National College Access Network

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Idea Incubator Series

Incorporating Fit and Match Into College Advising and Program Data

Introduction

NCAN has heard, repeatedly and consistently, over the years that one of the best aspects of NCAN membership is the ability to collaborate with and learn from other members. At our annual national conference, spring training events, and other gatherings, the cross-pollination of ideas and resources helps to make the entire membership stronger. In an effort to further this kind of transfer of ideas, NCAN, in the summer of 2016, hosted a series of four Idea Incubators across the country. These Incubators brought members together to tackle tough questions in data and evaluation.

The objectives of these Incubators were to develop a shared understanding of known research and best practices around the topic area; generate new insights, questions and ideas to test in practice; and identify actions to be taken and/or follow-up communication, as needed. Five to seven members came to each Idea Incubator. These two-day events were largely unstructured but were guided by a set of questions created by NCAN and bolstered by programs' individual interests. Discussions proceeded according to members' particular needs and levels of experience. Broad themes emerged in these discussions, as did shared needs for knowledge and additional resources.

The first of these Idea Incubators, "Incorporating Fit and Match into College Advising and Program Data," was hosted by Degrees of Change in Tacoma, WA. Readers should consider this document a hybrid between a white paper, a resource guide, and meeting minutes on this important topic, which has come into closer focus in both research literature and program practice in recent years.

Guiding Questions

The following questions guided the "Incorporating Fit and Match" Idea Incubator:

- What do we mean by "fit" and "match"?
- What are some ways to measure the concepts of fit and match and how do they fit into data systems?
- How do you recognize and capture data relevant to fit and match, including student-level data on institutional experiences?
- How is this data incorporated into existing systems (or put into new systems) to be used in a meaningful way?
- What does research say about fit and match, and what can we learn from the research about concrete practices for implementation?
- How can advisors best steer students to institutions that are good fits or matches?
- What are the implications for staff training and development for incorporating fit and match?

- What are the implications for program-institution partnerships for promoting good fit and match?
- What kind of continuous evaluation of institutional fit and match is possible for a program to implement?
- What are the implications for data sharing on fit and match among institutions to widen the pool of student experiences from which organizations can learn?

What Do We Mean by "Fit" and "Match"?

Incubator attendees generally agreed with the widely adopted (both by researchers and practitioners) definition of "match" being the degree to which a student's academic credentials match the academic competitiveness and selectivity of the college or university at which they enroll. "Fit," on the other hand, is "everything else," including dimensions like distance from a student's home and geographic location, campus atmosphere and degree of inclusivity, level of accommodation of and services for first-generation students, academic programs offered, and more. This expansive view of what "fit" encompasses makes it hard to capture and codify into a data system, which in turn makes it difficult to scale or standardize "fit" advising. Whether socioemotional and cultural fit can be quantified is one example of this challenge. "Match" is relatively easier for programs to create policies around.

The question of "fit" and "match" assumes that students have multiple institutional options at which to apply and enroll. For this reason, there are geographical constraints for fit and match. Attendees noted that community colleges are essential partners for students whose choices are geographically restricted because the two-year schools are their only option or because they're the best pathway and pipeline to eventually transfer to a four-year school. "Fit and match is a different game in rural communities," one attendee noted. "Are you having this conversation in rural communities where there are institutional deserts?" That fit and match assume access to mobility, resources, and institutional options is important to keep in mind throughout this brief.

Challenges with Systemizing Fit and Match

One of the big challenges related to incorporating fit and match into a program is how to scale the advising model in a way that makes these concepts institutional rather than individual. At smaller programs, based in a specific geographic area, it is relatively easier for advisors to know (and have experience with) the universe of schools that their students are more likely to attend. When programs scale to multiple cities, or even begin to serve more students in a specific city, it becomes more difficult and unrealistic for advisors to have experience with each of the schools that their students could attend. Similarly, when a program has just a few advisors, it is easier for them to

informally share their knowledge and talking points about colleges and universities than it is when there are more advisors.

