

Summer Link:

A Program to Facilitate the Transition From High School to College

Strategic Data Project Fellowship Capstone Report

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### **Summer Melt: Barriers to the Transition From High School to College**

“Summer melt” is a term used to describe the phenomenon in which high school graduates express strong intentions to attend college yet never end up enrolling. A number of barriers arise in the summer after high school that likely contribute to summer melt, including the cost of college and the ability to obtain sufficient financial aid, failure to complete application and enrollment paperwork, fear of the unknown, a lack of support from friends and family, and work or family responsibilities that limit the time for course taking. A study of students in a large urban district suggests that a lack of knowledge about how to navigate the often complex enrollment and financial aid processes is the primary cause of summer melt (Arnold et al., 2009). Research suggests that summer melt is a significant issue in districts across the country. In particular, it is a greater problem for low-income and minority students who are less likely to have access to information about the college enrollment process and more likely to face financial constraints (Castleman & Page, 2011). Summer melt contributes to lower enrollment rates for all high school graduates and increases gaps in college enrollment by income and race/ethnicity.

In the Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD) of Texas, summer melt is a significant issue. As Figure 1 indicates, more than 80% of FWISD graduates plan to attend college, and many of these students report having applied to and been accepted to at least one college. Of those students who plan to attend college, have applied to at least one college, and have been accepted to at least one college, however, only 52% end up enrolling in college in the fall. For 2010, this indicates a district-wide, summer melt rate of 48%. Similar to what has been found in other districts, rates of summer melt are significantly higher for low-income and minority graduates (Figure 2). Graduates who have enrolled in the free/reduced-lunch program have a 56% rate of summer melt, compared to only 25% for graduates not enrolled in the program. In addition,

summer melt rates for Latino and Black graduates are 59% and 41%, respectively, compared to 19% for White graduates.

Figure 1. Progress Toward College Enrollment

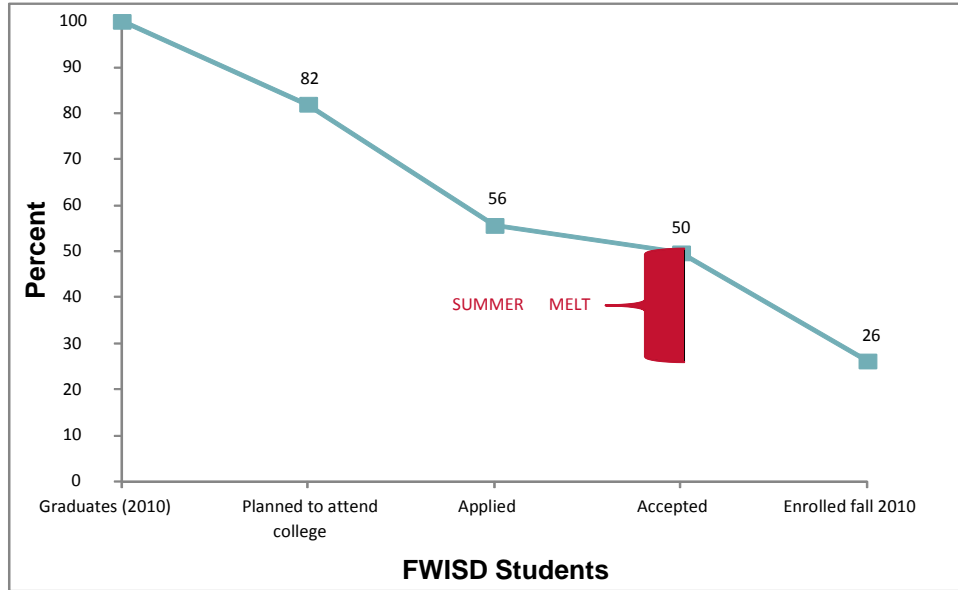
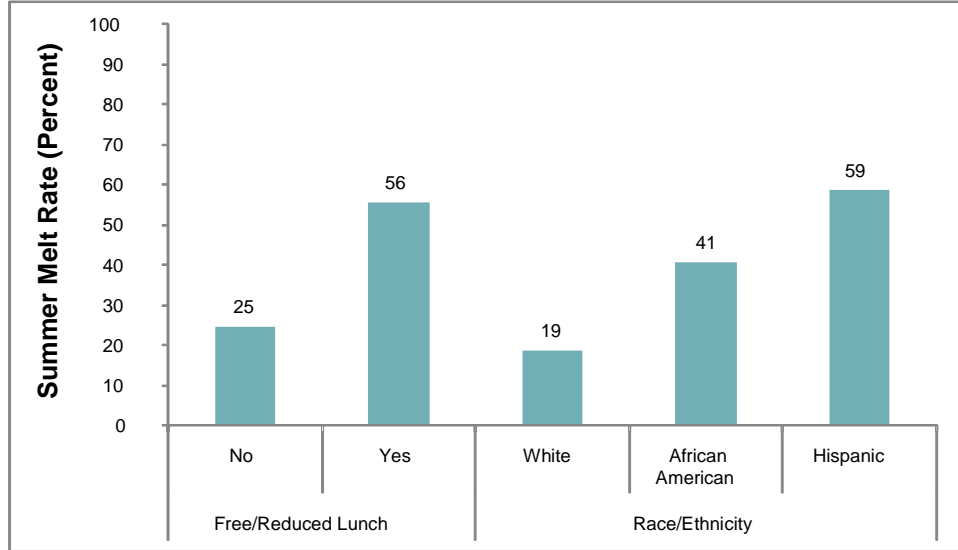


