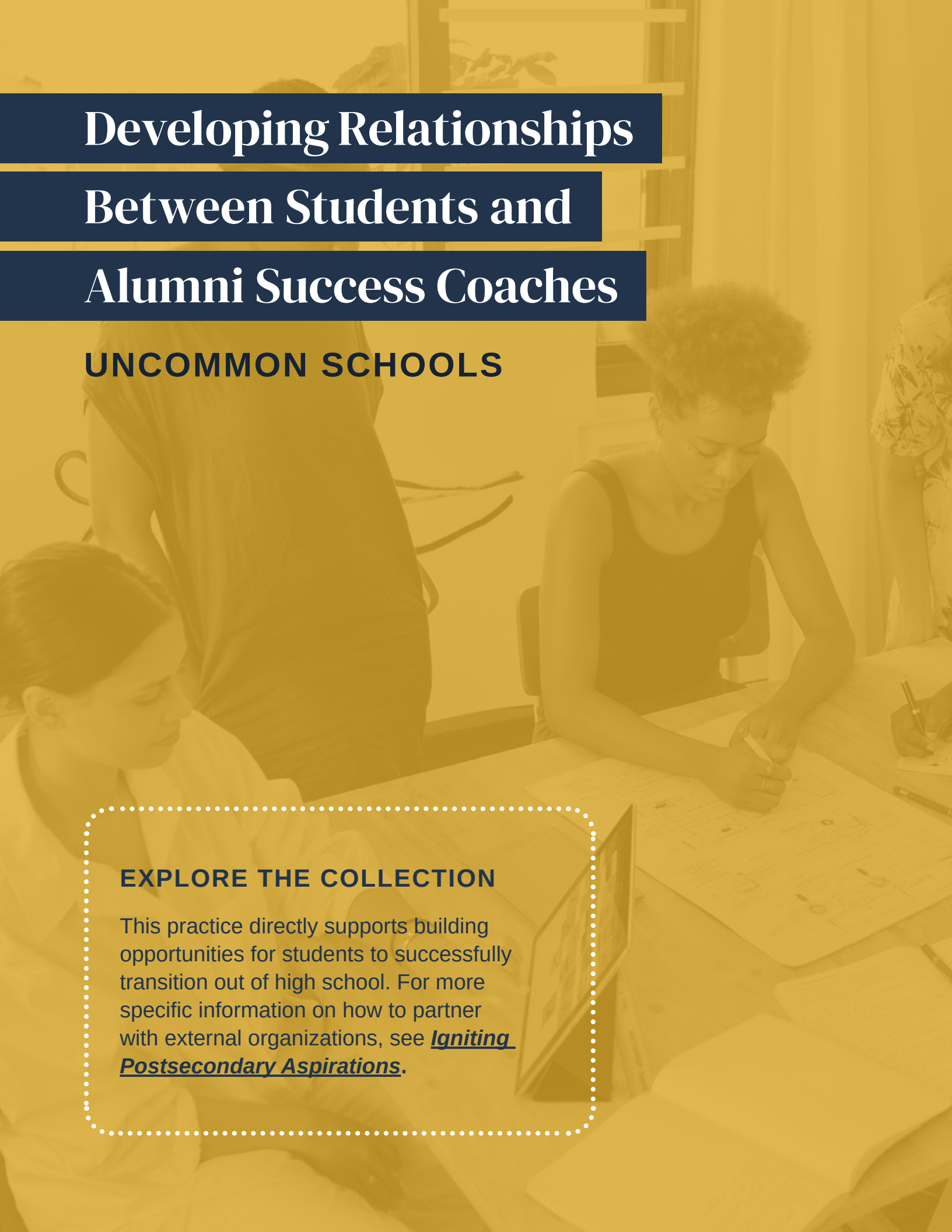
Developing Relationships Between Students and Alumni Success Coaches

UNCOMMON SCHOOLS



EXPLORE THE COLLECTION

This practice directly supports building opportunities for students to successfully transition out of high school. For more specific information on how to partner with external organizations, see ***Igniting Postsecondary Aspirations***.

