

Summer Melt

Text messages reminding high school seniors of key tasks boost college enrollment

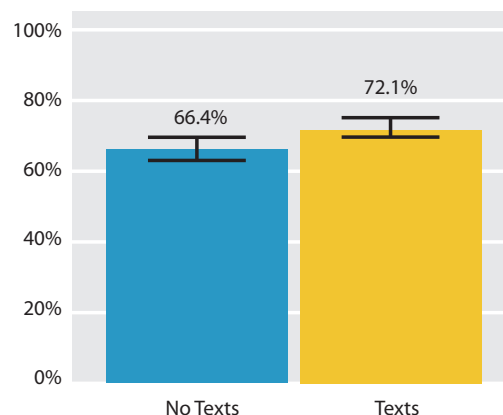
Agency Objective. Increase college enrollment rates among college-accepted high school graduates by sending them text message reminders to complete required pre-matriculation tasks over the summer.

Background. Every year 20–30 percent of college-accepted high school graduates in urban districts fail to matriculate in college in the fall—a phenomenon known as “summer melt.”⁴⁷ In the summer of 2014, the Department of Education’s (ED) office of Federal Student Aid (FSA), along with the Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST), provided technical expertise to the non-profit organization uAspire and a team of researchers on a text messaging campaign to students and their parents.⁴⁸ Text messages were personalized for each student and reminded each student of tasks she needed to complete to successfully matriculate. The text messages also provided recipients with a connection to individualized college and financial aid advising.

Methods. High school students from five cities participated in the pilot ($n = 4,882$). Students were randomly assigned to one of three groups: (1) a control group that was not sent messages; (2) a group in which only students were sent messages; (3) a group in which both students and their parents were sent messages. Prior work has shown that sending students low-cost text message reminders to complete pre-matriculation tasks is an effective tool for curbing summer melt.⁴⁹ The text message campaign began in late June and continued through late August 2014. The research team obtained student-level demographic and academic achievement data from uAspire and student-level college enrollment information from the National Student Clearinghouse.

Results. Among all students sent text messages, 68.0 percent enrolled in college in the fall compared with 64.9 percent of those not sent messages—a difference of 3.1 percentage points ($p < 0.05$, 95% CI [0.4, 5.8]). Enrollment effects were larger for the lowest-income

students and for first-generation students. Among students with an expected family contribution of \$0, for example, the text messages increased college enrollment by 5.7 percentage points ($p < 0.01$, 95% CI [1.4, 10.0]), from 66.4 percent to 72.1 percent. The differences between the students-only and students-and-parents treatment groups were not statistically significant.



Conclusions. These findings underscore the importance of supporting college-intending high school students during the summer months leading up to the start of college, as well as the efficacy of personalized text messaging as a strategy to help students successfully matriculate in college.

⁴⁷Benjamin L. Castleman and Lindsay C. Page, *Summer Melt: Supporting Low-Income Students Through the Transition to College*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2014).

⁴⁸Benjamin L. Castleman and Lindsay C. Page were the lead researchers on this project. FSA and SBST provided technical expertise on message content. The trials themselves (and the relevant data collection) were administered exclusively by the stated outside entities.

⁴⁹Benjamin L. Castleman and Lindsay C. Page, “Summer Nudging: Can Personalized Text Messages and Peer Mentor Outreach Increase College Going Among Low-Income High School Graduates?,” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 115 (2015): 144–160.