

The Summer Flood: The Invisible Gap Among Low-Income Students

by Karen Arnold, Shezwae Fleming, Mario DeAnda, Benjamin Castleman, and Katherine Lynk Wartman

The pipeline into higher education does not come to an end when a high school senior accepts an offer to attend college. Notwithstanding high school bragging lists and college-choice theory, for a large group of high school graduates, admission to college is not equivalent to going to college.¹ For low-income students who have made it through the entire admission and financial aid process, the education pipeline springs a leak at the very last moment: during the summer after high school graduation.

The loose hand-off between secondary school and postsecondary institution has different consequences for students from different social classes. Middle class high school seniors who plan to go directly to college follow a standard path of college applications, notification of acceptances and financial aid, and confirmation of college choice in the form of a financial deposit. A few such students change their minds over the summer, forfeiting their deposits and matriculating at a different college in the fall. Admission offices plan for this “summer melt,” understanding that a small percentage of their successful applicants will be accepted from other schools’ waiting lists or simply change their minds.² Summer melt can be annoying and costly for small colleges or those without a waiting list of their own. But, for the most part, parents, students, colleges, and researchers assume that the high school senior who sends a financial deposit to College X on May 15 will matriculate at College X (or at least at College Y) the following autumn.

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By contrast, for a substantial proportion of low-income high school graduates, the traditional pattern of application-acceptance-choice-matriculation does not hold. Despite national calls to conceptualize education as a continuous P-16 system,³ most high schools cease to serve their students at the point of graduation. For their part, colleges provide relatively few students with formal bridge programs during the summer transition between secondary and postsecondary education. Even among low-income students accepted into four-year colleges with financial aid, the period between spring admission and fall matriculation features a “summer flood” in which graduates continue fundamental decision-making about

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where—and even whether—to attend college.

Although this summer flood is familiar to secondary educators who work with low-income students,⁴ this phenomenon has been invisible in scholarly and policy circles.⁵ Pre-college enrollment changes can only be discovered by following students closely across the transition from high school to college. One such research project, the Big Picture Longitudinal Study (BPLS), uncovered the phenomenon of the summer flood. Begun in 2006 with funding from the Lumina and Irvine Foundations, the BPLS follows 500 graduates from over 50 innovative urban high schools that have gained national attention for graduating socioeconomically disadvantaged students of color and working in partnership with these students to assure their admission to college.⁶ These graduates are predominantly members of demographic groups least likely to complete high school or attain college degrees: low-income, urban, non-white, and the first generation in their families to attend college.⁷

Big Picture graduates are unusual among urban low-income youth, however, in having had a positive, personalized, real-world-based high school experience that supported them in aspiring to higher education and helped them succeed in gaining admission to a four-year college.⁸ With slight variations across schools, 95 to 100 percent of Big Picture students are accepted into college. Along with a school culture that fosters adult mentorship, and student self-determination, Big Picture high schools achieve their notable college acceptance rate partly as a result of college transition counselors who are employed specifically to work with individual students and their families to facilitate the process of applying to college.

Even under this best-case scenario, at least one-third of Big Picture students reconsider their college plans or change their intended college over the summer

following high school graduation. At least one in five decides not to begin college at all. This unexpected discovery came during the initial year of the longitudinal research when the research team compared seniors' college acceptance rates (close to 100 percent), their stated intentions to start college in the fall (close to 90 percent), and their actual enrollment in any college in the September after graduation (around 70 percent). These figures came from Big Picture college transition counselor records, exit surveys from graduating seniors, summer reports of counselor/student follow-ups, and reports of actual college enrollments provided by the National Clearinghouse for Student Enrollment.⁹

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The troubling gap between admission and matriculation led us to design a qualitative study with a specific focus on summer college planning among socioeconomically disadvantaged high school graduates who have already been accepted to college. We found that the Big Picture's exemplary college-going figures masked a summer pattern of ongoing deliberation about enrolling in college. Focus groups of transition counselors and school principals, and in-depth case studies with 13 recent Big Picture graduates, confirmed that the summer following graduation is a turbulent period for most of these high school graduates.

