

PREVENT SUMMER

Research indicates that 10 percent to 44 percent of high school graduates who've been accepted to college and intend to go don't actually make it there come fall.

BY LAURA OWEN, PH.D.

Numerous educators, practitioners and researchers have looked at the role school counselors play in college access. Upon review of the literature, a dichotomy of opinions is quickly unveiled. Some authors have focused on deficits, noting that role confusion combined with assignment of other duties, high student-to-school-counselor ratios, fiscal constraints, lack of preparation and inadequate expertise in college admissions prevent school counselors from fulfilling the college counseling role. At the same time, research has clearly documented that low-income and first-generation students as well as students of color have the greatest need for access to a school counselor for college information; however, they are often the least likely to meet with a school counselor for college admissions or financial aid support.



When school counselors are available and able to help students and families navigate the college admissions process, college enrollment rates increase, and opportunity gaps begin to close. Recent attention and focus on programs designed to decrease “summer melt” demonstrate the impact school counselor outreach and support can have on college enrollment.

Roughly 3.5 million high school seniors received their high school diploma last year according to the U.S. Department of Education. For these students, many years of dedication and hard work paid off. Parents, family and friends cheered them on while school counselors, teachers and administrators acknowledged, honored and celebrated the individual and collective accomplishments of their graduating class. For many students this did not signal the end of their educational journey but rather the next step on the path to a college diploma. Although most graduates will transition from high school to college smoothly, an alarming number will find themselves in uncharted waters and without the support and guidance needed to navigate complicated tasks and steps necessary to start college on time. Surrounded by what might be viewed as insurmountable obstacles, some of these students will choose to forgo or defer their college dreams, a phenomenon referred to as “summer melt.”

Summer melt is a term college admissions officers have used for many years to explain students who apply to college, get accepted and pay a deposit to secure their enrollment during spring of their senior year but never actually show up to that college in the fall. Believing these students simply changed their mind and opted to attend a different institution, most colleges didn’t explore this behavior further. Upon closer examination, however, researchers Lindsay Page and Ben Castleman discovered that many of these students weren’t showing up at any college in the fall. Rethinking the definition, they refer to “summer melt” when seemingly college-intending students fail to enroll anywhere the fall after high school graduation. These college-intending students have typically applied to

college, completed the FAFSA application, applied for financial aid and paid deposits to secure a spot at their intended institution. A student is considered to have “melted” if he or she planned to go but failed to show up to any college the fall following high school graduation.

Page and Castleman estimate that summer melt rates range from 10 percent to 44 percent. These rates have been found to be higher among students from low- and moderate-income families and among those with lower academic

Although most graduates will transition from high school to college smoothly, an alarming number will find themselves in uncharted waters and without the support and guidance needed to navigate complicated tasks and steps necessary to start college on time.

achievement. Melt rates are also considerably higher among students who intend to enroll at community colleges compared with their peers intending to enroll at four-year colleges and universities. Schools with greater proportions of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch tend to have higher rates of summer melt as well.

Why Students Melt

After students receive acceptance letters and decide to attend a particular college, they must complete a number of tasks to successfully start college. Many of these tasks may be challenging for students who no longer have access to their high school counselor and whose

families may lack experience with the college-going process. These tasks may include:

- Determining cost of attendance
- Making sense of financial aid award letters
- Understanding tuition bills and required deposits
- Identifying and budgeting for expenses (i.e. health insurance, textbooks, meals)
- Registering for and attending orientation
- Receiving required immunizations
- Taking placement tests
- Completing housing forms
- Registering for classes
- Arranging transportation
- Accessing and navigating online portals

A New Approach

Shannon Bergeron, a school counselor for Liberal Arts and Sciences Academy in Austin, Texas, knows firsthand how important persistence is to reach one’s dreams. As a first-generation college student herself, she understands the challenges students face and the support they need to successfully navigate the college enrollment process. She believes all students who want to go to college should have the opportunity to pursue their dreams and works diligently to help students see their potential. Bergeron became a school counselor with the hope that she could help more students realize their postsecondary options; negotiate the application and financial aid process; and successfully apply to, enroll in and attend college.

Bergeron met Juan a few weeks after his high school graduation. She had been hired by her school district to offer summer support to recent graduates. Juan was an only child and the first in his family to attend college. He performed well throughout high school and dreamed of becoming a teacher. Juan’s parents spoke very little English but wished to participate fully in the college-going process with their son. As a result, it was often necessary for Juan to translate college admissions and financial aid information as it was shared.

