

COMMENTARY

Mitigating Summer Melt

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With high school graduation only months away, seniors in California may already be eagerly anticipating the relaxation of summer before they transition into college or the workforce. For students who have planned and worked hard to pursue postsecondary education immediately after high school, however, a series of unanticipated financial and procedural hurdles may loom on the horizon that have the potential to derail their college aspirations.

In [this study](#), drawing on data from various urban school districts throughout the U.S. as well as from a nationally representative survey, we find that anywhere from 10 to 40 percent of students who have been accepted to college and intend to enroll as of graduation, fail to matriculate anywhere in the fall following high school. This attrition from the college-going pipeline, which we refer to as “[summer melt](#),” is even more pronounced among low-income students and contributes to socioeconomic inequalities in postsecondary access and success among college-ready students.

Why do college-intending, low-income students melt at such high rates? After being accepted to college and choosing where to enroll, students still have to complete a complicated sequence of tasks in order to matriculate. Many of these tasks relate to college financing. For instance, students often need to pursue additional funding to meet gaps between their financial aid packages and the actual cost of attendance at their intended institution. Students may also struggle to navigate various bureaucratic processes related to matriculation, from registering for academic placement tests to completing housing forms. Despite this array of challenges, students frequently do not know where to turn for help. School counselors frequently are not contracted to work over the summer; students have yet to engage supports at their intended college; and their parents often lack personal college experience. Thus, faced with substantial complexity and lacking access to professional help, students who have already surmounted many obstacles to college enrollment and who would potentially earn high returns to postsecondary education may nevertheless fail to matriculate.

Encouragingly, we find that offering students additional assistance and support during the summer after high school can have a substantial impact on whether they enroll and persist in college. Because students have already moved so far through the college pipeline, summer support can often be low-touch. In one set of interventions, school counselors invested 2–3 hours per student, helping them anticipate potential barriers to successful matriculation and addressing obstacles when they arose. In another set of projects, we developed a large-scale, automated text-messaging campaign to send students personalized reminders of tasks they needed to complete in order to matriculate at their intended college. The messages enabled students to complete tasks right from their mobile phones by including college- and task-specific web links, and also invited students to write back and request help from a college or financial aid professional. Across our summer outreach projects, we find that a little bit of help can go a long way. The counseling and text messaging interventions, along with a peer mentor outreach initiative, increased college enrollment

by anywhere from 5 to 15 percent.

Compared with other college-going supports, many of which cost several hundred if not thousands of dollars per student, our summer interventions ranged in cost from just a few dollars per student for the personalized text messaging campaign to \$150 for counselor-led outreach. Based on this work, we see the summer as an opportune time period during which targeted investments of information and counseling can generate sizeable improvements in college access for hard-working, low-income students.

The [*full study*](#) can be found in: Castleman, Benjamin L., Lindsay C. Page and Korynn Schooley, *The Forgotten Summer: Does the Offer of College Counseling After High School Mitigate Summer Melt Among College-Intending, Low-Income High School Graduates?* *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.

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