Snapshot

WHAT IS THE PRACTICE?

To effectively support students with disabilities during their high school-to-postsecondary transition, special education teams partner with postsecondary teams to facilitate relationships between alumni support staff and students. This proactive effort is concentrated in students' senior year, ensuring both students and alumni support staff understand each other's roles, needs, and ways of working together to achieve individualized postsecondary goals. Special education case managers guide the process, facilitating the establishment of effective relationships and collaboration methods to achieve students' individualized postsecondary goals upon graduation.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

- Research suggests that when students with disabilities feel a sense of connection and support from school staff, they are more likely to actively engage in educational services and interventions.[1]
- Establishing these connections between students and alumni counselors before graduation ensures students leverage the team's resources and guidance for postgraduation programs and services.
- Many charter school networks have transition-focused programs and staff, yet they traditionally emphasize college enrollment and persistence. Awareness among students with disabilities and their families about these available programs and their broader postsecondary benefits is often lacking.
- Engaging with students over their years in high school helps staff members understand the varied learning profiles and postsecondary transition goals of students with disabilities. This common understanding allows staff to productively partner with students, and families as appropriate, so students enroll in and persist with one or more college, career, or community programs aligned to their individualized transition plans and goals.



> **"Students who don't complete their exit interview are less likely to engage with us."**
>
> **— ROY PELLEW, UNCOMMON ALUMNI SUCCESS COACH**

[1] Martin, Andrew J., and Rebecca J. Collie. "Teacher-Student Relationships and Students' Engagement in High School: Does the Number of Negative and Positive Relationships with Teachers Matter?" *Journal of Educational Psychology* 111, no. 5 (2019): 861–876. https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000317

The Challenge

Traditionally, postsecondary support teams do not collaborate and coordinate with special educators to address the individualized transition needs of students with disabilities.

Remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic made it challenging for school staff across the United States to regularly interact with students. This made forming relationships with students difficult, particularly for new teachers and staff. For graduating seniors, these difficulties sometimes meant that they did not have strong connections with school staff, to whom they would normally turn for support with the transition out of high school. This absence was felt even more acutely by students with disabilities, for whom transition support is essential to connect with necessary services or to pursue less traditional postsecondary goals, such as those in workforce development or community living.

