EdResearch for Action

Design Principles

HELPING STUDENTS MAKE IT TO COLLEGE: EVIDENCE-BASED DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR REDUCING SUMMER MELT

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RESULTS FOR AMERICA

The *EdResearch for Action Design Principles Series* focuses on a single program or practice that has been proven to have positive effects on student outcomes. Authors – leading experts from across the field of education research – look across many high-quality studies of similar programs to identify the components and conditions that are key to its effective implementation. The Design Principles Series helps practitioners adapt and successfully implement an evidence-based program to meet the needs of their target population.

CENTRAL QUESTION: How can schools and districts design and deliver supports that ensure college-intending high school graduates successfully enroll in college?

DESIGN PRINCIPLES AT A GLANCE

	CONTENT	DELIVERY	INFRASTRUCTURE
	**Model 1: Behavioral Nudges and Messaging**		
	• Prioritize time-sensitive, high-stakes tasks • Address both the logistics of financial aid and affordability perceptions • Tailor messages to students' intended colleges	• Send messages from trusted sources	• Balance low-cost messaging with staffing support • Include human oversight when using AI tools
	**Model 2: Counselor-Led Summer Outreach**		
	• Provide support for complex enrollment tasks	• Proactively reach out to students • Embed advising in trusted settings	• Provide access to key student data
	**Model 3: Peer or Near-Peer Support**		
	• Extend advising support through the summer • Recruit mentors with shared backgrounds	• Match mentors early and maintain consistent contact • Integrate mentoring with broader support systems	• Provide training and supervision for mentors
	**Model 4: Summer Bridge Programs**		
	• Provide wraparound supports to reduce barriers • Integrate academic and college knowledge support • Offer credit-bearing coursework to build momentum	• Provide targeted and personalized recruitment	• Implement scalable program models

BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

What is summer melt?

"Summer melt" describes the phenomenon where high school graduates who intend to enroll in college fail to matriculate in the fall. These students are admitted to a college and often confirm their plans by submitting a deposit, but ultimately do not show up on campus in the fall after graduation.

Each year, thousands of high school graduates who intend to go to college never make it to campus, a phenomenon known as summer melt. Nationally, about 10% to 20% of college-intending students fail to enroll in the fall, and melt rates are significantly higher among low-income students. Much of this variation stems from how researchers define "college intending" and how they measure enrollment: broad definitions, such as self-reported plans, yield higher melt rates, while narrower definitions that require indicators like FAFSA submission or college acceptance show lower rates. Regardless of how it's measured, the challenge is consistent: many students lose momentum in the months after graduation, when they are expected to finalize financial aid, register for classes, and complete other enrollment steps just as their usual supports fade away.

This gap can be attributed partly to the fact that no single institution is responsible for ensuring students make it to college after high school graduation. High schools often stop tracking students after graduation, and counselors, typically on 10-month contracts, are unavailable over the summer. Colleges, meanwhile, have detailed information about tasks, deadlines, and which students are falling behind, but their communication with students may not begin until orientation or after enrollment deadlines have passed.

Both high schools and colleges have critical, complementary roles to play. High schools are best positioned to reach all students, especially those who haven't yet committed to an institution, are applying late, or plan to attend community college. Colleges, on the other hand, are equipped to monitor enrollment tasks and provide institution-specific guidance for admitted students.

As more districts and states recognize that postsecondary success is an essential indicator of K–12 performance, they are beginning to bridge this gap. Nearly 14,000 high schools now use StudentTracker® to monitor graduates' college enrollment, persistence, and completion, and 41 states include college and career readiness metrics in their accountability systems. Still, only eight states formally track actual college enrollment or workforce outcomes.

Districts that are well-positioned to lead summer melt efforts often have restructured staffing, funding, and data infrastructure. Districts that extend counselor roles, partner with community organizations, or implement year-round advising models, like those used by the College Advising Corps, are better equipped to ensure students follow through on their college plans. Policies for archiving senior records may also need adjustment so that summer support staff and college access partners can view key data (e.g., graduation lists, contact information, FAFSA completion, and college intentions). With the right systems in place, districts can close the support gap, help students follow through on their college plans, and strengthen the long-term impact of their college access investments.

