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INTERVENING WITH ON-TRACK STUDENTS WITH FINANCIAL CONCERNS TO PROMOTE FINANCIAL WELLNESS AND STUDENT SUCCESS

From the report series:
*Addressing Financial and Basic Needs
to Increase First-Year On-Track Rates*

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers at UIC have recently created an on-track index named First-Year On-Track (FYOT, Farruggia et al., 2020), which was inspired by the Freshman On-Track (FOT) indicator developed by researchers at the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). Freshman On-Track has two indicators: credits earned (i.e., a minimum of five, full-year course credits at the end of their freshman year) and class failure (i.e., no more than one semester course failure in a core subject in the first year). In order to be considered on-track, students must meet both criteria. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has used this metric to identify students who are at-risk for not graduating from high school and may benefit from early intervention (Allensworth et al., 2018). This initiative has been highly successful in addressing both behavioral and contextual factors involved in high school graduation. With these efforts, CPS has increased their graduation rates by over 20 percentage points.

The First-Year On-Track index (Farruggia et al., 2020) is comprised of four indicators: 1) first-term GPA (2.4 or greater); 2) credits earned in the first year (22 or more); 3) English writing grade (at least a C or its equivalent in

the first of the writing sequence); and 4) no unresolved financial holds in the first term of college. Students are considered on-track for college graduation if they meet all indicators and are considered off-track if they meet three or fewer indicators. This index is highly predictive of graduating from college within six years. In addition, achievement gaps in graduation by race/ethnicity are mirrored in gaps in on-track rates.

Ongoing research has aimed to better understand how other factors are associated with on-track status. For instance, Perez, Farruggia, & Vinson (2021) identified predictors of being on- and off-track, such as student and family background, basic needs, financial concerns, noncognitive strengths, and early programming for UIC students. Among the findings, students that were on-track by the end of their first year had lower amounts of unmet need and higher amounts of expected family contribution (EFC) relative to all students and those who were off-track at the end of their first year in college. When looking at family expenses generally, 75% of students who indicated that their families had financial resources to meet daily living expenses were on-track, whereas only 66% of students were on-track among

those who indicated that their families did not have enough money to meet daily living expenses. Overall, this previous study demonstrated the link between first-year student economic barriers and being on-track for graduation.

This study attempted to isolate and address the financial barrier to first-year on-track. More specifically, it sought to determine if providing support to students who were on-track, with the exception of having an unresolved financial hold, would promote their success in college. To test this, a program was designed and implemented.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The UIC Office of Student Services developed a program for high-achieving first-year students with a financial hold at the end of their first semester in college. The students were on-track through the first semester, but were at-risk of going off-track as they had a financial hold due to a past due balance at the end of the first semester (and were not eligible to register for classes). Students were selected by the Executive Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The program consisted of three components: scholarships; program sessions; and individual meetings. First, through funding by the Crown Family Philanthropies, students were awarded scholarships that paid down their past-due balances so their holds were removed and they were able to register for classes. Second, programming was provided that aimed to help students understand and address their financial situations and succeed at UIC. This program consisted of six sessions and covered key topics including: expectation setting;

SNAP (UIC's scholarship portal); career services and student employment; effective habits; semester planning and goal setting; scholarships and student loans; and budgeting. The sessions were conducted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the challenging schedules that some students had and the individualized needs of students, sessions were typically provided individually. Third, individual meetings were held for students and were tailored to the unique needs identified by each student. These one-on-one sessions provided a space to empower the students' voice and were needed to support the student through complex personal matters. These meetings also included an opportunity for students to create a budget for the upcoming year. The budgets were used as a tool to help students create a plan to reduce their student balances in the future. The Office of Student Services continued to meet with students and support them during the following year as needed.



METHODS

Participants in this study were 13 first-year undergraduate students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois Chicago who were on-track at the end of their first semester in college, with the exception of having an unresolved financial hold.

Demographic characteristics of the students are in Table 1. The students were awarded scholarships, ranging in amount from \$1,449 to \$9,496, with an average of \$5,769.