Despite these challenges, Incubator attendees shared some of the approaches they've used to implement fit and match advising at their programs. In all cases the human element remains, even where strides have been made toward rubrics or scales that categorize schools as good, neutral, or poor matches and fits for students served. Talking about fit and match with students (and, often, their parents) ultimately results in a conversation with advisors presenting some evidence. As mentioned earlier, match is a relatively easier concept to integrate into a data system. To calculate a "match score," one attendee's program observes students' academic credentials (GPA, standardized test scores) as well as the institution's selectivity rating from the Barron's Profile of American Colleges. Another program created a grid of past students' GPAs and test scores as well as where they were admitted (and with which kinds of financial aid packages were awarded), so that current and future students can match up their circumstances to gauge the odds of getting into schools of various levels of selectivity. Students then create a list of seven schools to which they will apply. Still another program color codes schools according to on-campus student supports and six-year completion rates (both overall and low-income). Students are discouraged from attending schools in red (which have graduation rates of less than 45 percent), while schools in yellow (45-59 percent) and green (60+ percent) are presented to students. From there, a conversation about fit takes place. Other variables attending programs took into consideration included a school's cost of attendance and students' median earnings 10 years after entering the institution (provided by the U.S. Department of Education's College Scorecard).

These systems are, by the programs' own admissions, imperfect. Given how intangible many of the "fit" factors are, it is hardly surprising that discussions between advisors and students can be and often are shaped by anecdotal evidence, even as programs are striving to incorporate more facts. "What happens when the colleges that rise to the top of our system are ones we don't like?" one participant asked. "Then advisors don't trust the tool, which defeats the purpose of having it." That question of advisor buy-in and belief in the system was another tackled by this Incubator. Through one lens, a system around "fit" could be seen as a supplement to advisors' knowledge and experience. Through another lens, the system could be seen as supplanting an advisor's judgment. Implementation of the system makes a big difference around which lens becomes dominant in a given program.

Campus-Based Support Systems

Characteristics like campus culture, services, and practices are difficult to quantify, but they make a difference in how good of a "fit" an institution is for a student and for the student's subsequent postsecondary experience. Another major topic raised repeatedly

at the Incubator was if and how on-campus support systems should factor into programs' assessments of colleges and universities. One attendee described how their program has a rubric that staff members fill out during outreach visits to students. "It's not down to a science," but staff members consider questions like, "Is it easy to locate the tutoring office?" and note the answer in a shared campus profile that is accessible to other staff members. Advisors here again use a color-coded system. Schools where advisors are easily able to recognize academic, social, and emotional supports on-campus are green. Yellow schools display some specific resources but with some trouble or obstacles to students accessing them. At red schools, supports are not well-established, and other students from the program often drop out within their first two years of matriculation.

This discussion about on-campus student supports raised the need for a resource that would allow students to discuss their on-campus experiences. Attendees considered something like a "Yelp for on-campus student supports" that would ask students questions like, "What was your experience of going to the university center?" Assuming enough usage, attendees suggested that programs (or perhaps NCAN) could aggregate the "green" lists of institutions and then "accredit" them. But there are at least a few issues with this proposal. First, as with any kind of review service, users only see one side of the story (in this case, the student's), which could to misleading reviews. Second, different programs and students tend to value various characteristics differently. There would need to be a streamlining and standardization of the measurement of on-campus supports, and agreement around these processes could be difficult. Third, any kind of review system is only as good as the representativeness and sample of the reviewers. Would programs want their students to make decisions based on just a handful of reviews from other students? Is that fair to campuses that may be rated poorly but are not given specific suggestions for improvement? Still, moving forward, programs may want to consider sharing their school ratings with each other, similar to how individual advisors share their experiences about specific campuses. This could be accomplished on a smaller scale without centralizing ratings into one system.

How Do Advisors Advise on Fit and Match?

As tends to happen when NCAN members convene, the Incubator conversation touched on general advising strategies and philosophies. In this case, the conversation unsurprisingly occurred through the lens of fit and match, which are just part of the advising calculus for the participating attendees. Financial fit "carries more weight than everything else," one participant explained. "We start with financial and we end with financial." Students might be admitted to a college or university with a lower average GPA, but those schools do not tend to offer the same level of aid that higher-caliber schools do, so this program tries to steer students toward the schools that are offering the best aid packages.

"The two biggest barriers to college completion are financial affordability and academic readiness," another participant explained. There is a tension around sending students to affordable institutions that are otherwise lacking in on-campus supports. This dearth often extends time to completion for students, if they complete at all. Neither "debt with no degree" nor "debt because of long completion" is an ideal outcome for students. The ideal that this program aims for is a choice that is affordable and will lead to a degree.