Figure 2. Rates of Summer Melt by Key Demographic Indicators



**Summer Link: A Counseling Program to Address Summer Melt**

To facilitate the often difficult transition from high school to college for FWISD students, a new program called Summer Link was piloted in summer 2011. Through the Summer Link program,

counselors, teachers, and other school staff actively reached out to graduates who planned to attend college to assist with whatever additional guidance and counseling needs they faced over the summer. Up to two hours of counseling was offered for every graduate who reported on the 2011 senior exit survey that they planned to attend college, had applied to college, and had been accepted to at least one college. The Summer Link program targeted 1,422 students, with 26 counselors, teachers, and school staff members providing the counseling. Assistance provided by counselors and advisers included going over checklists of “important steps to enrolling in college” for planned college of attendance; helping to complete financial aid applications; sending transcripts to college; talking with students about textbooks, housing, and parking; assisting with application forms; and providing emotional support to graduates and their families.

### **Early Successes**

Of the 1,422 students who were targeted by Summer Link, more than 500 graduates received substantial assistance with college enrollment. According to counselor logs, 505 graduates received at least 10 minutes of assistance, 205 graduates received at least 30 minutes of assistance, and 31 students received more than two hours of assistance. These numbers are likely to be underestimates of the total number of graduates served because at least three of the advisers did not keep detailed counselor logs for at least some portion of the Summer Link counseling period. Graduates who were provided with counseling were primarily those targeted by the program (those completing a senior exit survey and reporting plans to attend college), but in some cases advisers provided assistance to graduates who did not complete a senior exit survey and graduates from the previous cohort.

The most common area where advisers provided assistance was financial aid (158 graduates). Advisers helped graduates to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and

the Texas Application for State Financial Aid (TASFA); follow up on financial aid forms after they were submitted; apply for scholarships, transfer scholarships, or financial aid to another college when plans changed; and call colleges to lobby for financial aid on behalf of students. Other common areas of assistance were with transcripts (149 graduates) and placement testing (63 graduates). In addition, 48 graduates sought only emotional support and reassurance when dealing with anxiety about college. Other areas where graduates required assistance include preparing for orientation, figuring out housing, filling out applications and other forms, choosing courses and majors, and navigating college websites. A small number of graduates who spoke with advisers reported that they had no need for assistance. Even for these graduates who were on track with the enrollment process, advisers typically offered encouragement and the opportunity to go through a checklist of steps to enrollment to ensure that graduates had completed all important tasks.