Students who do not enroll in college the fall after high school are much less likely to re-enroll later, which limits their long-term economic prospects and deepens systemic inequities in education and the workforce.

- Lower rates of postsecondary enrollment are especially pronounced among historically marginalized students, including those from low-income families, first-generation college-goers, and students of color.
- While college might not be the best path for everyone, postsecondary education remains a powerful driver of economic security and opportunity. Between 10 and 17% of young adults ages 18 to 25 in the U.S. have been neither enrolled in school nor working in the past decade. The kinds of supports described in this brief could make a meaningful difference for many of these young people, helping them access college and expand their opportunities for the future.

Summer melt is primarily driven by a combination of the following factors:

1. **Financial aid confusion and unexpected costs.** Many students struggle to interpret financial aid award forms or are caught off guard by unanticipated costs, such as housing deposits, meal plans, or health insurance. Others believe their aid is finalized when key forms or verifications are still incomplete. These financial uncertainties can delay or derail enrollment decisions, especially for students with limited family support to navigate the process.
2. **Complex and unfamiliar enrollment tasks.** Once admitted, students must complete a series of administrative steps: submitting forms, signing up for orientation, completing placement tests, and more. Without support from high school counselors or clear communication from colleges, many students miss key deadlines or get stuck trying to access portals.
3. **Social and emotional barriers.** Feelings of uncertainty, impostor syndrome, fear of leaving home, or doubts about whether college is "for them" can grow for students during the summer. These internal hurdles can be especially powerful for first-generation college-goers and those without strong networks of college-going peers.

Districts can measure the extent of summer melt by combining data on students' college intentions with actual enrollment records.

- Senior exit surveys, especially when completed close to graduation, can capture students' plans, deposit status, and summer contact information. When student exit surveys aren't available, school counselors can assemble their own records on students' reported college-going plans.
- Comparing this intention data with enrollment records from the National Student Clearinghouse or from partnerships with local colleges can help districts estimate melt rates and target support for subsequent cohorts of students.
- This tool, "*Measuring Summer Melt in Your District*" helps district and school leaders determine whether melt is a problem locally and which students are most affected.

EVIDENCE-BASED DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The strongest evidence on reducing summer melt comes from a range of district-, university-, and nonprofit-led programs that provide targeted support to college-intending students during their senior year and in the summer following graduation. Although programs to reduce summer melt often share key features, they vary in content, delivery, and the infrastructure needed to implement the program. Because of this variation, we group effective programs into four models based on their core structure.

Table 1: The four main models to reduce summer melt

Core Approach	Program Staff	Delivery Format
Model 1: Behavioral Nudges and Messaging		
Automated texts or chatbots provide info on college-specific deadlines, FAFSA/aid tasks, placement exams, and affordability guidance.	Automated systems with human backup from counselors. Outreach is generally more effective when it comes from a sender known and trusted by students. This could be a person from the student's high school or from their intended college or university.	Digital messages via text or chatbot
Model 2: Counselor-Led Summer Outreach		
Trained counselors or advisors conduct one-on-one outreach post-graduation and help with enrollment paperwork, aid verification, and orientation registration.	High school counselors, district counselors, or nonprofit staff trained to provide summer advising	Phone calls, texts, and in-person meetings
Model 3: Peer or Near-Peer Support		
Mentors provide academic, social-emotional, and logistical guidance, often extending from high school support.	Recent college graduates or current college students, supervised by school staff or college access organizations.	Phone calls, texts, and in-person meetings
Model 4: Summer Bridge Programs		
Academic and college-readiness programming in summer, often for credit.	College instructors, professional staff, and trained program facilitators	In-person programs (residential or day), including instruction and support services.

Design Principles Specific to Each Model

For each model, we identify the most likely "drivers of effectiveness," the specific features that make the model work, so school and system leaders can select the approach that fits their context and implement it in a way that maximizes impact.