Juan submitted his college applications early and was accepted, but he



Tips to Address Summer Melt

- Be proactive, and take initiative to address summer melt and the tasks needed for on-time matriculation.
- Calculate your school's summer melt rate.
- Disaggregate the data to determine if there are groups melting at higher rates than others.
- Design interventions to reach out to college-intending students
- Pay particular attention to first-generation, low-income students.
- Connect students and parents to web-based resources that demonstrate the importance of FAFSA completion.
- Provide workshops and hands-on assistance to students and their families in completing the FAFSA form.
- Schedule FAFSA completion events before major deadlines.
- Advocate for extending the school counselor contracts to include summer months to support students who need help at a vital time when the school is typically closed and support services are not available.
- Administer a student exit survey to gather contact information and the most current student information.
- Be creative and flexible when addressing barriers and concerns. One school counselor met with students at Starbucks because that was a place they could meet when the school wasn't open. Another school counselor shifted his hours toward the evening to accommodate student work schedules. One school counselor helped a parent rent a car to drive a large group of students to freshman orientation.
- Build collaborative relationships with others who are also committed to addressing summer melt.
- Organize a meeting, and invite stakeholders invested in increasing college opportunity in your community.
- Determine overlap and shared work areas to provide a seamless array of student supports.
- Bring in organizations specializing in areas of need (i.e. College Goal Sunday to help with FAFSA completion events, uAspire to train school counselors on FAFSA completion)
- Set up meetings with local colleges and universities, and advocate for student needs.
- Work with community organizations, business organizations, higher-ed institutions, faculty/administration, parents and students to address issues and concerns.
- Utilize the faith-based community to help dispel the myths around college admissions and financial aid.
- Coordinate with parent, business and community partners to deliver a seamless stream of resources supporting students through the college-going process.
- Find resourceful ways to address barriers and concerns.
- Provide workshops and office hours at varied times to accommodate parent schedules.
- Translate FAFSA and college admissions information into appropriate languages.
- Offer translation services for meetings as needed.
- Connect students and parents to college-access resources.
- Ensure all students at every grade level are provided with adequate and appropriate supports in preparation for their transition out of high school.
- Become well-versed and knowledgeable regarding financial aid and college admissions.
- Ask for continued professional development to stay up to date and prepared for your role in college and career counseling
- Attend school counselor workshops provided by local colleges and college-focused organizations.
- Partner with higher education institutions to evaluate your school counseling programs, interventions and curriculum to determine outcomes and discover best practices.
- Advocate to remove nonessential, non-school-counseling duties from your schedule so you can provide more direct services to all students.
- Measure the impact of activities, and share results.
- Measure impact of interventions on college enrollment.
- Report results of summer-melt interventions to stakeholders.
- Advocate for funding or extended-year contracts to support school counselors providing summer-melt prevention and intervention services during summer break.

was late completing his financial aid application. After submitting the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) paperwork, he was selected for income verification and was required to turn in additional documentation to the financial aid office. Unfortunately Juan didn't fully understand the financial aid process or the fact that the verification documents were important.

During their first meeting together, Juan mentioned to Bergeron that he still needed to fill out financial aid papers, but he wasn't sure which papers he needed. Juan and Bergeron decided to meet again a few days later and discovered he was missing the IRS transcript, affidavit and verification of income forms. Although Juan had already sent the documents earlier in the school year, the college had no record of receiving them and asked him to send them again. Unfortunately, he hadn't made any copies; Bergeron helped him print the paperwork and find a local notary willing to sign his

Massachusetts Institute of Technology • Williams College • Stanford University • Amherst College • Harvard University • University of California, Berkeley • Cornell University • Middlebury College • University of Michigan • Princeton University • The City of New York • Carleton College • Pennsylvania State University • Wellesley College • The University of Texas at Austin • Claremont McKenna College • University of Washington • Pomona College • Yale University • Stanford College • University of Pennsylvania • United States Naval Academy • University of California, San Diego • Vassar College • University of Minnesota • Hamilton College • University of Wisconsin • Washington and Lee University • Princeton University • Harvey Mudd College • Carleton College • Grinnell College • Wesleyan University • United States Military Academy • Pennsylvania State University • University of Florida • College of William and Mary • University of Virginia • Michigan State University • Colby College • Duke University • Colby College • University of California, San Diego • Macalester College • University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill • Oberlin College • University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill • United States Air Force Academy • University of Chicago • University of Richmond • University of Toronto • Bryn Mawr College • St. John's College • University of Arizona • Barnard College • Connecticut College • University of California, Davis • Bucknell University

NEW!



"I Got In!"

5 Minutes to Successful College Interviews

Save time!

Prep students for interviews in 5 minutes!

\$50 OFF! Go to:
www.igotinwow.com

School Counselors Say Great Things About Salisbury University

“SU falls into that ideal mid-size university category: small enough to afford personal attention yet large enough to provide a wide range of opportunities.”

