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A Conceptual Model for Collaboration to Combat the Summer Melt of Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Carrie V. Smith

This article includes a suggested model for postsecondary institutions to address the problem of summer melt among students from low-income backgrounds. The model accounts for four areas deemed integral support systems for low-income students to matriculate. The following partners are advised: student affairs, admissions, counselor education graduate programs, K-12 counselors, and financial aid. Within this collaboration, personnel within the student affairs divisions serve as the conveners and developmental experts. The article also outlines a summer melt prevention program that could be the focus of this type of collaboration. Due to the unique multifaceted design of this model, the author includes a discussion on navigating the process including benefits to each partner, as well as caveats for implementation.

Historically, student affairs practitioners have associated the term summer melt with high school students who paid numerous deposits to universities while weighing their decisions concerning where to attend. In making a final decision about what school to attend, these students forfeited monies to various institutions (Arnold, Fleming, DeAnda, Castleman, & Wartman, 2009). Recently, the term has become synonymous with students from low-income backgrounds who decide after graduation not to matriculate in the fall, even after receiving their acceptance and their requested financial aid package (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012). Research has identified numerous reasons—social, emotional, and financial—that may factor into matriculation decisions made by students from low-income backgrounds (Castleman & Page, 2014; Castleman, Page, & Schooley, 2014; Castleman, Page, & Snowdon, 2013). Despite exploration into the circumstances that potentially hinder this student population, educational experts have yet to create a comprehensive model for an intervention that specifically addresses the summer melt of students from low-income backgrounds. The summer presents a unique time when most students from low-income backgrounds operate without integral support systems such as their high school counselor or adviser due to the nine-month contract cycle within which these personnel operate. In addition, most colleges and universities do not consider admitted students their responsibility until the moment students attend their first class.

In order to reduce the summer melt of students from low-income backgrounds, a common practice for higher education professionals includes outreach to students early in high school. This method is preferred, rather than focusing on the last few months before students arrive on campus. In other words, professionals are *reaching out early* rather than *staying late*

(Arnold et al., 2009). Colleges and universities, educational nonprofits, and government programs have designed various interventions aimed at assisting students from low-income backgrounds, but they have had mixed results (Castleman & Page, 2013; Castleman et al., 2014; Jaschik, 2011; Strayhorn, 2011). Many summer bridge programs, as they are often called, do not specifically address the needs of students from low-income backgrounds. Instead, these programs focus on providing transitional support to all entering students (United States Department of Education, 2013). If student affairs practitioners have an ethical and professional obligation to help students develop emotionally, socially, and intellectually, among other areas (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 2006), how can they ignore this opportunity to begin the process of helping accepted students from an underrepresented population reach their potential? This paper presents a conceptual model for institutions to use when creating an intervention that can address the complex needs of students from low-income backgrounds who are susceptible to summer melt. The model outlines a collaboration spanning the institution and the surrounding community followed by detailing an intervention called the Summer Melt Prevention Program. The intervention is initiated through student affairs, but involves participation of various partners that can fulfill specific responsibilities as outlined in the model. Practitioners should acknowledge that institutional context will play a substantial role in the implementation of this model (Kezar & Lester, 2009). While the model is based on the organization of research universities, the concepts set forth in this model allow for application at other institutional types. Where possible and necessary, the author has made suggestions for adaptation.

Is My Institution Experiencing Summer Melt?

First, institutions must assess whether this type of summer melt is an issue in their communities. Practitioners should work with their admissions offices to establish the percentage of students receiving admission to the university yet not enrolling in the fall. Practitioners can look more closely for common characteristics such as socioeconomic status among students not matriculating, by disaggregating the data further. While socioeconomic status may be an indicator that a student may benefit from this intervention, it cannot be considered a forgone conclusion that all students from low-income backgrounds need this type of intervention. Even so, collecting this type of institutional data, coupled with issuing electronic or phone surveys, can contribute to understanding what is happening in the lives of the students in this targeted population over the course of the summer. Castleman, Page, and Schooley (2014) acknowledged that community colleges are especially at risk of summer melt, but the problem at 4-year institutions is growing. In addition, before schools can begin establishing a more formal collaboration to combat this issue, they must consider their context beyond institutional type. This includes but is not limited to, demographics of their student body, culture of the institution, and their mission and vision statements.