"Affordability" is sometimes a loaded word in the college access space. What is the definition of affordable? There was agreement that affordability can differ by student and program. A $60,000-per-year school can be more affordable than one in a program's backyard, depending on net price and aid packages. One attending program defines "affordables" as a school that a student can attend with "a healthy amount of federal work study, loans capped at $5,500 per year, and external scholarships and institutional aid…beyond that, it's unaffordable." Part of the "fit" conversation that advisors have with students is which kinds of financial aid an institution has offered to similar students in the past.

Beyond affordability, attendees also discussed the tension between selectivity and cultural fit. Advising students toward the most selective school they can get into may at times be inversely proportional to how well the campus fits them. This, in turn, adds to students' daily stress and impacts their coursework and comfort level. All of these are considerations for conversations with students and their families who are picking a campus for the first time. Advisors, on the other hand, have often worked with similar students and families as well as the campuses in question, and can help to navigate these issues, even if it is just by making students and parents aware of them.

Despite advisors' best guidance, sometimes students do not want to attend an institution that might be the best match and fit for them. Attendees discussed how they handle this situation. One example is a student deciding between a full scholarship at a private out-of-state institution (the program's preferred choice for the student) versus staying in-state and close to home to attend an institution with a low graduation rate (the student's preferred choice). Another example is if a student wants to pursue an academic program that may not be economically profitable in the future. There is a tension here between nudging the student and promoting that student's agency to make their own choice. "When we are really pushy, students disengage and are like, 'We don't even trust you now'" said one attendee. "Students felt like we didn't support them regardless of what choice they made [and said,] 'I don't feel valued at the organization, so why would I participate in other opportunities?' We are nudgy but don't disengage or discourage if they go to a place we don't think is a best fit. We might even check in with them more because we think they may have some obstacles to overcome." These kinds of scenarios go beyond "fit" and "match" and extend into broader issues around and approaches to maintaining the healthy relationship between students, advisors, and programs.

Program-Level Fit & Match and Wage Outcomes

Dr. Mark Schneider, President of CollegeMeasures.org and Vice President and Institute Fellow at the American Institutes of Research, presented to Incubator attendees on "Finding Degrees of Value" for students. The economic outcomes related to an academic program are another element of fit and match for programs to consider. Dr. Schneider noted that students have five key questions in deciding where to attend and what to study:

- Will I get in?
- Will I get out?
- How long will it take?
- How much will it cost?
- How much will I make?

His presentation used data from MyFutureTX.org and LaunchMyCareerTN.org, two statewide websites created in partnership between CollegeMeasures and those states that describe the wage outcomes of students who attend particular institutions or obtain certain degrees. Examining Texas' and Tennessee's median wage data among college completers, Dr. Schneider described how the average certificate- and associate's degree-holder in these states earns more than bachelor's-degree holders in some fields (e.g., music, social work, and psychology). He also discussed the need to look at student outcomes at the academic-program level rather than just at the overall institution level (and even better, at the program-by-institution level). Many NCAN member programs emphasize to their students the importance of four-year degrees, and in some ways Dr. Schneider's presentation challenged that approach. He noted that students who choose to pursue less profitable four-year academic programs often need to supplement their degree with "hot skills" that are associated with growing jobs (e.g., data analysis and coding).

Expanding the discussion about fit and match beyond four-year institutions and into two-year (with or without eventual transfer) is often a whole new dimension in the conversation with students and their families. One attendee described how, "We gear all of our students to four-year schools from 7th grade on. We have had very few students find success at two-year colleges. We do aim for four-year, but we support them wherever they are." Another attendee concurred, but with a catch. "We were pushing four-year colleges, and then we did an evaluation with our students. The students at two-year schools said, '[This program] doesn't care about us,' and that there was not enough emphasis on two-year colleges. Subsequently, we created partnerships with local community colleges." The emphasis on program-level outcomes was also one to which attendees continued to circle back to discuss the differential results from various types of degrees and academic programs.

Attendees described how there are factors other than pay involved in the fit and match decision. "If you go for a job that only has skills, and if those skills phase out, where does that leave you? Do you need to go back again? What does that cost you?" asked one attendee. Attendees also raised concerns about tracking students into sub-baccalaureate programs. On the one hand, earning a great wage with a certificate or associate's program could help to end the cycle of poverty (even though bachelor's-degree earners on average earn more in the long run). On the other hand, the assembled programs (and presumably programs in the broader NCAN membership) have concerns about closing postsecondary doors to their students that remain open to other students. As one Incubator attendee put it, "We are preparing every student to have the option to decide, but this conversation is about having to decide." Another added, "Any kind of advising is going to be values-driven, and systemizing that is going to incorporate those values," which is where there is a tension surrounding how to advise students on different pathways.