TABLE 1.
Study Participants Demographic Characteristics (n=13)

Race/Ethnicity	
Asian	46% (6)
Black	15% (2)
Latinx	23% (3)
White	15% (2)
Gender	
Female	54% (7)
Male	46% (6)
CPS high school	23% (3)
First-generation in college	54% (7)

This mixed-methods project utilized institutional data, program data, and interview data. Institutional data were secured from UIC's data warehouse and included indicators of on-track, student and family background characteristics, academic performance in the first year of college, and university-related variables. For the program data, student participation in the sessions was collected. For the interviews, all students in the program were asked to participate in an interview and three students agreed to participate. Students were invited via e-mail to participate in an interview with a member of the research team. Upon agreement of participation, students were given the informed consent form to read and sign. These interviews were structured and lasted 30-45 minutes in length. Interview questions focused on identifying the

mechanisms that promoted change and what factors led the students to having an unpaid balance that they could not cover. Students were given a \$30.00 gift card to thank them for their time.

Interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, recorded and automatically transcribed utilizing Zoom's built-in feature. When interviews were completed, recordings and transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy and edits were made when necessary. Prior to analysis, interview transcriptions were de-identified. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), interviews were coded using Atlas.ti. Themes were deductively extracted that provided a better insight into students' struggles with financing college.

RESULTS

The results of this study are provided in three parts. First, institutional data are examined to determine if program students were on-track at the end of the year, and if they were retained to the second year and third year in college. Second, data from the program was examined to

look at patterns of attendance with success indicators. Third, interview data were examined to understand what the students learned in the program that would help facilitate their on-going success in college.

INSTITUTIONAL DATA

TABLE 2.

Proportion of Students On-Track, On-Track by Indicator and Retained

	Financial Wellness Students
On-Track	85%
On-Track Indicators	
First-Term GPA	100%
First-Year Credits Earned	85%
English 160 Grade	100%
No Unresolved First-Term Financial Holds	100%
Retention to the Second Year	77%
Retention to the Third Year	69%

The success of the students in terms of being on-track and being retained to the second year and third year was examined (Table 2). Of the 13 students, all but two (85%) were on-track at the end of the year. The two students were off-track due to them not having enough credits earned to meet the 22 credits threshold. In addition, 10 of the 13 students were retained to the second year of college (77%) and 9 were retained to the third year in college (69%). Without the scholarship provided to the students at the end of first semester to resolve their financial holds, none of them (0%) would have enrolled in college in the second year.

Further, when examining grades and credits, the students did perform well. On average, students earned a 3.35 first-term GPA (s.d. = 0.50) and had 26 credits at the end of the first-year in college (s.d. = 5.73).

One additional source of institutional data was related to FAFSA completion. At the time of the awards, one of the students did not have a FAFSA on file. At the end of spring semester, the student still did not have a FAFSA on file and reported that their parents were not willing to complete the documentation. As such, the student chose not to re-enroll (was unretained) because they had an additional financial hold, and a viable financial aid plan could not be created.



PROGRAM DATA

Overall, students were engaged in the programming, with 12 of the 13 students participating in at least one session and most students attending four or more sessions. In addition to the sessions, students were requested to attend two individualized check-ins over

the summer. Over half of the students attended their first check-in, while only three attended the second. Two of the students who did not attend a summer check-in were two of the students that were not retained, whereas every student that completed both check-ins were retained.

INTERVIEWS

Five major themes emerged from the data: 1) **The financial assistance enabled the students to stay in school**; 2) **Students did not understand how to finance college prior to the program**; 3) **Positive relationships established with program staff enabled the students to get the most out of the program**; 4) **Financial barriers impacted success in college**; and 5) **COVID-19 impacted employment and finances that contributed to the unpaid balances**.