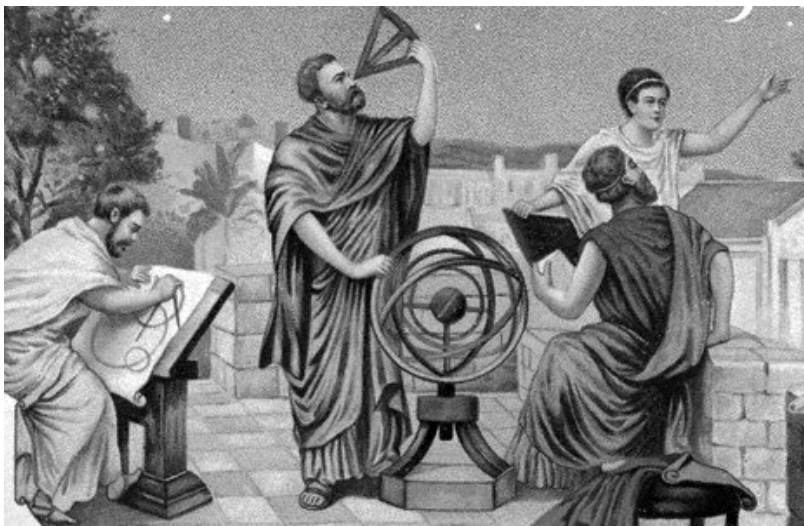
Summer check-ins conducted by college transition counselors with alumni gave the first indication of substantial shifting in students' fall postsecondary plans during the post-high school summer. Profiled students were chosen to represent the patterns found in the summer check-ins and focus groups: graduates who kept their original four-year college plan without significant wavering over the summer (30 percent); graduates who enrolled in their chosen college only after serious reconsideration (15 percent); graduates who changed over the summer from one baccalaureate institution to another (25 percent); graduates who moved between four-year and community college (15 percent); and graduates who decided against any fall enrollment (15 percent). Several of the graduates continued to apply to colleges over the summer after having been accepted elsewhere. Nearly all of them continued to work over the summer on finalizing financial aid. These findings suggest students continue to decide about where and whether to enter higher education after existing theory and policy presume that the access process is complete.

Students' struggles with relationships, resources, and lack of knowledge appear to underlie the summer flood. For Big Picture students without a family history of higher education, it is the high school advisor, college transition counselor, and school community that maintain the vision of college through the ups and downs

of adolescent motivation. Although some students have clear parental support, Big Picture graduates and their college transition counselors told story after story of parental ambivalence, lack of understanding, and even hostility to their child's college plans. In addition to the drags of family instability or inadequate support, peer relationships also exert summer pulls to remain home with non-college bound friends and romantic partners.

Without adults to help hold on to the dream of college over the summer, incomplete faith in the likelihood of achieving the degree leads some students to hedge their bets, reduce the stakes, or opt out of higher educational altogether. "Even when their name is on the wall for their college acceptances, it is still not certain," noted one of the researchers, remarking on a student's muted reaction to the good news that she had been accepted into her first choice college. "Transferring is part of their plan," a transition counselor said of Big Picture students in general. "They figure they'll try someplace close to home and then maybe go away." An accepted senior said, "Maybe it would be cool to go to college for a few years. Not like promising myself anything but maybe give it a try." Teachers, transition counselors, internship mentors, and principals build the vision of attending college for Big Picture students, but the dream can fade over the summer without ongoing support. "A month without you, and they lose motivation, talking to parents and friends," a transition counselor summarized.

Finances are a major stumbling block during the post-graduation summer. Most Big Picture students live in low-income households and are keenly aware that paying for college is uncertain and perhaps unachievable. All Big Picture seniors are required to apply for financial aid. Staff in their high schools provide considerable assistance to students and their parents in researching sources of aid and



filling out the complicated paperwork for federal, state, institutional, and private scholarships. Even so, students frequently go into the summer without knowing their financial aid situation, making it difficult for staff to help them after the end of the academic year. Financial aid offers—indeed, sometimes conditional college acceptances—are difficult to decipher by families making decisions over the summer. Students and transition counselors report that some students receive mixed, confusing, or unfriendly signals during the summer from colleges about admission, housing, and other non-financial aid matters.

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tion process, many students still face a significant gap between their financial aid award and their families' ability to pay the costs of higher education. Many students and their families cannot cope with the reality of their financial aid shortfalls. As a transition counselor reported, "Some parents and kids can't see debt as an investment. Even if they understand it, they don't believe it." The unwillingness to incur debt relates in some cases to students' worries about achieving the degree. Some families are willing to take out loans but lack a credit-worthy member to sign a loan document. Summer is the season in which families secure loans, which means decisions and crises about loans take place when students lack ongoing contact with high school staff.

During the college admissions process, principals and counselors noted, students don't share (or sometimes even know) vital information like the credit status of their parent or even their own immigration status. "At the end of the school year, they just seemed like they were fine," said one college transition counselor of a group of her students who appeared to have solid plans and financial aid but then floundered during the summer. During the summer, the careful spring choice of where to go to college collapses in the panic of how to pay for any college. "It's just expensive and I'm just going to community college," is a common student refrain according to a West Coast college transition counselor.