Resources Related to Fit and Match

The following are some of the fit and match resources suggested or discussed by attendees at this Idea Incubator:

- NCAN's eLearning Platform (https://collegeaccess.edu20.com/) – NCAN's eLearning platform is a great training tool for staff members at college access and success organizations. Two courses are particularly relevant to the fit and match conversation: "Interpreting Award Letters and Understanding Affordability" and "College Admissions: Finding the Right Fit."
- College Greenlight (www.collegegreenlight.org) – NCAN member College Greenlight "connects first generation and underrepresented students to caring colleges, generous scholarships, and life-changing counselors and mentors" via its free online platform. Students can explore Greenlight's campus profiles to try to find the best fit for them and also consider their odds of being admitted. Program advisors can keep track of cohorts of students all at once with a useful backend dashboard.
- Consortium on Chicago School Research "From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College" (https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/CCSR_Potholes_Report.pdf) – This research report from March 2008 has some great information about what derails students from applying to and enrolling in college. There is an entire chapter on college match, but the chart on page 18 is especially relevant to the fit and match conversation. It sorts colleges based on unweighted GPA and composite ACT score and suggests which category of college to which a student is most likely to be best matched.

- uAspire (www.uaspire.org) – Another NCAN member, uAspire offers training that attendees called useful for helping students to better understand financial fit, especially with regard to award letter review and comparisons.
- Overgrad (www.overgrad.com) – Nationally recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a finalist in the Reach Higher Career App Challenge, Overgrad is a free online platform through which students can use college and career software to search for and compare colleges based on academic ability, interests, and more. Students can also use the platform to better understand how to get to college and measure their progress.
- The TalentED Project (http://www.tncollegeaccess.org/thetalentedproject) – The TalentED Project is a partnership between the UBS NextGen Leaders Initiative, the Tennessee College Access and Success Network (TCASN, an NCAN member), and Discovery Education. It provides a curated list of schools that are a good "fit" for student populations served by NCAN members. The portal helps to connect college access professionals and college admissions recruiters.
- ScholarMatch (www.scholarmatch.org) – ScholarMatch's ScholarMatcher examined 1,400 schools to find the 301 considered best fits for first-generation and low-income students. Students can match to these schools based on their academic credentials. The website also has free online college resources.
- I'm First (www.ImFirst.org) – I'm First is an online community for first-generation students and those supporting them. Students can connect with each other, find schools that best accommodate first-generation students, ask questions about college (and receive answers!), and get college advising.
- The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Project (https://www.indiana.edu/~cece/wordpress/) – The Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Project provides a research-based model for college success that examines the extent to which a campus is culturally relevant and/or responsive to racially diverse populations. CECE's undergraduate survey can be used to help determine whether students find a campus to be "culturally engaging." This survey may be a good starting point for members hoping to codify different elements of institutional "fit" among students.

Remaining Questions and Next Steps

Though this Incubator covered a lot of ground related to fit and match, attendees still left with a number of questions to investigate. These included:

- Academic program-level differences matter: How can we change the paradigm of match and fit to encompass this? Programs often think about advising students among institutions rather than among programs of study; should that practice shift?

- Are there assessments or surveys to reliably identify and codify relevant dimensions of fit? Fit is hard to articulate. Are there diagnostic tools other than student self-reporting that might be better at revealing this? What other standardized measures could be used (e.g., diversity levels, distance from home, campus environment)?
- How do we balance fit and match considerations with future earnings? We need program-level data to understand how successful students are in a given program. How can we advise a student on that? How do we advise students who want to pursue a career based on their passions but won't necessarily find high-earning jobs?
- Can the college access and success field come to a consensus on what the bare minimum match and fit factors are?

Next steps discussed at the Incubator included developing a fit and match survey for students (although it appears that the [Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Project](#) appears to have completed substantial work in this area). Attendees also discussed the need for more tools for comparing financial aid packages so that financial fit can be better addressed when advising students and their families. Overall, the discussion cemented how critical fit and match is in advising students toward an institution that best meets their current and future needs, but the discussion also highlighted the further needs in this area.

NCAN would like to thank all of the attendees for their candor during this Idea Incubator, as well as Degrees of Change for being a phenomenal host for this event. Stay tuned for future briefs documenting the rest of the Idea Incubator series.