Many schools may have existing summer bridge or TRIO programming, and professionals may wonder why a program such as the one set forth in this model is not redundant. TRIO—a name referring to its design of three original programs, and summer bridge programs—focuses heavily on academic remediation efforts. They also require students to enroll in the program as early as middle school (University of Georgia Trio, 2013; United States Department of Education, 2014). In contrast, the proposed model for a collaborative intervention

focuses more on the dispensing of information and psychosocial services specifically during the summer after graduation from high school and prior to the fall semester of college.

The Framework of the Conceptual Model

Once an institution establishes the need to address summer melt, they can begin to identify appropriate partners among their community and stakeholders. Student affairs practitioners are charged by their professional organizations to decrease barriers to student success and to ensure that all students have the opportunity to thrive in college (American College Personnel Association [ACPA] & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2010). Therefore, regardless of their institutional context, student affairs practitioners have at their core a desire to help students succeed. For this reason, they are an ideal population to assume the responsibility for the creation of this partnership. They should begin by reaching out to partners that fit the four areas on which this model (see Figure 1) was developed. Arnold et al. (2009) identified four areas where students facing this phenomenon need support:

1. continuing availability of expert guidance and support with the college admissions and application process from both high school and college staff;
2. continuing assistance for students in finding the best possible pathway for their skills, interests, and postsecondary goals;
3. ongoing social and emotional support for students and their families so that they can acquire skills for coping with current barriers, overcome unforeseen challenges as they arise, and engage in appropriate anticipatory socialization for the college experience;

4. intensive and consistent financial guidance as students and their families interpret financial documents and contracts, make decisions among funding alternatives, and take actions within the complex world of grants, loans, scholarships, and other financial aid options. (p. 29)

Student affairs divisions should be cognizant that each of these areas might manifest itself through a number of departments, divisions, and individuals depending on the institution; however, this model offers a suggested structure and process based on what entities have traditionally held these responsibilities.

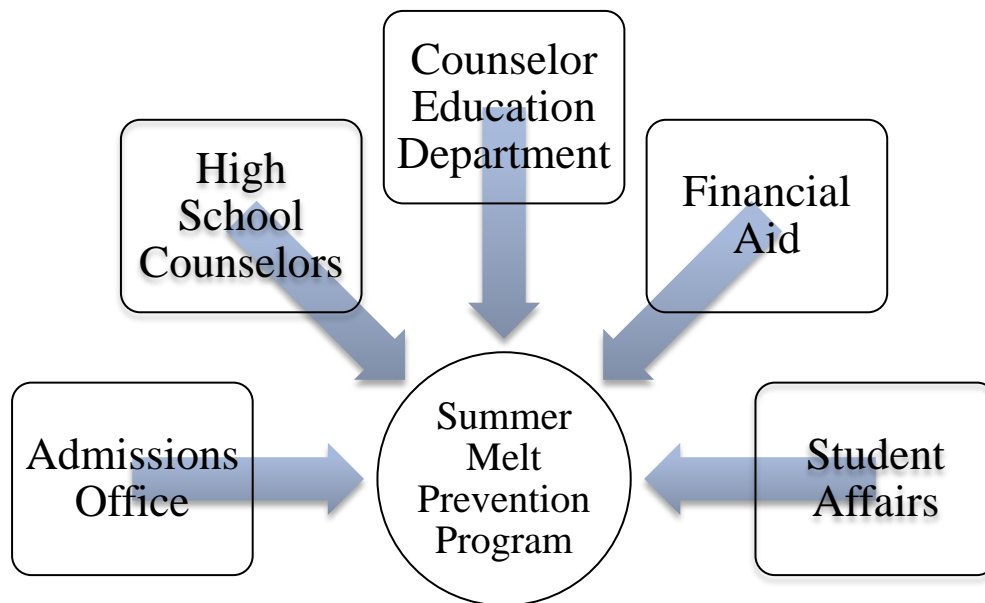


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of a Collaborative Approach to a Summer Melt Prevention program.

Partner One: Admissions Offices

As mentioned previously, admissions offices serve as information distributors within this model. Often members of the admissions office have connections to high schools that historically send their graduates to certain institutions. Depending on the structure of the admissions office, and the demographics of the student population, staff in the admissions office

may have existing relationships with high school counselors and teachers, families and the actual students. They also usually house data that can help an institution best identify the students that are most susceptible to summer melt potentially even noting their interests and planned academic major. Admissions offices often have the goal of increasing diversity specifically among income levels; they can illustrate their commitment by participating in this collaboration to achieve that goal.

