlotte	80.88%
University of North Carolina at Greensboro	78.79%
University of Arizona	72.91%
Portland State University	72.74%
Georgia State University	71.73%
Morgan State University	39.44%
University of Illinois at Chicago	39.16%
University of New Orleans	38.09%
University of Massachusetts-Boston	37.84%
Tennessee State University	37.47%
University of Louisville	36.66%
Wichita State University	36.37%
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee	35.82%
University of Hawaii at Manoa	30.16%
Cleveland State University	29.45%

Table 1: Comparison of the Ten Most- and Ten-Least Efficient Public, Urban, Research-Oriented Universities Using Data Envelopment Analysis

External Partners

Given the limited funding available for this coordination program, we will work with four organizations who were chosen to maximize variation in organization types: North Lawndale College Prep, Noble Street Charter School Network, Bottom Line, and OneGoal. North Lawndale and Noble are charter school networks, while Bottom Line and OneGoal are nonprofit organizations. While Noble and Bottom Line are large organizations, North Lawndale and OneGoal are smaller organizations. The number of UIC students supported by these organizations varies from a small, growing number to a large population.

The rationale for developing partnerships with different types of organizations is grounded in the theory underlying both transactional and managerial efficiencies. Selecting different organizations is essential because the OVPUA hopes to learn through the program how to best partner with each type of organization. Therefore, the OVPUA strategically chose partners that varied according to the following organizational criteria.

Size

Size typically influences organizational efficiency both transactionally and managerially (De Alessi, 1983; Gooding & Wagner, 1985; Nooteboom, 1993) and the mechanisms are straightforward. With regard to transaction costs, the larger an organization is, the more cumbersome it can be to navigate a decentralized campus. If the average number of interactions with UIC remains constant for every student, for instance, an external coach supporting 50 UIC students would need to interact with the university five times more often than would a coach supporting 10 students. The OVPUA program has the potential to significantly reduce the number of campus interactions necessary to support UIC students, thereby increasing the transactional efficiency of external coaches and improving levels of support for UIC students.

On the other hand, small organizations may lack the infrastructure, capital, and organizational knowledge necessary to systematically organize interactions on a decentralized campus. These are known as threshold costs, where the managers of small organizations are too involved in the day-to-day functioning of an organization to optimally set up, contract, and monitor organizational systems (Nooteboom, 1993). For coaches who support students attending multiple universities, establishing one university contact might reduce the number of campus interactions required for each student, thus enabling more efficient, thorough support across a coach's caseload.

Prior Informal Relationship

The program should reduce the extent of or-

ganizational learning necessary for partner organizations to support UIC students. However, the extent to which the program reduces the organizational knowledge that coaches require will vary by their existing knowledge about UIC. Organizations that have been supporting UIC students for some time may have already built informal networks that enable them to adequately support their students. However, these organizations might have as many points of contact on the campus as they have students to support: a large, diverse "bundle of resources." Thus, for both organizations with and without significant prior histories at UIC, the presence of a liaison should reduce the number of interactions necessary to support their students.

Ownership and Organizational Structure

As the program will be implemented with charter networks and stand-alone nonprofit organizations, we will be able to learn more about the best approaches to building partnerships with these two different types of organizations. We chose these two organization types to allow us to explore differences related to ownership and governance structures. Hiring and budget constraints in public schools can make it challenging to provide students with additional services. Oftentimes nonprofit organizations will step in to fill public service roles that are not addressed by the public sector (Young, 2000). This appears to be the case with nonprofit organizations that provide transition coaching services.

While charter schools are public schools, they are not governed by the same school boards that oversee traditional public schools. This allows charter schools to have more flexibility in hiring and programming. As a result, it might be easier for charter schools to hire transition coaches who will directly serve their students. In contrast, transition coaching services for students in traditional public schools are typically offered by nonprofit organizations.

It is also important to include both types of organizations in the coordination program because there may be issues specific to each type that might impact the program at UIC. For nonprofits, fundraising may be a challenge (Ahmed, 2005; Eikenberry, 2008; Miller, 1998). As a result, our partnerships with nonprofit organizations

might be impacted by capacity constraints or revenue uncertainty. There might also be issues for charter schools related to governance. While charter schools are governed by independent boards, in Chicago most charter schools are authorized by Chicago Public Schools (CPS). CPS authorizing policies might also impact external partnerships in some ways. Data sharing, for instance, might be constrained by CPS data policies. As part of the coordination program, OVPUA researchers will explore the external factors that impact the capacity of partner organizations and their ability to collaborate with UIC during the program.

Direct Student Benefits

The program will be managed by the Office of First Year Initiatives (OFYI). While the program is designed to streamline transition coaches' interactions with the campus, there will be several other components, including

- There will be a shared data system that will allow transition coaches to view student alerts and grades in real time. Through this system, both the OVPUA and the coaches will be able to identify students who need additional support.
- To facilitate communication and collaboration, monthly meetings will be held with each of the four organizations: Noble, OneGoal, BottomLine, and North Lawndale College Prep. At these meetings, the director of the OFYI will work with the coaches to address any unresolved student issues.
- Students will meet with their professors to get midterm grades and qualitative feedback about their progress in the course. This information will be collected and stored in the shared data system.
- Coaches will encourage students to participate in the UIC Experience.

Evaluation of the Program

As OVPUA implements the program, it will also develop an evaluation plan to assess the efficacy of the program. We will evaluate two key components of the program:

1) The impact of transition coaching on first-to-second-year retention of UIC students
2) The extent to which our OFYI structure streamlines relationships with external transition coaches.

To evaluate these outcomes, OVPUA researchers will collect qualitative and quantitative data from directors of external organizations, UIC staff, transition coaches, and students. With regard to students, OVPUA researchers will collect data through surveys and focus groups at the inception of the program and then again after the first year of implementation. With regard to our external partners, OVPUA researchers will conduct pre- and post-program interviews with key staff members to better understand how their interactions with UIC changed over the course of the program and whether or not the OFYI helped them to more efficiently identify appropriate supports for their students at UIC.

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