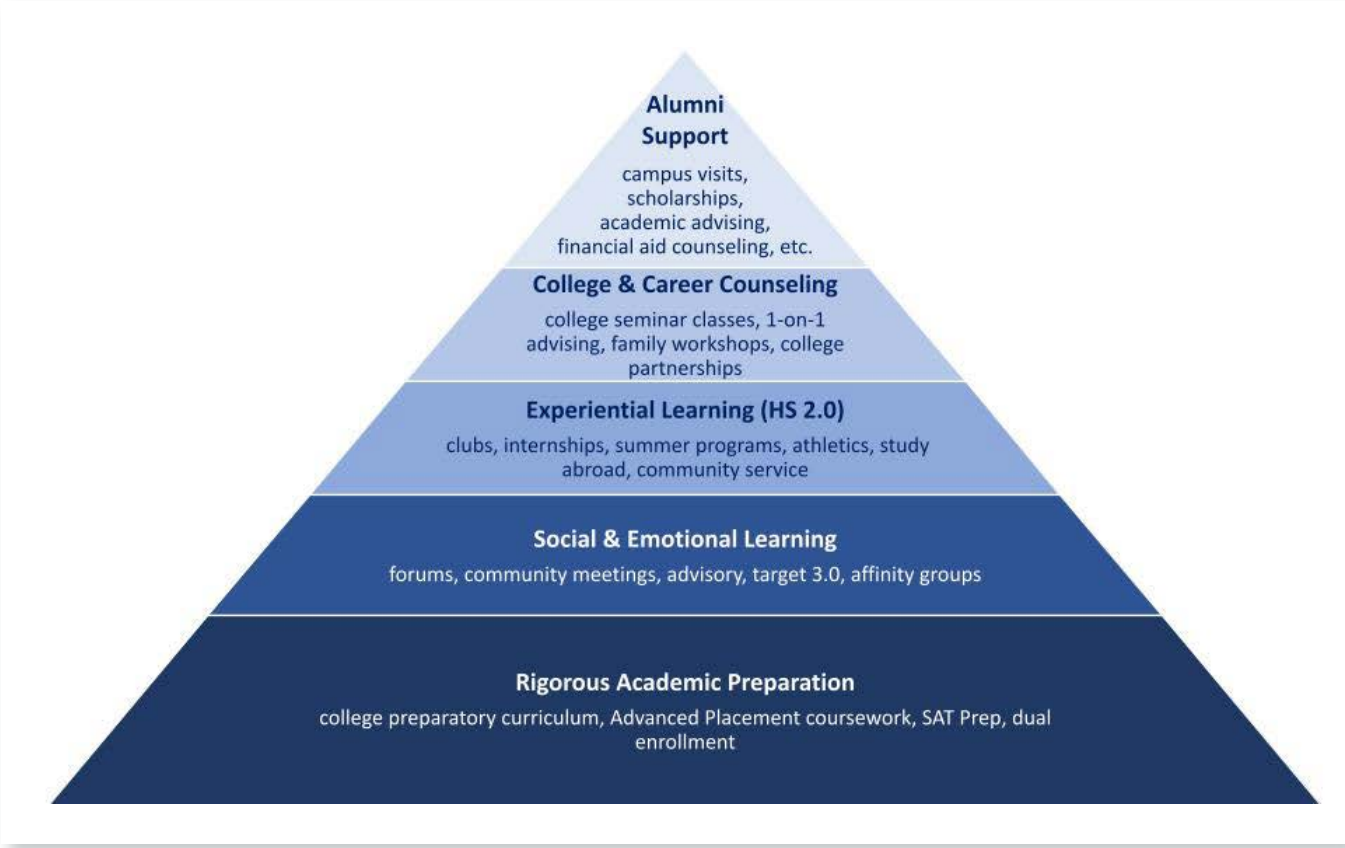
At Uncommon Schools, the challenges of remote learning were particularly difficult for the Office of College Access and Success (OCAS) team as they endeavored to facilitate relationship-building between students and their alumni success coaches. These coaches support students after graduation to ensure they achieve their individual postsecondary goals. Tonya Ballard, a special education teacher and the college and career readiness coach for North Star Academy Lincoln Park High School's self-contained class — the Impact Program — realized that only about 60% of her students were responding to their alumni success coach, Roy Pellew. The OCAS team recognized that they needed to develop solutions so that Uncommon staff like Roy and Tonya could collaborate to increase students' engagement in working toward their postsecondary goals.

Before working with alumni success coaches like Roy, Uncommon students attend seminar classes from freshman to junior year to explore postsecondary opportunities and to prepare for the transition out of high school. In their senior year, students learn more about the support that alumni success coaches can provide once students leave high school. During the pandemic, students' initial interactions with their alumni success coaches had to take place remotely via Zoom, phone, or email. This remote set-up made it more difficult for students to form trusting relationships with their coaches and understand the coach's role. They were also unaware of the type of help the coach could provide them after they graduated. Ultimately, students had little reason to pick up the phone or answer a text from their alumni success coach after graduation because they did not know how the coach could help them.



Furthermore, the social disconnection students experienced during the pandemic made it difficult for them to reach out for help from their coach or from Uncommon once they left high school.

In light of these circumstances, Roy faced a disadvantage with the Impact Program students. He did not get the chance to foster connections with students in the Impact Program before they graduated. Students in the Impact Program were also accustomed to having Tonya as their primary point of contact during high school because she taught almost all of their classes, including their college and career readiness class. In addition, many of the students in the Impact Program wanted to attend a 2-year college or immediately enter employment, pathways that were less familiar to Roy, as he had previously focused on Uncommon's mission that their students attend 4-year college. Roy understood the importance of familiarizing himself with the diverse postsecondary aspirations of students in the Impact Program, beyond the traditional 4-year college route, to better support them in achieving their postsecondary goals.