Partner Two: High School Counselors

One of the largest issues causing summer melt is the lack of clarity on who is responsible for the student during the summer months. According to the National Survey of School Counselors conducted by the College Board, 92% of counselors believe part of their mission and purpose is to prepare students for life after high school by helping them complete 12th grade, and less than 25% or a fourth of the surveyed counselors work at schools where they conduct intentional initiatives over the summer (The College Board Advocacy & Policy Center National Office for School Counselor Advocacy [The College Board], 2012). In addition, “less than a third of high school counselors say that they intentionally collaborate with outside organizations...to support college and career readiness activities” (The College Board, 2012, p. 11). These statistics present a unique opportunity to help counselors achieve their goals through this collaboration. Student affairs practitioners can use the data obtained from the admissions offices to target specific school counselors or school districts whose students are perhaps at the highest risk of not matriculating to the institution. Once these schools have been identified, student affairs practitioners should begin developing rapport through informal and formal conversations as soon as possible. This is imperative, so that as the collaboration moves towards

a more critical stage of formation, the relationships between student affairs and the counselors are firmly established.

High school counselors, like student affairs practitioners, hold a number of roles in addition to helping a student attain their academic and personal goals (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2004). High school counselors can bring their knowledge about the students on an individual level, potentially providing more context to a student than the information supplied on required admissions documents. The involvement of high school counselors also demonstrates how groups from outside the college campus can use their authority, network, and skill set in order to form a more holistic outcome (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

Participating in this collaboration serves school counselors in numerous ways. First, there is a movement among the school counseling profession to demonstrate accountability to their supervisors and districts (ASCA, n.d.). This is a data driven initiative that allows school counselors to partner with a local university or college in order to produce outcomes that bolster their importance. For that reason, it raises the school's public profile as well as the school's dedication to creating a culture of college bound students, which may also help retention and persistence efforts.

Partner Three: Counselor Education Departments

Students decide not to matriculate to college due to a variety of circumstances, many of which the university will have no control over. Proactively providing qualified professionals on a college, or a university campus to ease the anxiety associated with entering college for the first time gives students from low-income backgrounds tools to manage challenges both expected and unexpected. For the purposes of this model, the author discusses using Counselor Education and School Psychology departments as a resource for this segment of the conceptual model. These

programs are traditionally housed within the College of Education; therefore the academic programs may possess more knowledge about the inner workings of a school environment than a traditional mental health counselor or psychologist. In the 2012 National Survey of School Counselors (The College Board, 2012), the majority of those counselors who earned a graduate degree in school counseling did not feel adequately equipped for preparing students for the transition to college. The partnership described by this model would increase students preparing for a role as a school counselor more direct access to students who are transitioning to college, a task considered of great importance to school counselors (ASCA, 2004).

Counselor education programs will certainly not exist at all colleges or universities who experience summer melt. These institutions will need to consider how to select a partner who can best serve the counseling services facet of this model. Many times students within counselor education programs seek internships or professional experience at institutions other than the one awarding them a degree. One option might include reaching out to these schools to gauge their interest in a program such as this. Schools should also consider looking to the surrounding communities for mental health professionals who would be willing to lend their time and expertise to this type of program. Institutions should also explore those offices on their own campuses whose responsibilities include students' emotional health and well-being. In doing this type of exhaustive search, student affairs practitioners can ensure that they are filling this crucial component of the model.

Partner Four: Financial Aid Office

Arnold et al. (2009) included a separate tenet about financial assistance and guidance in their recommendations for students facing this phenomenon. Students who have received their financial aid packages still have additional scenarios to navigate before they officially begin their

college careers. For this reason, the Office of Financial Aid should have an intentional and transparent role in this collaboration. Staff from financial aid offices bring an expertise about grants, loans, and financial aid options that go beyond what a website might provide. In addition, staff working with this student population can learn additional contextual information about their circumstances, which may help the counselors understand the multifaceted experiences students have during the summer prior to starting college.

