



# *Preparing Youth for College and Career*

## *A Process Evaluation of Urban Alliance*

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## Executive Summary

Urban Alliance, headquartered in Washington, DC, serves at-risk youth through its high school internship program, which provides training, mentoring, and work experience to high school seniors from distressed communities in Washington, DC; Baltimore; Northern Virginia; and Chicago. The program serves youth before they become disconnected, helping them successfully transition to higher education or employment after graduation.

Urban Alliance has commissioned the Urban Institute to conduct a six-year, randomized controlled trial impact and process evaluation of its high school internship program. This report provides a process analysis of the program; the analysis is informed by extensive evaluator observation and interviews with staff, stakeholders, and youth. It also presents baseline information about Urban Alliance and the youth participating in its high school internship program in Washington, DC, and Baltimore in the 2011–12 and 2012–13 program years. Subsequent reports as part of the impact study will describe the early-adulthood impacts of the Urban Alliance internship program on the youth it serves. Below is a summary of the findings in this first of three reports.

### PROGRAM MODEL

- *Goals for youth:* The program’s goals for youth are that they (1) improve their hard and soft job skills, (2) gain long-term, office-based employment experience, (3) graduate from high school, (4) attend college or a training program, and (5) identify long-term employment opportunities.
- *Program components:* The program’s key elements are (1) a paid internship in an office setting at a nonprofit organization, corporation, or government agency (daily after school and full-time during the summer); (2) soft and hard skills job training for 4–6 weeks after school at the start of the program (“pre-work training”) and Fridays after school thereafter (“workshops”); (3) coaching and mentoring provided by Urban Alliance Program Coordinators and job mentors at the internship site; and (4) alumni services consisting of individual coaching, alumni reunions and events, and a paid internship opportunity during the summer break from college.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF PROGRAM APPLICANTS

- *Demographic characteristics:* The average age for all applicants at the start of the program was 17. Ninety percent of applicants were black, and 65 percent of applicants were female. Over half lived only with their mother, 5 percent only with their father, one quarter lived in two-parent homes, and 12 percent lived with neither parent. Four percent have children of their own.
- *Work experience:* Three-quarters of youth reported at least some work experience before applying for the program, with average experience of just less than 10 months in all jobs combined. Common job experience was through summer jobs, including those accessed through the Summer Youth Employment Program in Washington, DC.
- *Educational background:* Slightly more than a quarter of Urban Alliance applicants attended a charter school, and the majority of these were in Washington, DC. Applicants on average exhibited satisfactory but not stellar performance in school. The average cumulative GPA at the end of applicants’ junior year was 2.66. Over one-third of applicants had attended more than one high school.
- *Motivations:* Many program staff and youth participants cited the internship wages as a major motivating factor in applying to the program. Youth also reported interest in building up credentials on their resume for college or job applications. Many saw the internship and training as an opportunity to develop professional and interpersonal skills for future use, and some noted prestige among their social networks for having a professional internship. Generally, youth articulated they planned to go to college and choose professional career fields.

## PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

- *Recruitment and application:* Collaboration between Urban Alliance and local high schools is important for recruiting participants. In Baltimore, a formal partnership with the schools allows youth to receive course credit for participation; in DC, the partnership is informal. In both sites, school counselors and other staff encourage the participation of “middle-of-the-road” students: those who are not at the top of the class but are not struggling severely. Youth must obtain an early-release schedule to participate, so they tend to have some flexibility with their schedules; their schedules are not filled with AP courses or unmet graduation requirements.
- *Pre-work training and workshops:* Training is delivered in many formats, including lectures, group work, skits, and hands-on individual or group activities.
  - *Pre-work training:* This phase of training lasts four to six weeks and focuses on building job skills, including soft skills such as how to behave in an office setting and presenting a “professional self.”
  - *Training workshops during internship phase:* Workshops focus on general life skills, self-sufficiency, and college planning. They keep youth motivated about going to college.
  - *Public speaking challenge:* At the end of the program, youth give presentations on their internship experience at the public speaking challenge and receive a bonus for successful completion. This provides them with an opportunity to showcase the skills they have gained in communication and public speaking.
- *Internship:* Youth who complete pre-work training enter the internship phase of the program. Youth are matched with job sites based on the degree of nurturance they need, their distance to the job site, career interests, and personality. Typical job duties included filing, correspondence, shipments, copying, printing, and other clerical duties. These basic office tasks are considered part of the skills growth process. The internship is meant to provide a foundation of skills that can be used in future jobs in any field and to motivate youth to pursue higher education.
  - *Job mentors:* Each job site selects a mentor to guide the youth through the internship. Some job mentors contribute to youth development in a wide-ranging mentorship role, some principally act as supervisors, and others provide general mentoring but little job-specific guidance. Some mentors reported speaking with their intern every day, but for others contact was weekly or monthly if other staff at the organization assigned the intern work. Communication between job mentors and Program Coordinators occurs throughout the program and is important to program success.
  - *Attracting and retaining job sites:* Urban Alliance Program Coordinators, senior-level staff, and board members all help attract organizations to serve as job sites for interns. Attracting sites is challenging and was especially difficult in Baltimore, but once involved, organizations tend to stay involved in subsequent years.
  - *Intern value to employers:* Job sites found interns to be helpful additions to their workplace. Some reported that interns helped them meet their aim of increasing workplace diversity, boosted public image, or provided employees an opportunity to gain supervisory experience.
  - *Internship value to youth:* The potential value of the Urban Alliance internship for participating youth is substantial. The internship provides paid work: youth earned nearly \$3,800 (in 2013 dollars) on average, participated in their internships for an average of 35 weeks, and averaged about 400 hours of work. In addition, the internship provides access to an otherwise inaccessible, often prestigious, job environment. Some youth secure future internships or jobs as a result of their internship, and some gain connections at colleges. Youth also benefit from mentor support through tangible help with résumés; career advice; college applications; or encouragement to complete the program, school, or navigate hardships at home. Youth gain hard and soft skills, with the gains in soft skills more notable. The improvements most commonly mentioned by youth and by staff were in communication skills, confidence, and comportment.

- *Program Coordinators:* Program Coordinators manage a caseload of 30–35 interns. Their duties include running training sessions; communicating with their caseload; entering tracking notes and other data into Urban Alliance’s case-management system; connecting youth with resources as needed; communicating with job mentors and school counselors; and leading one-on-one post–high school planning sessions. Program Coordinators reported this set of responsibilities is both highly rewarding and highly demanding; many would prefer a smaller caseload and felt that the position induced burnout. Furthermore, many acknowledged difficulty in balancing time between encouraging youths’ professional development and supporting their academic success.
  - *Post–high school planning:* Three times a year, youth meet with Program Coordinators for one-on-one 30–60 minute post–high school planning sessions. During the sessions, they help youth with college essays and applications, applications for financial aid and scholarships, college choices, and preparation for the public speaking challenge. Many Program Coordinators felt there was insufficient time for post–high school planning.
  - *Coaching relationship:* The relationship between Program Coordinators and youth is extremely important and is believed to influence retention, commitment to college, and level of internship attendance. Program Coordinators strive to maintain a close, open, encouraging relationship with youth. Contact between youth and Program Coordinators varied in form and frequency, with high-need youth sometimes occupying the bulk of time staff could spend providing one-on-one guidance. Program Coordinators reported connecting with youth one to five times per week outside a weekly e-mail to their caseload. Program Coordinators believe most youth need very frequent communication as part of the coaching relationship. Though students expressed annoyance at the high level of contact, they also seemed to be grateful for its ability to keep them on track.
  - *Communication with schools:* Urban Alliance assigns a specific program staff member as the main point of contact with each school. Program staff contact the schools to provide updates and compare notes on youth. The frequency of communication with schools varies depending on the style of the school counselor and the challenges faced by particular Urban Alliance interns.
  - *Qualifications, training, and retention:* Program Coordinators have at least a bachelor’s degree and usually have at least two years of direct service experience. They receive a week of initial orientation and a yearly stipend for further training. Most learning is on-the-job; Program Coordinators say that through a process of trial and error, they learned how to deal with different situations and types of students. Typically, Program Coordinators stay in the position for two to three years, though some have advanced to management level within the organization.
- *Program Attrition:* Substantial attrition occurs in the Urban Alliance internship program. Of youth who completed an application and were admitted to the treatment group, more than one in five did not show up to pre-work training. Roughly one-quarter began but did not complete pre-work training. Of the 52 percent of accepted applicants who completed pre-work training, nearly all were placed in an internship. Overall, about two of five accepted applicants ultimately completed the program. The high rates of attrition before and during pre-work training are not seen as problematic by the program; youth with low motivation or irreconcilable scheduling conflicts leave the program before beginning an internship. The driver of attrition most commonly mentioned was the cost of transportation to and from training events and job sites. Scheduling demands were also a problem, especially in the pre-work training phase. Further, some youth did not complete their jobs because of poor attendance; misconduct; or conflicting employment, educational, or personal obligations.
- *Program Costs:* Youth participant wages, awards, and fringe costs together made up nearly half of all program costs. A few job sites pay youth wages themselves, though for most, Urban Alliance covers the cost. Staff wages and fringe benefits totaled another 42 percent of costs; the remainder was rent, administrative costs, and other direct program costs. Cost per student is \$4,925 if spread across all youth who attended at least some pre-work training, but equals \$8,866 when spread only among youth who completed the entire program.