Model 1: Behavioral Nudges and Messaging

> These programs use text message communication or other digital tools to deliver timely reminders and task-specific guidance. They are highly scalable and cost-effective. RCTs have found that text messaging campaigns can reduce summer melt by up to 10 percentage points.
>
> Example programs:
> - Text Messaging Campaign (Lawrence & Springfield, MA)
> - "Pounce" chatbot (Georgia State University)
> - OtterBot (Washington Student Achievement Council)
> - Summer text messaging from high school counselors (TX) and College Board (national)

Design Principles:

CONTENT

- **Prioritize time-sensitive, high-stakes tasks:** Texting campaigns that emphasize immediate, deadline-driven tasks, such as completing financial aid verification or registering for orientation, see higher student engagement than those centered on general encouragement or long-term planning.
- **Address both the logistics of financial aid and affordability perceptions:** Effective campaigns tackle both the logistics of financial aid (e.g., FAFSA verification, scholarship deadlines) and perceptions of affordability (e.g., loan guidance, budget advice), which are major drivers of student uncertainty during the summer.
- **Tailor messages to students' intended colleges:** Programs that incorporate both universal and college-specific tasks, such as placement exams, are more relevant and actionable for students, increasing follow-through.

DELIVERY

- **Send messages from trusted sources:** Students are more likely to engage with messages that come from familiar institutions, such as their high school, their intended university, or a known college access organization with which they have a relationship. For example, a national intervention to deliver text messages aimed at reducing summer melt did not significantly increase college enrollment overall. However, when a very similar outreach campaign was implemented locally in Texas, where students had existing relationships with the sender (e.g.,, familiar mentors), the intervention did increase college enrollment meaningfully. The contrast suggests that outreach is more effective when students perceive the message as coming from someone they already know or a familiar institution, rather than from an unfamiliar source.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- **Balance low-cost messaging with staffing support:** While text campaigns can be scaled affordably, successful models invest in message development, data integration for personalization, and staffing capacity to provide responsive follow-up.
- **Include human oversight when using AI tools:** Programs that use AI to respond to common questions can reduce staff workload, but also include safeguards to ensure accuracy and prevent misinformation.

Model 2: Counselor-Led Summer Outreach

These programs rely on school counselors, trained college-access advisors, or AmeriCorps coaches to provide one-on-one professional advising support over the summer. RCTs have found that students who received counselor-led outreach starting in their junior year were 7 percentage points more likely to enroll in college than those who did not.

Example Programs:

- College Forward (TX)
- uAspire Summer Counseling (Boston, MA)
- Summer counseling by Fulton County Schools (GA)
- High School–University Summer Counseling Partnership (Albuquerque, NM)

Design Principles:

CONTENT

- **Provide support for complex enrollment tasks:** Trained counselors guide students through high-stakes steps such as reviewing award letters, completing verification, registering for orientation, troubleshooting college portals, and setting up tuition payment plans.

DELIVERY

- **Proactively reach out to students:** Effective programs reach out to students during the summer to schedule advising sessions, rather than waiting for students to seek help on their own.
- **Embed advising in trusted settings:** Students are more likely to engage when support is delivered through familiar institutions like their high school or a community-based organization.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- **Provide access to key student data:** Programs that give counselors access to students' applications, financial aid, and matriculation records enable more accurate and timely support.

Model 3: Peer or Near-Peer Support

These programs rely on current college students or recent graduates to guide students through summer tasks, leveraging relatability and lived experience. RCTs have found that peer and near-peer mentors increase 4-year college enrollment and are especially impactful for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students.

Example Programs:

- Advise TX
- uAspire peer mentoring (Mastery Charter Schools)
- College & Career Bridge for All (New York City Public Schools)

Design Principles:

CONTENT

- **Extend advising support through the summer:** Effective models build on relationships formed during the school year and extend support through the summer, creating a more seamless transition to college.
- **Recruit mentors with shared backgrounds:** Effective programs recruit near-peer mentors, current college students or recent graduates, who share similar backgrounds with the students they support.

DELIVERY

- **Match mentors early and maintain consistent contact:** Programs that match mentors with students early in the summer and maintain regular communication see stronger engagement and follow-through.
- **Integrate mentoring with broader support systems:** Programs that align mentoring with digital nudges, summer bridge programming, or professional coaching provide students with layered and complementary supports.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- **Provide training and supervision for mentors:** Mentors are most effective when trained to provide both logistical and emotional support and when supervised by professional staff.