Uncommon's Continuum of Postsecondary Readiness Supports for All Students

Enabling Conditions

Enabling Conditions describes the minimum conditions needed for successful implementation, including resources, mindsets, staffing, and recommended time allocation.

Prerequisites	★ Systemwide commitment to alternative pathways in addition to 2- and 4-year college ★ Network-level support for developing clear structures and easy-to-use resources for postsecondary transition ★ Dedicated time for high school seniors to engage in postsecondary transition planning, such as seminar classes for all students
Recommended Materials	★ Data systems that track student goals and progress for postsecondary transition that are integrated into existing platforms ★ Guidance for postsecondary and special educators on transition for students with disabilities
Staff Commitment	★ Dedicated alumni support staff with special education knowledge ★ Special educators to collaborate with postsecondary teams
Recommended Time Allocation	★ Meetings between network-level postsecondary and special education teams (1 hr/monthly) ★ **Case Managers and Alumni Success Coach** – Collaborative meetings between school-based special education case managers (1 hr/monthly) • Review the student roster • Plan the schedule of sessions with students • Adapt lessons and activities to complete whole group and 1:1 – Family engagement and education • Develop and deliver 1–2 family training sessions (2–3 hours per training) to help them understand the goals and focus of the course, the roles of various staff, and the ways staff will work with students and families this year to support them – Transition IEP meetings (1–2 hours per student) ★ **Alumni Success Coach** – Training on transition planning for students with disabilities (1–2 hrs per year) – Two 1:1 sessions per semester for each student (1 hour per session) – 30 min. exit interview with every senior, typically in spring

The Practice

Proactively Introducing Postsecondary Transition Support Systems

To create a game plan for how to better engage students in the Impact Program with their alumni success coach, Tonya and Roy knew they needed to work together more than ever before. With the support of their special education and OCAS teams, Tonya and Roy devised a plan to foster working relationships between Tonya's students and Roy throughout the school year. In doing so, they believed students would be more open to Roy's outreach attempts and Roy could learn more about students' postsecondary goals long before their graduation.

In September, to start off the school year, Roy and Tonya delivered to all students in the Impact Program a presentation about Roy and his role. Roy explained that he would be meeting with students throughout the year and working with them on their postsecondary plans. Tonya then held an evening workshop specifically for the Impact Program families at which she introduced Roy and the Uncommon alumni services that he could provide. The workshop was an important opportunity to emphasize that, though the overwhelming message is often "college, college, college," Roy would support students in achieving their goals regardless of the pathway they chose.

After the first workshop, Roy and Tonya scheduled specific times for Roy to visit Tonya's classroom. The visit would enhance students' awareness of Roy's role on their postsecondary team and his availability as a resource. At the visit, Roy actively participated in a JobCorps workshop with Tonya's students to gain insights into their career and community interests beyond college. Furthermore, Roy collaborated with Tonya throughout the school year to deepen his understanding of the transition process and the special education support available to students.

In the first stage of their collaboration efforts, Tonya and Roy experienced a number of barriers that required them to adapt their approach. For instance, after the initial meeting with Roy at the start of the school year, a sample of students was surveyed on their understanding of Roy's role and their plans to work with him. Five out of six students reported a clear understanding of the alumni success coach's role, and two-thirds already planned to work with their coach after graduation. The remaining students were uncertain about future collaboration with him. Because they had started early in the school year, Roy and Tonya were able to work together to alleviate some of this uncertainty among Tonya's students.

Tonya and Roy created opportunities to clarify to both students and families how Roy could support students before graduation, as well as how the alumni success coach role continues to work with students after high school. Roy taught lessons specifically for students in the Impact Program to learn about the different options they have available to them after high school. Roy and Tonya met to create materials that could help students and families understand what students' accommodations might look like in postsecondary life and how to use their accommodations in college. Just as he would have done before the pandemic, Roy met with each student individually to make sure they had a plan in place and knew the resources available to help them reach their postsecondary goals. These personal interactions helped Roy understand that many students needed help staying motivated as they finished high school and feeling like they had agency over their future goals.