Even having a dream and feeling worthy, competent, and confident of achieving it does not mean students necessarily understand the steps to make it happen. Tacit knowledge is an aspect of practical intelligence that includes an understanding of the way the world works and the ability to use this understanding to set and reach realistic goals.¹⁰ The summer behaviors of low-income students without college-educated parents reflect incomplete practical knowledge of the college tran-

sition. Summer is also the period when students face the consequences of their sometimes naive behavior during the senior-year admission period. Not all of their mistaken assumptions and unrealistic expectations have been cleared up in the application process; indeed, many are never expressed verbally.

College transition counselors confirmed that students seek knowledge over the summer from sources beyond the school that may be unhelpful or even wrong in their advice. “Students are gathering bits and pieces of information from people who don’t really know anything,” one transition counselor concluded. In one case, a student decided over the summer to apply to Northwestern University

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because he assumed it was the California branch of Northeastern University. Another student assumed her financial aid award was in process and never thought to inquire until the middle of the summer.

Big Picture school staff and internship mentors work hard to help students research colleges and make informed choices. School-sponsored campus site visits are common, along with visits from college admissions officers and high school alumni who are currently in college. Still, the naiveté of students and the thinness of their college social networks leave them prone during the summer to unsophisticated choices and vulnerable to scams. Transition counselors told stories of students receiving repeated phone calls from for-profit school recruiters pressing them to sign binding financial agreements.

Students do not always share their plans and sometimes conceal problems or intentions from adults. This was fortunately not the case for a student who excitedly phoned his transition counselor over the summer with a question. “I found a scholarship on eBay. Should I buy it?” After all, he said, it was a \$1,000 scholarship on offer for only \$500. Wasn’t that a good deal? As these stories show, the combination of unsophisticated consumer behavior during the college choice process and lack of sources of practical higher education knowledge outside the high school can come to a head during the post-high school summer.

Clearly, the summer between college acceptance and matriculation is a vulnerable time during which no institution owns high school graduates who have been admitted to college. Much can and does happen in these young people’s lives from mid-June to mid-August, as they face a crucial transition without the close guidance and support that they had in high school. As this study reveals, many students respond to the withdrawal of high school supports and the emergence of

post-high school challenges by reopening the entire college decision-making process.

These students need a more conscious hand-off between high school and college. Continuing intensive high school involvement would enable connected adults and effective structures to “stay late” after graduation, to make sure the student can follow through on senior year plans. For their part, colleges can “start early” by taking responsibility for working with their admitted low-income and first generation students in the summer before initial matriculation.¹¹ P-16 educators and policymakers can take action to reduce “drop-out” and enrollment plan

Colleges can start early by working with their admitted, low-income and first-generation students in the summer before initial matriculation.

changes during the summer before college. Low-income students who will be the first in their families to attend college need summer support in the following areas:

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.

Programs designed to support these students must take these needs into account during the summer, as well as in high school and into the fall, as students make the transition to new learning environments. Simply addressing one of the listed areas or covering all for a brief period of time, such as the second semester of senior year, will not address the multiple, interconnected, and persisting needs of first-generation college-bound students.

High schools can “stay late” by developing formal support systems for the post-graduation summer. Whether the high school teacher or counselor takes primary responsibility for following students through the summer, this population of students needs considerable time and attention from someone with whom they already have a relationship. As a transition counselor said of her students: “They

have bottomless need, and they want help from the person they know.”

Of course most low-income, first generation students of color attend high schools without the Big Picture model of four-year advisories and focused college transition support. For these high schools, supports for college-bound graduates should include: ongoing interaction of recent graduates with high school staff; summer work with families; facilitated connections with other college-going peers; assistance with summer financial decisions; and college anticipatory socialization activities.

Big Picture schools have responded to the longitudinal findings of our study

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by extending the contracts of college transition counselors into the summer. A 2007 intensive effort of this type yielded a 90 percent college enrollment rate for a midwestern Big Picture senior class. In 2008, seven Big Picture schools participated in a randomized experiment of formal summer intervention. In this experiment, transition counselors provided systematic outreach and assistance over the post-high school summer to 80 randomly selected new graduates who had been accepted into at least one college. Another 82 randomly selected new graduates served as a control group.¹² Analysis of summer interaction logs shows that counselors helped students lobby successfully for additional funds from the college; find private loans; and in the absence of additional funds, develop alternative postsecondary plans. We also found that counselors helped students make sense of the information they received from colleges. The counselors recorded that many students lacked the confidence to telephone their chosen college to ask a question or to discuss an issue that had arisen. Counselors helped students connect with the college to resolve outstanding issues and to complete required paperwork. This was the most popular topic for counselor-student communication, followed by procuring additional funding, and evaluating financial aid packages. In addition, we found that students required assistance from counselors most often between two and four weeks after high school graduation (from approximately the beginning to the middle of July).

