

2020

# HOW TO FREEZE SUMMER MELT

WHAT IS SUMMER MELT AND HOW  
CAN YOU PREVENT IT ON YOUR  
CAMPUS?

TARGET 



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## WHAT IS SUMMER MELT?

### *Summer melt refers to:*

1. Students who paid a deposit at an institution, only to attend a different college or university (usually of similar perceived quality).
2. High school graduates who seemingly intended to enroll in college in the fall but didn't do so at all.

# INTRODUCTION

Summer days inspire visions of fun, sun, and sand. However, for those of us in higher education, it also signifies the beginning of the always-dreaded *summer melt*—when our sunny enrollment numbers are quietly melting away behind the scenes.

According to a study by the Harvard Center for Education Policy Research, 10-40% of college-intending students fail to enroll in a university the fall after graduating high school. Losing 40% of your incoming class is not going to make your team or leadership feel warm and toasty. And now, more than ever before, summer melt feels much scarier as institutions start to plan for what campus might look like come fall, when students who may have been a sure thing are facing obstacles that hadn't previously existed.

So, what can you do now to help keep your students engaged, especially when they can't physically be on campus? Here are some things to consider as you continue to build your plans going forward.

# UNDERSTAND WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO MELT

Summer melt happens everywhere and with all types of students. It affects both two and four year institutions, and students from every background and income level. However, it's more likely to affect particular student populations.

## ***1. First-generation students***

Students from families with parents who have not graduated from college are considered first-generation. This is a massive population. A 2019 study done by the Department of Education showed that 59% of children under the age of 18 live in households with parents who do not have a bachelor's degree or higher. This population is also more likely to be from the bottom income quartile. First-generation students represent 40% of the melt at community colleges and 20% at 4-year institutions [1]. With numbers this high, institutions cannot afford to ignore the specific challenges of these students.

**Why?** The college search, application, and financial aid processes are complicated for prospects under the best of circumstances. When students are unable to draw from the experiences of parents who have also navigated those processes, they're at a distinct disadvantage that can feel overwhelming. These students require additional supports and simple processes.

## ***2. Low-income students***

Summer melt is estimated to be twice as high for students who come from low-income backgrounds. In the US, 18% of students under the age of 18 come from families living in poverty—a considerable number.

**Why?** Low-income students, not surprisingly, have more financial concerns and are also more likely to be derailed by family or financial challenges. Difficulty filling out the FAFSA, small fees, or a family that requires them to contribute financially can all become roadblocks that lead to melt. Additionally, these students are less likely to get the college-going supports of their wealthier peers such as SAT prep, college coaches, support with essay writing, engaged college counselors, etc. In contrast, college counselors at under-resourced high schools may be handling up to 900 students at a time [2] with little ability to spend concentrated time with the students who need it most.

### ***3. Competitive students***

Competitive students are more likely to make deposits at multiple institutions, usually of similar perceived quality [3]. These double, triple, or quadruple deposits make it difficult to predict your true incoming enrollment numbers.

**Why?** Generation Z, generally defined as those born in the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, has grown up in a world that caters to its individual likes, desires, and expectations—immediately. They are savvy consumers and are not known for brand loyalty. In fact, 81% are willing to switch from their favorite brand if they find a similar product at higher quality. Therefore, a Gen Z student with the credentials to get admitted into multiple quality institutions is likely to keep their options open until the very end. Your institution has to be the brand that stands out amongst the pack.

### ***4. Out of area/state students***

Especially now, students coming from out of the area, especially out of state, are going to be facing new, unexpected challenges. From financial to personal, students will have to reconsider their options for the fall.

**Why?** Even prior to COVID-19, living away from home for the first time could be a daunting prospect for burgeoning adults. Some many have never left their city or town before. Therefore, moving to another area or state, away from family and friends and what's familiar, can be daunting. This is why building strong relationships with prospects and ensuring they feel a strong connection and familiarity with your school matters.

# TIPS TO CURB SUMMER MELT

## ***1. Be intimately aware of the roadblocks on the path to college***

We know that there are many obstacles that can get in the way of a student showing up in the fall: personal, financial, psychological, and academic. And with the current state of things, I'd venture to guess that a majority of admitted students are going to be facing one, if not all of these roadblocks. This means that institutions need to be as closely aware of these roadblocks as possible. Financial aid, enrolling in courses, finding housing, setting up payment plans, etc. can all be overwhelming, particularly for students who don't have family members who are familiar with the process, and with so many unknowns about this fall.

A good first step is student journey mapping. Go through every step and piece of paperwork that a student would. And as you work to move a lot of these interactions online, make sure your processes are as streamlined and simple as possible. Role-play how you would get financial aid, housing, or class enrollment questions answered. Is it easy? Are there enough supports in place? Make sure multiple departments are not sending out duplicate information. And consider first-generation, low-income, and non-traditional students; they already have additional challenges, don't add more to the list.

## ***2. Build relationships and communicate straight through the finish line***

The enrollment process isn't over until, as my old boss used to say, "you've got those butts in seats". Admissions does a great job of communicating and selling the school to early prospects, but your students need to feel connected to your institution from beginning to end. Make sure the excitement for your institution stays fueled with strategic and ongoing communications.

This is especially important this year as summer orientations go virtual. Building those personal connections and sharing stories that truly help students “see themselves” on your campus is crucial. Research has shown that if a student has connections with nine or more students after being admitted, they are 93% more likely to attend that institution. Don’t leave those relationships to chance. Set up virtual summer programs and events for students to meet one another, get to know staff, and become familiar with the campus. Cultivating a sense of belonging can go a long way, particularly with first-generation or out-of-state students, who may feel particularly nervous about the unknown.

### ***3. Leverage technology to build a seamless student experience.***

With most of the traditional road to enrollment milestones happening with students at home, institutions must create a seamless, cross-platform environment that delivers information when and where students want—without bouncing them around to various offices and representatives. Today’s digital natives will accept nothing less! (In fact, 83% of mobile users say that a seamless experience across all devices is “very important” to them.)

Low-cost behavioral nudges like texting reminders and easy-to-use chat technology can also be the difference between a matriculated student and one who melts. A Harvard University study found that an automated but personalized text messaging campaign that reminded students of required college tasks substantially increased enrollment for students most vulnerable to summer melt. Two-thirds of students indicate that they would be willing to receive a text message from a prospective college, yet few do. Take the competitive advantage and keep your students from melting by being the institution that does.

Crucial relationships now need to be cultivated online. We suggest leveraging online communities for your accepted students to connect with one another and multiple campus offices in real time, whenever they desire. This is a powerful way to build community and institutional loyalty. Remember the power of those nine or more connections! Our Schools App tool, which offers a private, branded, social community built for higher education—could be just the solution you need.



#### ***4. Prioritize parents as critical partners***

For traditional students, parents play a critical role in the college process. Yet, oftentimes, institutions stop including parents as partners once the deposit has been received. With so much uncertainty around what things are going to look like come fall, and a hyper-focus on health and safety, keeping parents up to date is crucial.

Consider hosting virtual parent events to address concerns and loop them into the enrollment process. Include parents in your relationship-building communications. If parents and families feel confident in your institution, they are likely to have considerable influence over their students feeling similarly.



## SOURCES

- [1] Source: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/A-Trickle-or-a-Torrent-Understanding-the-Extent-of-Castleman-Page/3cdefef59be6d5bb61b2eca5ffbe3b5185d2708e>
- [2] Source: <https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/state-by-state-ratio-report.pdf>
- [3] Source: <https://www.interactionmarketing.com/press-releases/interactions-marketing-explores-next-generation-retail-new-gen-z-study/>

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