Anecdotal evidence from advisers suggests that Summer Link was an extremely useful and well-liked program. Upon soliciting feedback from advisers, the following comments were made:

- Need to keep this program funded and executed. A huge need for our kids!
- This is a great program. Colleges are eager to work with us and so are students and parents. Very needed in FWISD.
- Most students were very excited and eager and enthusiastic to hear from me!
- Program was great. It was necessary. I've always wondered about our student success. Now I know (well, a little better).
- I loved doing this as much as I love teaching! (I love teaching!)
- Thank you for the opportunity to help with Summer Link. I really enjoyed this experience. . . Due to that I usually work with the students from a negative truancy standpoint; this was a refreshing time to work with the students in a more positive light.

## Key Implementation Decisions

A number of key implementation decisions in the pilot year of the Summer Link program had implications for the way the program functioned. For any district developing a counseling program for graduates to address the problem of summer melt, these are important decisions to consider.

**Timeline.** Counselors and advisors were trained on June 21, and counseling was provided to students between June 22 and July 29. Over the five weeks of the program, Summer Link advisers were given flexibility in choosing the days and hours they would work. This allowed them to be responsive to student needs and to avoid conflicts with other district obligations (e.g., scheduling) and personal summer plans. Advisers were permitted to provide assistance to students any day of the week before 8 p.m. and were able to spend some of their hours contacting students from home (as long as it was less than 40% of total hours per week). The amount of time each adviser worked varied depending on the caseload for the campus and the number of staff members providing the counseling.

The decision to allow for flexibility in the hours, days, and weeks worked by advisers was a well-liked aspect of the program. In addition, the flexibility was necessary to facilitate the often busy schedules of counselors over the summer, as well as personal plans that were made prior to staffing the program. Because of variability in the number of graduates in each adviser's caseload, it was also necessary for some advisers to work the entire length of the program while others needed only to work one or two weeks.

Still, there are some key considerations that should be balanced against these benefits of flexibility. Since many of the key deadlines and requirements must be met early in the summer, it is critical that at least one advisor from each campus begins actively contacting graduates in early to

mid-June. For some graduates, it may also be useful to have continuous contact with an adviser throughout the summer to address ongoing counseling needs. To that end, it may be beneficial to have at least one adviser per campus provide counseling at the beginning, middle, and end of the timeline for the program.

**Budgeting.** The budget provided \$48 for each targeted student to account for two hours of counseling (at the \$23 per hour rate for counselors) and \$2 for postage costs. Campuses funded the majority of the program, with supplementary district funding for three campuses. Because exact numbers of participating graduates could not be calculated until early June when senior exit survey data was available, budget estimates were made for each campus based on the numbers of college-intending graduates from the previous senior exit survey. For a variety of reasons, the estimates varied significantly from the actual budgets needed, and district-wide, the budget was underestimated by 33%. With these underestimates, campuses and district administrators had to work at the last minute to track down additional funds.

In addition, there were a number of other issues related to budget and payroll, including difficulty allocating and tracking budgets at campuses with multiple advisors, variability of hourly pay by type of employee and type of work, unfamiliarity with the program by campus staff responsible for payroll, and confusion with varying sources of budget for different campuses and appropriate budget numbers.

There is no simple solution to the problem of budget uncertainty if a district wants to ensure a particular amount of counseling time for every targeted graduate. Potential ways to allow for earlier, more certain budgeting include fixing the budget based on estimated survey response rates and student reports of college intentions and allowing the number of hours per student to vary, rather than requiring the program to be budgeted at two hours per participant. It is also critical that a department familiar with funding summer programs assist in coordinating any summer counseling

program. This could ensure that common budget and payroll complications are avoided and the program functions smoothly.

**Staffing.** The majority of campuses assigned one staff member to provide counseling for the Summer Link program. At most campuses, more than one adviser was needed to cover the entire caseload of college-intending graduates, so supplementary staff was brought on to the program in the days leading up to and the week following the training. This led to complications with communication and training, and the late timing of staffing was a source of frustration for advisers. Earlier staffing can help to ensure that sufficient personnel are available and that preparation for the program and communication with students can begin prior to graduation.