Linda Campbell • Lancaster, PA

“SU has unique offerings like conflict resolution and respiratory therapy, in addition to a strong education program. SU's also a great size.”

Jennifer Nuechterlein • Flemington, NJ

“Salisbury provides a warm, caring atmosphere in a beautiful setting – with strong academics.”

Bettina G. Heiman • Wilmington, DE



Salisbury University consistently ranks among the nation's best for quality and value in such publications as *The Princeton Review* and *U.S. News & World Report*. To learn more, visit **www.salisbury.edu/admissions** or call 410-543-6161.

Application Deadlines

- Early Decision: November 15
- Early Action: December 1
- Regular Admission: January 15

Salisbury
UNIVERSITY
www.salisbury.edu

A Maryland University of National Distinction

Research has shown that summer melt interventions do increase college opportunity for students who may otherwise make decisions to forgo their college dreams.

affidavit. She also helped Juan log onto his online portal, which he was unaware of, and showed him how to check his financial aid status.

A week later, they met again to follow up. Believing Juan was now all set for financial aid, Bergeron helped him get connected with housing and arrange to receive his meningitis vaccine. He wasn't sure if he had the vaccine previously, so it took him another week to get a copy of his immunization records. Juan and Bergeron were unable to tell based on his immunization records if the vaccine was current, so they called the school together and discovered his vaccine was good for another year. Two weeks later, after additional financial aid and housing issues had been resolved, Juan was ready to begin his college journey and moved into campus housing. Shortly after, Bergeron received a text message from Juan saying "Everything is going great. I just wanted to tell you thank you for everything you've done for me. I can't thank you enough; thank you for taking the time to help me!" And, at the end of his first semester, Juan discovered he'd made the dean's list.

Many students who plan to attend college face similar challenges over the summer, although their individual circumstances vary. Student concerns range from absence of information and worries regarding financial aid to lack of transportation to attend required orientations or meetings with college advisors.

Families typically serve as the primary source of social capital for students, especially in relation to their education. However first-generation youth often

have social capital deficits placing them at risk when it comes to endorsing postsecondary educational opportunities and options. School counselors can provide students and their families with ongoing information and make special efforts to provide culturally relevant interventions that support and encourage students and families who historically have had limited access to higher education.

School counselors who assist students during the summer employ a variety of strategies to help these students, including building rapport; listing important tasks and timelines for completion; providing direct outreach via texts, e-mails and phone calls; forming collaborative relationships and establishing outside contacts; communicating with parents; adjusting work hours to meet student and parent schedules; and advocating on behalf of students to university and college admissions, financial aid, housing and student affairs offices.


Necessary Competencies

School counselors describe a host of skills they feel are necessary to successfully address summer melt. With leadership as a core focus, school counselors also see passion, personal determination, grit, confidence in one's college and financial aid knowledge, and ability to support students throughout the transition process as essential skills.

At a meeting convened by the White House and hosted by Harvard University, K-12 and college-level educators, district leaders, researchers, funders and nonprofit leaders from around the country gathered to discuss ways to strengthen school counseling and college advising with the goal of creating greater postsecondary opportunities for all students. The event highlighted the importance of developing innovative practices in the areas of professional development and training. School counselors must have the knowledge, skills and culturally responsive attitudes to support students through their transition to college.

Many school counselors implement a host of initiatives and interventions to support their students through

the college admissions, financial aid and college enrollment process, but their offices and schools frequently shut down during the crucial summer months. Those with extended-year contracts often find their extra summer time allocated to registration, master scheduling and more administrative tasks, limiting the opportunity they have to help students navigate additional steps over the summer. It is true that some of the summer melt interventions could begin earlier in the school year, but due to the timing of many of the required tasks, support will continue to be an essential need throughout the summer after graduation.

Research has shown that summer melt interventions do increase college opportunity for students who may otherwise make decisions to forgo their college dreams. It is important for us to look at current policies and practices in our own schools and districts and advocate for the restructuring of school counselor contracts and priorities so they can provide the support needed to curb the summer melt. School districts and school counselors can also partner with community colleges and universities to look at needed changes from higher education institutions that could also reduce the summer melt. Collectively, we can begin to close the opportunity gap by taking these simple steps to address summer melt. 

Laura Owen, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at San Diego State University. She can be reached at lowen@mail.sdsu.edu. Thanks to the work of her colleagues Ben Castleman and Lindsay Page and in collaboration with Karen Arnold, Erin Cox, Lindsay Daugherty, Korynn Schooley and many others, researchers continue to understand the summer melt issue, the impact it has on college enrollment, and how to best curb the loss of college-intending students during the summer transition to college.