Model 4: Summer Bridge Programs

These are pre-college academic or orientation programs offered during the summer to prepare students for the transition to college. Evidence shows that summer bridge programs can boost academic preparedness, increase student aspirations, and improve college completion.

Example Programs:

- Texas High School Summer Bridge Program
- SB University Summer Bridge Program
- Challenge Program (Georgia Tech)

Design Principles:

CONTENT

- **Provide wraparound supports to reduce barriers:** Effective programs provide housing, meals, transportation, and stipends to ensure students can participate fully without logistical or financial strain.
- **Integrate academic and college knowledge support:** Successful models combine academic instruction with guidance on navigating college expectations, norms, and the hidden curriculum.
- **Offer credit-bearing coursework to build momentum:** Offering college credit during the bridge program helps students build confidence and accumulate early academic progress.

DELIVERY

- **Provide targeted and personalized recruitment:** Programs that automatically enroll eligible students or extend personal invitations see stronger participation than those relying on opt-in.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- **Implement scalable program models:** Programs with limited resources can implement shorter or hybrid summer bridge models, balancing cost with accessibility and student support.

Design Principles Across Models:

The design principles below reflect common elements across the range of successful models. School and system leaders can integrate these practices into existing supports, even if they aren't replicating a full programmatic model.

CONTENT

1. Start early and extend support beyond graduation

Effective programs start as early as junior year and extend into the post-graduation period, when traditional guidance structures fade and students face critical next steps on their own.

2. Focus supports on students most at risk

Students from low-income families, first-generation college-goers, and those attending community colleges face the highest melt rates. Targeting these students ensures limited resources are allocated where they are needed most.

3. Provide clear, proactive financial guidance

Confusion about financial aid, housing, or registration often derails students. Proactive, easy-to-understand communication, especially in students' home languages, about aid packages, required documents, and key deadlines can be effective at keeping students on track.

DELIVERY

4. Build trust between support providers and students

Students are more likely to respond to support from people and institutions they know, relate to, or affiliate with. Successful programs build on existing trust by training school counselors, hiring recent alumni as mentors, or partnering with college staff to offer credible, consistent guidance.

5. Use personalized, actionable communication

Whether through text messages, chatbots, or in-person outreach, the most effective efforts tailor messages to a student's intended college, deadlines, and next steps. Clear, personalized guidance with direct links to action is more likely to prompt follow-through than general reminders.

INFRASTRUCTURE

6. Create and support year-round college access roles

Summer melt programs are most effective when staff are both available and well-prepared to support students through the summer transition. Districts can create 12-month counselor or college-access positions, or provide summer stipends, to ensure students have access to guidance when they need it most. Staff should also receive targeted training and supervision to help them address students' logistical and emotional needs effectively.

7. Equip staff with data access

Programs are more effective when they have access to key student data. Access to real-time college application and financial aid information allows for timely interventions.

8. Combine digital tools with human connection

Technology can help scale outreach, but cannot fully replace person-to-person support. Effective models pair low-cost digital nudges with one-on-one advising or individualized follow-up to address complex questions and keep students moving forward.

