

A college nightmare: Melting students

By Emily Scheie

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“I’m melting! Melting! Oh, what a world! ... Look out! I’m going! Ohhhh— Ohhhhhhhhhh!” That famous last utterance from the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* summarizes what many college admissions directors fear this July. In a phenomenon called “summer melt,” students who had college plans in the spring will not make it to campus in the fall. This may be wise for those not ready for college work or tragic for those who face obstacles to higher education. But for colleges that care about lives, fight for dollars, or both, stopping summer melt is a vital mission.

The *Summer Melt Handbook*, published by Harvard University Center for Education Policy Research, estimates 10 to 40 percent of “college-intending students” do not follow through on their higher education plans. The rates increase among students from low-income families. A 2012 report by Lindsay Daugherty, who specializes in education and policy research, says the obstacles involved in college enrollment cause low-income minority students even higher rates of summer melt. She reports the 2010 summer melt rate of an urban district as greater than 50 percent for Hispanic graduates, 35 percent for African Americans, and 17 percent for white students.

After being accepted to a college, students still must finance tuition, health insurance, and textbooks. They have to register for orientation and classes, complete housing forms, and take placement tests. Many universities use online portals to guide students through these steps, but some incoming freshmen don’t have internet in their homes. “Students encounter financial and procedural obstacles that they didn’t anticipate, and they lack access to professional help or support to deal with them,” said Benjamin Castleman, assistant professor of education at the University of Virginia (UVA), in an interview with Libby Nelson on Vox conversations.

Though Castleman suggests students should attend college for the sake of their future success, Glenn Harlan Reynolds, author of *The Higher Education Bubble*, questions the

assumption that college is a “path to prosperity.” Many higher education institutions are facing a financial crisis, and their continued success is “predicated on the money continuing to roll in,” he said. To the institutions that lose tuition payments, “summer melt” is a financial loss. If students are not self-motivated enough to make it through the college entrance process, though, investing in a college education might not be their best option. As Reynolds wrote in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, “The credit-driven higher education bubble of the past several decades has left legions of students deep in debt without improving their job prospects.”

Castleman’s dissertation work focused on intervention to prevent summer melt and especially on the effectiveness of text messaging, as he explained in an interview with UVA’s Curry School of Education. Text messages can remind students of important deadlines: “We all procrastinate in the face of unpleasant tasks,” he said. Students can ask for help by simply texting a reply. “They’re really responsive to immediate stimuli and have a harder time with things that require long-term planning,” Castleman noted.

In 2011, Boston nonprofit uAspire contacted students the summer after graduation to help them prepare for college. Harvard’s *Summer Melt Handbook* said uAspire experienced the greatest success through text and Facebook messaging. A similar program called Summer PACE (Personalized Assistance for College Enrollment), started by Fulton County Schools, used phone, email, text, Twitter, and Facebook to offer help to students who had been accepted to college. Harvard credits the program with increasing the “on-time college enrollment of low-income students by 8 percentage points.”

Not surprisingly, navigating financial aid poses the greatest problem for students. “Students from more affluent backgrounds have parents they can turn to for help, or who are very involved in knowing what needs to get done and pestering students who haven’t done it,” Castleman told Vox. “What distinguishes the lower-income students is not a lack of tenacity or ability or readiness for college, but unfamiliarity with complicated financial and procedural issues.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.