Partner Five: Division of Student Affairs

The Division of Student Affairs lies at the center of this model, coordinating the collaboration, and providing tools for assessment and evaluation both during and after the program. Student affairs practitioners serve as the “conveners” bringing together the various components of this collaborative model (Kezar & Lester, 2009, p. 109). Institutional context and organizational structures will dictate who within the division is best suited to serve as the initial point person for this collaboration. Some schools may see it necessary to enlist the services of a trusted administrator or faculty member in order to gain additional leverage. Even so, student affairs remain crucial to the success of the collaboration as they bring a unique expertise about students. As college student development experts, student affairs practitioners will lead the discussion to develop a mission for the Summer Melt Prevention Program. This mission will be the culmination of the expertise and input from the aforementioned partners in the conceptual model. Student affairs professionals are accountable for ensuring that each partner in the collaboration is operating with the students’ well-being at the center of the initiative. The student affairs division is also responsible for the implementation of the timeline, created by the partners; that outlines the specific timing of the different types of communication and programming that exist within this model. Finally, student affairs practitioners will see the

collaboration as a collection of fluid partnerships understanding that revision and modifications are integral to the sustainability of the collaboration, thereby also operating as the administrative partner (Martin & Samels, 2001). By understanding the institutional context and applying it to the entire program's goals, student affairs professionals can avoid a breakdown in collaboration that may occur due to organizational cultural differences (Kezar, 2011).

The current culture and reputation of the student affairs office will certainly play a role in its ability to function in this capacity. Whereas some institutions will need to navigate the bureaucracy of many silos, other institutions may find themselves implementing this model in student affairs offices where a few people are responsible for all the tasks. Furthermore, existing relationships between the division of student affairs and other campus and community entities will make this collaborative process run more smoothly. If the division feels as though they do not have the relationships necessary to convene partners in each of the necessary areas, then it will need to begin building a rapport with potential partners that allows for seamless partnerships.

Summer Melt Prevention Program: Collaboration in Action

Once the partners outlined in the model have gathered, they can begin to develop an intervention to address summer melt of students from low-income backgrounds. The intervention will serve as a comprehensive program designed by using the four areas of need outlined by Arnold et al. (2009). Aforementioned partners will bring their ascribed area of expertise for a true collaborative effort. The Summer Melt Prevention Program will focus on increasing communication with students and providing support socially, financially, and psychologically.

Communication with Students

A visitation program in conjunction with a local university or college can be an aspect of a high school student's experience early in his/her high school careers. The high school counselor can recommend and encourage students to join visitation programs led by various student affairs staff members via online modules developed on topics like financial aid, what to expect upon one's arrival to college, and student organizations, among others. For students who do not have Internet access, high school counselors and the university can work to find computer access for the student, or they can help the student join these conversations via cell or smartphone. In a presentation on college access, sponsored by the United States Department of Education, Castleman, Cox, Owen, and Page (2014) outlined potential avenues through which high school counselors and postsecondary institutions might work together during the summer including mentorship, continued communication and text messaging. Furthermore, some schools have found that text messaging provides an inexpensive way to connect with students over the course of the summer (Castleman & Page, 2013). Through this messaging, university representatives can remind students of upcoming deadlines for materials, keep them abreast of university happenings, and encourage them to visit the website or even the campus, for various events prior to their enrollment. By request of the student, or by recommendation of the high school counselor, the student can enroll their parent(s) or guardian(s) to receive the text messages thus increasing at-home support during the summer.

Financial aid offices will also provide text reminders about upcoming deadlines for financial aid. They will schedule a time to meet with the student either online or in person, to discuss any additional payments of fees that a student might expect to encounter. The personal attention that a student would receive would allow them to develop rapport with a financial aid

staff member so that they would feel comfortable speaking with someone on campus about sensitive issues related to finances and resources.

Social and Emotional Support

Student affairs will work with the counselor education departments to develop a program for graduate internship credit that focuses on working with the students participating in the Summer Melt Prevention Program. Over the summer, these interns (or the corresponding party chosen to fulfill this component of the conceptual model) will design, implement and assess socialization initiatives. These efforts could include virtual programs, Facebook groups, text message campaigns focused on morale, or even small group in-person counseling sessions. The format of services selected will depend on the institution, the resources, and the willingness of student participation. The intent of the programs would be to alleviate any anxiety the student might be experiencing while also helping prepare them for their college journey. Boston, MA – based nonprofit [uAspire](#) and Fulton County Schools in the metro Atlanta, GA area piloted counseling programs, with traits similar to those previously mentioned, to high school students who were at risk of not matriculating (Castleman et al., 2014). These programs increased college enrollment with students from low-income backgrounds enrolling and persisting through at least the first year of college (Castleman et al., 2014).