EXAMPLE PROGRAMS TO REDUCE SUMMER MELT

Program	Key Components	Impact
Model 1: Behavioral Nudges and Messaging		
Text Messaging Campaign (Lawrence & Springfield, MA)	Personalized, automated texts with campus-specific info and task reminders; counselor support via reply text	+7 percentage points increase in college enrollment among students with limited access to college planning supports
Georgia State University AI Chatbot ("Pounce")	AI-enabled text chatbot providing proactive, targeted outreach to admitted students about administrative tasks (e.g., FAFSA, registration holds, balances); administrator support to monitor system and answer questions AI cannot	+2–3 percentage points increase in FAFSA filing; +7–8 percentage points increase in registration hold resolution; +2–5 percentage points increase in timely course registration; no effect on first-year GPA or credit attainment
OtterBot (Washington Student Achievement Council)	AI-powered, two-way text messaging system offering FAFSA/WASFA guidance to high school seniors across Washington State	+3 percentage points increase in FAFSA completion among male students when messages were tailored to individual needs
Summer text messaging from high school counselors (TX) and College Board (national)	National-scale and Texas-focused text messaging campaigns for low-income, college-intending students, providing reminders and information on tasks needed for college enrollment	No impact on overall FAFSA completion and college enrollment; + effects for students with GPAs below 3.0 in Texas; findings suggest large-scale, centralized campaigns may be less effective than localized efforts
Model 2: Counselor-Led Summer Outreach		
College Forward (Texas)	Long-term, intensive advising model led by AmeriCorps college coaches, starting junior year of high school and continuing through college. Services include help with college entrance exams, applications, financial aid, and summer transition. Advising is provided in-person via afterschool classes, 1:1 meetings, and parent workshops (English & Spanish). Students continue to receive support in college via calls, texts, and occasional campus visits.	+7 percentage points increase in college enrollment; +6.5 percentage points increase in Bachelor's attainment within 5 years; +4.8 percentage points increase in continuous enrollment into year 4
uAspire Summer Counseling (Boston)	Summer outreach to college-intending high school grads by nonprofit advisors. Support included FAFSA verification, tuition payment plans, and waiving health insurance fees.	+4.6 percentage points increase in college enrollment; +7.8 percentage points increase in sophomore-year persistence; +12.3 percentage points increase in college enrollment for low-income students.

EXAMPLE PROGRAMS TO REDUCE SUMMER MELT

Program	Key Components	Impact
Summer counseling by Fulton County Schools (GA)	District counselors provided phone-based summer support to recent graduates about financial aid, college portals, paperwork, and enrollment tasks.	+8.5 percentage points increase in college enrollment for students eligible for free/reduced price lunch.
High School–University Summer Counseling Partnership (Albuquerque, NM)	Proactive outreach during summer by Albuquerque Public Schools counselors stationed either at students' former high schools or at the University of New Mexico (UNM). Counselors offered help with college paperwork, financial aid, and enrollment tasks. College-based counselors received UNM-specific training, office space, and campus staff support.	+11.7 percentage points increase in UNM enrollment for Latino males when outreach came from UNM-based counselors; no significant effects for other subgroups or from high school-based counselors.
Model 3: Peer or Near-Peer Support		
Advise TX	College Advising Corps placed recent college graduates full-time in high schools to serve as near-peer advisors.	No impact on overall college enrollment; +1-2 percentage points increase in college enrollment for Hispanic and low-income students.
uAspire peer mentoring (Mastery Charter Schools)	College student peer mentors provided proactive summer outreach to recent high school graduates.	+4.5 percentage points increase in four-year college enrollment across sites.
College & Career Bridge for All (New York City Public Schools)	Current college students (mostly City University of New York enrollees and NYCPS alumni) are hired and trained to support recent graduates from June–September. Mentors help with postsecondary planning and matriculation tasks and provide socio-emotional support. Mentors are supervised by NYCPS counselors and receive real-time data on student progress to offer tailored outreach.	+7 percentage points increase in college enrollment.

EXAMPLE PROGRAMS TO REDUCE SUMMER MELT

Program	Key Components	Impact
Model 4: Summer Bridge Programs		
Texas High School Summer Bridge Program	4–6 week pre-college academic programs for rising 11th and 12th graders who were not yet college-ready. Programs varied in structure and included components such as academic instruction (reading, writing, math), labs, tutoring, study skills, advising, parent involvement, field trips, and college navigation.	Statistically significant gains in reading and writing (objective and essay) scores; effect sizes of 0.3–0.5+ standard deviations in reading and writing; no math gains.
SB University Summer Bridge Program	6-week residential summer program at a highly selective university for first-generation, low-income students. The program included for-credit humanities and STEM courses, mentorship, social integration, training on the "hidden curriculum," meals, housing, travel cost coverage, and stipends. Designed to increase academic confidence and integration before freshman year.	+7 percentage points increase in nonintroductory courses taken; +6 percentage points increase in courses taken for a grade; no negative effect on first-year GPA, credit accumulation, or academic withdrawal.
Challenge Program (Georgia Tech)	5-week summer bridge program for incoming underrepresented minority students that included structured, non-credit coursework in calculus, chemistry, computer science, and English and offered peer mentoring, and other supports.	Participation associated with a 19% higher likelihood of college graduation among underrepresented minority students.

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