The first major theme was **the financial assistance enabled the students to stay in school**. While paying the unpaid balance was the first step in the program, the students did discuss the multiple ways that the funds assisted them and enabled them to stay focused on school because these financial needs were met. Three sub-themes in this major theme emerged from the interviews that identified the mechanisms by which these supports empowered the students to be successful in school. To start, *the grants helped pay the outstanding bills*. Students reflected how the funds allowed them to pay for essential costs, including their outstanding bill, which also allowed them to register for class. They would not have been able to register without the support. Likewise, students would not be able to pay for the class materials if they were solely focused on paying their bill. Next, *the awards allowed for job flexibility/reduction and thus increased concentration on academic studies*. Students reported working a lot of hours in an attempt to pay for school and related costs. The long hours spent working for pay prevented students from focusing on school. The resulting aid reduced the financial pressure the students were experiencing as illustrated by one student who shared:

I was able to like quit one of my jobs. And I was [working] every day and I was really stressed, because of it, so in that job it's like they would work me a lot for little pay. I was not getting a lot of money for the things that they would make me do, I never brought that up because it's I kind of need this place [the job], so if I did bring it up they probably would fire me and get someone within that amount of time, so I kept quiet about that, but like when the grant came,

I'm like, okay, I can I can like quit this job and I'm just going to focus on this one job to get my degree and have my school, so I had more time to focus on school.

The third sub-theme was *participating in the program increased confidence in staying at UIC and graduating*. As a reminder, all of the students had a hold and were unable to register for classes and attend college. The program paid their balance and allowed them to attend school while engaging in the program. Students reported that the support that they received as a part of these initiatives helped them to see that completing their degrees was possible for them—they saw that there was a pathway to graduation for them.

The second major theme was **students did not understand how to finance college prior to the program and learned to do so in the program**. Within this major theme, four sub-themes were identified, the first being *a better understanding of college financial processes*. Students in the program noted that they gained knowledge in financial aid and scholarship processes. This was reflected by one student who described how they were unaware of how scholarships worked or how to apply to them. This student said, “I didn't know the best way to go about it, or how many to apply to or what types of scholarships, stuff like that so, yeah, I found it helpful.”

A second sub-theme was *students experienced an overall increase in financial wellness*. Students consistently reported having increased financial wellness as a result of participating in the program. One student recalled how before the programming, they were spending their money without thought and after they learned how to budget better and focus on their priorities:

It gave me a little more, um how do I say, it kinda just open my eyes. I guess when it comes to my money, because I was definitely spending my money very irresponsibly. And there's priorities you know, and you

got to start setting your priorities straight and that's what I've been taking away.

A third subtheme was that *students had increased awareness of additional resources on- and off-campus.*

Students also indicated that they had increased awareness of UIC and non-UIC resources after participating in the programs. As an example, one student recalls how they became more aware of financial resources that were not financial aid to help their situation:

It helped me learn ways on how to find more scholarships and it helped me find out ways to save up, to save up until that point and see what resources that you can use to my advantage to tackle my financial situations.

The fourth sub-theme was putting gained knowledge and skills into practice. Students felt that while they did not understand how to finance college prior to the program, afterwards, they had the knowledge and skills to address their college-related financial needs. One participant explains how they took what they learned around scholarships and has been more proactive in making sure they do not get a financial hold in the future,

“I've looked at more scholarships and I've been more mindful to make sure that I'm set in the future, you know, so I wouldn't get a hold, a financial hold or anything like that.”

The third major theme that emerged from the data was **positive relationships established with program staff enabled the students to get the most out of the program.** This was reflected in the overall sense of positive feedback from the students concerning the program staff. Students noted the importance of creating positive relationships with program staff. One student mentioned how one of the positives of the program was building a personal relationship with the staff and having them connect with their story and specific struggles.

The fact that they helped us financially, but also what I like about it is that they listen to you as a person, so they kind of connect your story cuz when I was talking to [program staff], they asked me what I wanted to do, what my major was and how was going to tackle that and just overall about me. So, the good thing I liked about that is that they got to know me personally and they tried to like use my personal experience to see how I can tackle my financial situation.