- *Organizational growth and change:* Urban Alliance has experienced tremendous growth over the past decade, transforming itself from a local nonprofit with four staff members to a multisite organization with 42 staff members that has served over 1,500 students. Urban Alliance enters new sites if staff believe there is a need in that locality, at least 70 internships can be secured, and the regional staffing can be put in place. The high school internship program now operates in Washington, DC; Baltimore; Chicago; and Northern Virginia. Staff members say it can be challenging to navigate the program model in each site; a newly created chief program officer position helps ensure that the sites implement the curriculum and share information in a standardized manner. Growth within a particular site is dependent on the number of local internship slots that can be secured for students. Besides expanding the number of students at each site, Urban Alliance has experienced growth in the technologies and tools that each site uses to serve its youth. In 2012, for instance, sites began using Salesforce’s web-based case-management system. The organization has also developed new capacities in evaluation and alumni services.

## IMPLICATIONS

- Urban Alliance fills in important niche in the continuum of services provided to at-risk youth in two ways. First, it serves “middle-of-the-road” students who are likely to graduate, but who may have difficulties acquiring good jobs or enrolling in higher education after high school. Second, Urban Alliance has created an intermediary role between schools and employers, relieving schools of a task for which they may be ill-suited. Employers are able to deal directly with a responsive organization that will provide interns with a beginning set of both hard and soft skills.
- The internship program depends heavily on buy-in from schools and employers. School administrators must buy into the model in order to allow for the necessary early-release schedules, and school counselors must help identify appropriate program applicants. Employers must be willing to welcome low-skilled high school students, give them genuine work opportunities in an office setting, and negotiate their issues with the help of Urban Alliance.
- The office-based work experience Urban Alliance provides helps youth understand how college can improve their future opportunities and earnings. However, if college is the goal, more could be done to introduce students to college, such as sponsoring campus visits.
- The Urban Alliance funding scheme is an important component of the Urban Alliance model. By having employers pay Urban Alliance a contribution, Urban Alliance can oversee the payment of wages to youth and cover the additional costs of administering their high school internship program, allowing the organization to achieve sustainability of the program after initial start-up.
- Program attrition is high and poses challenges. For one, attrition rates vary each year, so Urban Alliance may end up with either too few or too many youth for the number of internships they have available. Perhaps more important is the possibility that the program serves a motivated group of youth who may have done well in the absence of the program. Although these youth can still benefit from the training and internships, the resources may be better allocated to serve more at-risk youth. The results of the impact evaluation will help determine the appropriateness of the self-selection aspect of Urban Alliance’s program design.