Of the 26 advisers who provided counseling, 11 were counselors, seven were teachers, and eight were other campus staff. There are benefits to using both counseling and non-counseling staff as Summer Link advisers, and these factors should be considered carefully in determining who will provide the advising in a summer counseling program for graduates. Counselors were often more familiar with the resources available to assist graduates with college enrollment processes and more experienced with helping students to fill out financial aid forms. In addition, there are some tasks that are restricted to certain school staff (e.g., printing out and mailing transcripts). Counselors are more likely to have well-defined office space that is consistent from year to year, so they did not have to work with the campus to find a place to hold office hours with a computer and working phone.

On the other hand, there were several benefits to having non-counseling staff participate in the Summer Link program. Teachers and other campus staff were, in many cases, familiar and connected to graduates, and many of the advisers who were most successful in contacting and assisting a large number of graduates were non-counseling advisers. In addition, most counselors are tasked with a number of duties over the summer, particularly in the area of scheduling, so non-



counseling staff may have more flexibility and greater availability in being able to devote time to Summer Link advising. Support was provided to non-counseling staff to make up for deficits in knowledge of college advising resources.

**Data and support materials.** In order to support advisers and ensure that they were able to spend most of their time working with graduates, a variety of materials were created, including individual student case files, checklists for the four most commonly attended colleges, an information sheet on why it's important to go to college, guidelines for how to contact students and use Facebook, and strategies to relate to students with varying issues. Many advisers reported that the support materials were extremely valuable in facilitating their efforts. According to advisers, the most useful resources were individual case files for each targeted graduate with important information on college plans, FAFSA completion, test scores, and potential barriers to immediate college enrollment. These materials should be included in a summer counseling program for graduates in any district.

Contact info for graduates also played a key role in assisting advisers with their efforts to provide targeted counseling. Phone numbers captured earlier in the school year by the district are often incorrect, and email provides an alternative and frequently more efficient means of communication, so it was important to collect both current phone numbers and email addresses from graduates. Current phone numbers were collected at graduation rehearsal, a time when the information could be gathered efficiently from most seniors. A few campuses did not collect contact information, which significantly impacted the effectiveness of advisers by increasing the amount of time it took for them to reach a graduate and preventing some graduates from being contacted at all. It is critical to ensure that contact information is collected from as many graduates as possible to facilitate smooth implementation of a summer counseling program.

**Communication.** Many advisers commented that they would have liked to have learned about the program earlier, and in some cases the lack of communication prior to the training led to issues in its implementation. Consistent communication with school administrators and advisers in the months leading up to graduation is important for the summer counseling programs to run smoothly. In addition to ensuring a more consistent timeline, increased communication with campuses and counseling departments will make staffing easier, allow staff to prepare for the program prior to graduation, ensure that contact information is collected, and provide an opportunity for staff to publicize the program to students.

In order for FWISD to publicize the program to graduates and their families, it posted information on the district website in the week before graduation. In addition, Facebook pages were created for each campus, and business cards were distributed to seniors to direct them to individual campus Facebook pages. Campuses used Facebook with varying frequency: Four campuses used Facebook early and often for posting and individually messaging graduates, two campuses started a little later but eventually used Facebook for posting and messaging graduates, two campuses used Facebook for messaging only, and three campuses chose not to use Facebook for any purpose. While relatively few graduates ended up joining the pages, several advisers mentioned that messaging was an effective way of contacting students, particularly at those campuses where email addresses had not been collected. Email was also seen as an effective way of contacting students while telephone was reported as the most problematic method of contacting students.

**Additional events/services.** A few advisers decided to try some unique methods to provide assistance beyond what was suggested at the training. These methods included inviting college staff to come to the high school to help students complete application and financial aid paperwork, accompanying students to college campuses to walk them through enrollment and financial aid processes, and sharing the success stories of current college enrollees. College staff are

often better equipped to deal with complex financial aid and application issues and can more easily check on the status of applications to determine where graduates are facing issues. A partnership with local community colleges can help to provide additional assistance with facilitating completion of all enrollment requirements. In addition, providing forums for current, successful college enrollees to share their experiences, and/or parents of first-generation college enrollees to provide informational sessions for parents of prospective first-generation college enrollees, could be effective additions to a summer counseling program for graduates.

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