Given the sensitive nature of the topics that they discussed, having this rapport with the program staff was important for the students to engage in the difficult content.

The fourth major theme was **financial barriers impacted success in college**, which had two sub-themes. The first sub-theme was financial concerns for tuition and fees impact educational decisions. Students often reflected that the costs of college tuition and fees were too high and an ongoing source of stress. Students found the financial aid process confusing and worrisome as they were concerned that the amount of aid may be reduced in subsequent years based on the FAFSA. As a result of these, students make educational decisions, such as not declaring a major with high fees, to manage the financial barriers. These were reflected by one student who said:

So that's a big reliance on that [financial aid], and it also it's also worrisome cuz every single time I have to do the FAFSA, I'm always worried I am going to get less money or wondering what they [Office of Financial Aid] were thinking because I don't know how their whole process is, so it's really worrisome because it was already a struggle, as it was for the first year. Which is why I first came [to UIC as an] undecided [major], because it was the thousand dollars wasn't there until I transferred over.

The second sub-theme reflected *concerns about not completing college due to financial and basic needs*. First-year students often felt daunted by the prospect of managing the finances of college for the next four years. They strategized ways to be able to complete their degrees, but feelings of discouragement made that difficult. This was reflected by one student who said:

...I was considering leaving UIC and going into community college and finishing off two years there and then maybe coming back. Right now, I'm not too sure about doing that. I think I'm gonna stay at UIC, but I did consider it because I had to work full time and some of the classes weren't manageable working full time.

The financial support that students received made it viable for them to remain in college.

The final major theme was that **the COVID-19 pandemic upended students' lives**. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Illinois was under strict mandates around mask-wearing and physical distancing, among others. At the start of the study, vaccines had just started becoming more widely available. Many students had experienced profound consequences to themselves and their families as a result of the pandemic. Two sub-themes specific to the consequences of the pandemic emerged from the data. First, *the pandemic created job-related issues that made paying for college difficult*. Students reported that they experienced challenges such as reduced hours at work, losing a job, or needing to find a job for themselves and their families as family finances worsened. Employment-related challenges consistently came up for students which made paying their college balance difficult.

A second sub-theme was *the pandemic created challenges in a wide range of students' lives beyond finances*. While the students specifically talked about the role of the pandemic in terms of employment and finances, the pandemic was influential in other areas, such as feelings of social isolation, mental health, transportation concerns, and the transition to online learning as reflected by a student who said:

Online [learning] was a pretty big impact, not being able to really talk to them to your professors or your class face to face. I feel like sometimes you feel isolated because you know there were classes where nobody [would] turn on their cameras. And then it's like you don't even know who you're talking with. So as freshmen it was hard making friends and stuff like that.

While students entered the program due to having an inability to pay for college, they also highlighted the consequences of the pandemic on many aspects of the students' lives.



DISCUSSION

This program was highly successful. First-year students were selected for the program who were ineligible to return to the second semester of college due to an unpaid balance, but were academically in good standing as demonstrated by the first-year on-track indicator. They had their balance paid and then participated in programming that helped them learn how to finance college, as well as meet other needs that created barriers to their success. All but two students were on track at the end of the first-year (85%), 77% were retained to the second year of college, and 69% were retained to the third year of college. It is anticipated that the retention rates could be increased if a FAFSA on file was required for entering the program.

Interview data identified the mechanisms that promoted the success of the program. Prior to their matriculation to college, students did not have a good understanding

of how to finance college, nor did they typically make effective decisions around money management. Participation in the program provided them the opportunity to learn and implement better financial decision making skills. Further, the program provided students the opportunity to learn additional skills to promote their success in college.

While this program was developed and delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic, principles remain. We anticipate that on-track students, with the exception of having an unresolved financial hold, would continue to benefit from the financial and educational resources associated with this program. Next steps would be to assess the feasibility of expanding the program, increasing the retention rates of students in the program, and conducting a financial analysis of the costs and benefits of the program.

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