By starting at the beginning of the school year, Roy was able to build students' knowledge slowly and in small bites throughout the year. As students learned what they needed to do in their final year of high school and how Roy could support them, they were able to build the agency they needed to be successful and knew to reach out to Roy when they encountered obstacles. Tonya also continually reinforced Roy's role with students and families when they reached out to her for issues related to postsecondary planning by encouraging them to contact Roy instead. Tonya and Roy's continued collaboration also helped them both stay aligned and able to communicate students' needs as they arose.

How Uncommon Implemented the Practice

The process Uncommon's team designed includes the following steps:

Step 1: Hold the First Collaboration Meeting Before School Starts

Special education teachers, case managers, or transition coordinators need to meet with alumni success coaches before school starts or near the start of the school year (i.e., within the first quarter). This meeting is a chance to align on students' transition goals, resources available, and anticipated student needs. Special education coaches and/or OCAS leaders may join where needed to support the team in their planning and remove barriers to its implementation.

Step 2: Schedule Dates for Collaborative Activities During the School Year

Alumni success coaches and special education teachers create a calendar of joint activities that happen at least quarterly. Some of these can be informal, like meet and greets, which help students and families build trust and get comfortable with their alumni success coach. Other activities can be more formal opportunities for alumni success coaches to teach lessons about certain postsecondary topics (e.g., navigating the FAFSA, writing personal statements, or interviewing).

Step 3: Hold the First Meet and Greet Activity (1st Quarter)

This first meet and greet can be with students or students and their families. The activity has several purposes:

- Learn who the alumni success coach is
- Understand what the alumni success coach does
- Provide students an opportunity to ask questions and share about themselves
- Begin building relationships

If this activity does not include families, another family engagement event should be planned early in the year so families also know their alumni success coach and the coach's role in helping students meet their postsecondary goals. Use the time with families to collect additional contact information in case students change phone numbers, emails, or home addresses. At least one of these should stay constant.

Step 4: Alumni Success Coach Attends Other Transition-Related Events

Throughout the school year, alumni success coaches should periodically engage with students and staff for major transition-related events, such as college and career fairs or special education specific transition events. As the coaches learn about other organizations and disability specific topics, they can assist students and staff in making connections with community and college resources and provide information to guide postsecondary transition efforts.

Step 5: Winter and Spring Meetings with Students

The team establishes meetings during the school day for students to meet with their alumni success coach in both winter and spring. At these meetings, the coach shares **resources** developed by the OCAS team with students and families to provide proactive support for working on postsecondary pathways. Meetings and content should align with students' chosen postsecondary goals and pathways. When appropriate, meetings may also include other support staff who are working with the student on their plan for life after graduation.

Step 6: Alumni Success Coach Attends Students' Exit IEPs (End of Year)

As the end of the school year approaches, case managers and alumni success coaches meet to discuss each senior student, their goals, and their needs for coaching support upon graduation. They also set up times for alumni success coaches to hold an **exit meetings** or to attend students' exit IEPs to discuss a plan for support directly with students. Attending these exit meetings allows alumni success coaches to align with students on the postsecondary support they will receive based on their goals and priorities postgraduation. It also allows coaches to have a better understanding of students' disability-specific needs (e.g., accommodations, services, or social-emotional needs). Coaches utilize the information gathered from this exit meeting to guide their future interactions with students.

Step 7: Establish Follow-Up Communication Channels

Alumni success coaches confirm or revise the best communication methods for connecting with students and families, as well as with school staff to monitor postsecondary transition progress. Alumni success coaches may need to coordinate with their OCAS team and other site or network leadership to leverage shared resources or address unique needs for student transition progress.

