
Rural Student Summer Melt

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Background

As many as 40% of college-bound high school graduates from underrepresented communities leave high school with college acceptance letters in hand, yet fail to show up for classes in the fall. The reason? The preenrollment process that needs to be completed over the summer can be daunting and challenging—especially for students who are the first in their families to go to college. Perhaps nowhere is this phenomenon, known as “summer melt,” more acute than in rural communities. Due to financial constraints, community views on the value of college degrees, and the desire to remain close to home, many rural students change their mind about going to college during the summer before their first semester, if they elect to go at all.

How might funders address this pressing issue? Below are ideas we present for your consideration.

Potential Directions for Future Interventions

There are several directions that may be taken for future interventions. First, interventions may be focused solely on students who have been accepted and plan on attending college in the fall. These interventions are the most cost effective and easiest for institutions to implement, and are backed by a large body of research as being effective at preventing summer melt. Text message nudges, especially those which students can respond to with any questions, have been shown to be highly effective at getting students to complete preenrollment requirements on time. Similarly, interactive online checklists provided by universities outlining the steps students need to take prior to enrolling and how to complete them have proven to be effective at helping students manage the tasks they must complete before arriving on campus. Peer- or near-peer-aged mentors who can provide guidance and help create a sense of community around college, either in person or remotely, also help to keep many students from melting. However, due to the lack of reliable internet and cellphone service in rural areas, these interventions might not be the most effective for all rural students, especially remote rural students.

A second set of interventions might focus more broadly on rural students and encouraging students who might not have otherwise considered higher education. These interventions focus on reaching students earlier in their academic careers and providing more in-person resources related to the college enrollment process. These interventions would target junior high school students and focus on the importance of taking AP courses, finding available AP and college entrance test preparation courses, and encouraging students to take the SAT and ACT. These students would also benefit from peer-aged mentors who might encourage them to consider higher education as a viable option.

Finally, interventions might focus on rural communities as a whole. These interventions, while being the costliest, would have long-term benefits for both students and their communities. Key components to these interventions would be implementing accessible, high-quality, low-cost pre-K programs, and encouraging parents to enroll their young children to foster a community attitude that prioritizes education from an early age.

A second priority for these interventions would be to increase the availability, accessibility and quality of internet and cellphone coverage in rural areas. This would not only increase college-bound students' ability to complete preenrollment requirements online more easily and participate in social media community building through their schools, but would permit more work-from-home opportunities for adult rural residents and help to boost local economies in areas where they have been lagging.

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