Navigating the Process of Collaboration

This paper outlines a model for collaborating with multiple partners to create an intervention of great scale. The division of student affairs understands that undertaking an opportunity for increased retention and relationship building might have long-lasting positive effects on any college campus. Most importantly, the model and resulting Summer Melt Prevention Program specifically aim to meet the needs of students from low-income

backgrounds, a population rarely seen as a stand-alone population. In the initial stages of developing this collaboration and program, the greatest barriers to implementation will be schedules of those involved and budgetary restrictions. This model will involve additional financial resources as well as increased time and effort from people who may already feel overworked or overwhelmed by the myriad of responsibilities that their jobs entail (Gündüz, 2012; Taylor, 2005). Addressing these concerns from the beginning of the partnership will be valuable in obtaining buy-in from administrators, as well as collaborative partners. Furthermore, creating an atmosphere of collaboration and then sustaining commitment to that climate will have varying results based on the institution (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

As practitioners use this model for their institutions, they should consider the individual strengths, weaknesses, and area of expertise that each partner brings to the collaboration, while also remaining cognizant of the common values that each partner holds (Kezar & Lester, 2009). For example, this collaboration has at its core the best interest for college-intending students and providing them the support they need. Practitioners must understand and respect the various cultures involved especially when forming partnerships with faculty and the K-12 educational system. One recommendation is to develop a central point of contact online during the development of the program that includes essential documents, the mission statement and goals of the program, links to relevant programming, and a message board where the members of the collaboration can communicate when it is convenient for them (Duffield, Olson, & Kerzman, 2012). This acknowledges that a high school counselor, a college graduate student, and a financial aid staff member may operate during different times of the day, but that should not prevent them from sharing thoughts or accessing resources necessary for the program's success. In addition, building rapport with various divisions and departments may take time and involve

explaining why participating in this collaboration benefits that specific party. Obtaining the initial buy-in from participating partners should not be underestimated as a crucial step in the success of such a model.

Some institutions may have existing programs they believe address this type of summer melt. In cases such as those, it is important for practitioners to develop appropriate assessment measures to see how this model might improve the organization or targeted actions of those initiatives. In some cases, summer programs may not involve multiple offices or anyone outside of the student affairs department. The responsibility falls to the student affairs practitioner to explain both internally and externally why involving collaborative partners from different constituent bases is integral to the success of the collaboration. In this case is the matriculation, persistence, and retention of these students who want to attend college and have qualified to do so (Kezar & Lester, 2009).

The Path to Persistence and Increased Institutional Quality

While this model may have its origins in a research university setting, summer melt and the needs of the students susceptible to it exist at many types of institutions. Whereas places that might require adaptation have been noted, this is certainly not an exhaustive list. For example, smaller institutions may have one person serving multiple roles listed in the model. In this case, it is not necessary to find another partner, but rather to make sure that the core needs of expert academic, social, and financial support are being met. For those institutions with larger staffs or increased resources, the model serves as an example of combining expertise to create an innovative program to address the needs of their students.

This model has implications beyond the Summer Melt Prevention Program it outlines.

First, an integral component of this model is the relationship between the university and high school counselors. Nurturing this partnership has not been a focus of student affairs as a field, yet bringing together the two areas of expertise could lead to innovative programming and initiatives. Additionally, this model demonstrates how important it is that practitioners be cognizant of the vast resources that may exist outside of the division of student affairs and their institutions.

Colleges and universities must respond to the changing world of today's college students. In order for higher and postsecondary education to remain a viable and productive choice for graduating high school students, innovative collaboration and flexible thinking must continue both inside and outside the classroom (Martin & Samels, 2001). This conceptual model provides a possible collaborative strategy for addressing a growing problem, and it utilizes existing intersection points by which to make contact with students who are at risk of not matriculating (Cueso, n.d.). If in fact, "the majority of institutional mission statements embrace educational goals that are much broader and diverse than knowledge acquisition and cognition," this collaboration also serves to enhance the university environment through increased economic diversity among the existing student population (Cueso, n.d., p. 8). Furthermore, if the goal of post-secondary institutions is to support students to persistence, then this collaborative partnership helps to increase the chance that the students will arrive on campus for such an opportunity.

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