The Impact

Collaboration at All Levels Helped Uncommon Build Robust Supports for Student Postsecondary Transition

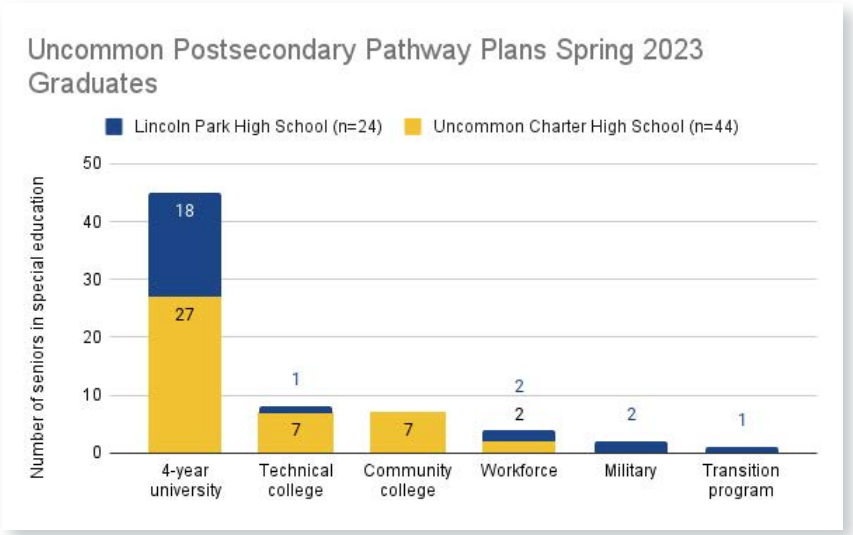
Facilitating collaboration between special education and postsecondary teams across Uncommon has enabled the network-level teams, including OCAS, to develop strong partnerships with school teams, directly contributing to positive student postsecondary outcomes. In the case of Tonya and Roy's collaboration, they put the OCAS guidance on proactive relationship building between coaches and students into action and refined the activities by regularly monitoring student milestone completion

and perception data. This allowed them to adapt their approaches for the LPHS students in the Impact Program and improve the process for future cohorts of students.

As a result of their small-scale learning, Roy and Tonya were able to solidify their systems and routines for introducing students to Roy's role as the alumni success coach during students' senior year. They made those systems and routines transferable by developing a transition handbook for the entire special education program and OCAS. This work helped bridge students' learning in college seminar classes with the continued support of the alumni support team. While Roy's collaboration with Tonya helped him gain additional knowledge about how to best support and relate to students in the Impact Program, Uncommon recognized that everyone in the OCAS would benefit from annual training before school started each year to learn how to support students in special education with their transition out of high school.

Importantly, as Tonya and Roy made progress creating resources and building relationships with students and families, students at both of Uncommon's schools participating in the NIC chose a diverse set of postsecondary pathways to pursue when they graduated from high school. With the support of special education and postsecondary staff, students at Uncommon were able to choose a pathway that was right for them.

While a part of the NIC, Uncommon also hired Joe Frick as their career and technical education manager. Joe brought deep knowledge of special education to the work of the OCAS, and particularly to the alumni success coaches, to further strengthen their support for students with disabilities seeking alternative postsecondary pathways. Regular collaborative meetings between special education and OCAS at the school and network levels have helped Uncommon build more opportunities for students and help them achieve success in reaching their postsecondary goals.



To learn more about how you can ensure that students with disabilities succeed no matter their preferred postsecondary pathway, see *Igniting Postsecondary Aspirations*.

***Uncommon Schools** serves approximately 19,000 students in grades K–12 across New York City, Rochester, NY, Camden, NJ, Newark, NJ, and Roxbury, MA. Focal schools participating in the Networked Improvement Community included Uncommon Charter High School in Brooklyn, NY, and North Star Academy Lincoln Park High School (LPHS) in Newark, NJ.*

*Uncommon Schools is a part of the **Marshall Street Networked Improvement Community,** a three-year intentional community of 10 public charter school networks nationwide aiming to make dramatic gains for Black and Latinx students with disabilities experiencing poverty. Collectively, the 10 networks identified over 20 best practices that improve learning outcomes and school culture for students positioned furthest from opportunity. Learn more here.*