According to National Clearinghouse enrollment figures for Fall 2008, graduates who received active outreach were statistically significantly more likely than their classmates in the control group to follow through with their last-semester high school postsecondary plan and to enroll in four-year colleges. The enrollment rate of students in the treatment group was 15 percentage points higher than

for students in the control group. Students in the treatment also enrolled full-time and enrolled in four-year colleges at considerably higher rates. Forty-eight percent of the treatment group enrolled full-time, compared to 32 percent of the control group. Forty-one percent of the treatment group attended four-year colleges and universities, compared with 26 percent of the control group. Even more striking, we found that students in the treatment group were substantially more likely to keep their postsecondary plans from June of their senior year. Over half (57 percent) of the treatment group kept their June plans, as compared with slightly more than a third (37 percent) of the control group.

Early college outreach programs could improve their ultimate effectiveness by continuing to serve students through the post-acceptance summer.

These results were persistent, though slightly attenuated, when we controlled for gender, race, special education status, eligibility for free and reduced lunch, ACT score, and specific high school. The results of this experimental study suggest that, for low-income students at Big Picture high schools, active college counseling the summer after high school graduation leads to substantially higher rates of college enrollment.

These findings suggest that other college-access programs could usefully remain with students after college acceptances arrive. Transition programs, such as TRIO's Upward Bound program and GEAR UP, are valuable, but they normally cease once the students graduate from high school and are accepted into college. Early college outreach programs, our work suggests, could be more effective if they continued to serve students through the post-acceptance summer.


As for colleges starting early with admitted students, many institutions have implemented academic enrichment or pre-collegiate programs to serve as a bridge between high school and college. Campus bridge experiences appear to be successful in helping students acclimate to the university, understand its academic demands, and make important social connections to college peers.¹³ But bridge programs are relatively rare among low-income, first-generation students, especially those who attend less selective institutions. All colleges and universities should consider broader adoption of summer bridge programs, structured specifically to address the issues that often derail low-income, first-generation students' summer plans.

As a beginning step, official communications over the summer must be timely, easily understandable, informative, and welcoming. Summer contacts raise the probability that admitted students will communicate difficulties and concerns,

enabling timely and targeted intervention by college staff. Summer outreach can also provide early warnings of issues that might require attention during the initial transition to college. One small college, for instance, found that difficulty reaching incoming students over the summer was a significant predictor of college drop out in the first year.¹⁴

Study results suggest the importance of college efforts over the summer to help students and their families anticipate what college will be like, plan for what they will do when they get to college, and meet other students. Summer orientations, Facebook communities of incoming first-year students, family involvement, outreach by resident assistants and other current students, and roommate contact information and pre-enrollment conversation guidance are just a few examples of pre-entry summer college interventions that would focus admitted students on anticipatory socialization activities and increase their store of tacit knowledge about managing the college transition.

Policy targeted at the post-high school summer can potentially pay large dividends by assisting students who have reached the very door of higher education. Of particular value are policy efforts that enable high schools and colleges to develop partnerships in which they work together over the summer transition to higher education. Financial aid policies that enable families to understand and navigate summer decisions are certainly crucial. States could require higher education institutions to report the extent of their summer melt, information that is currently rarely shared beyond the admission office.

The same factors that reduce college aspirations in the national population of low-income students of color continue to operate in the summer after students' admission. The summer flood is not about academic preparation or higher education goals, according to this study, but about aligning aspirations, knowledge, relationships, and resources so that students receive a necessary escort into the opportunity they have prepared for, sought, and won. Separately and in partnership, high schools and colleges must attend explicitly to the summer transition of new high school graduates. Researchers and policy makers need to understand the dynamics that lead to the summer flood and take action to reduce it. Aligning the complex hand-off of students from high school to college requires the consistent presence of all parties to make sure admitted students follow the higher education pathway for which they are prepared. 

ENDNOTES

1. The most widely cited theory of college choice identifies three distinct periods in college choice: predisposition, search, and choice. The model assumes that students engage in one phase at a time, follow the stages in order, and complete the entire process at the point of formal acceptance of an admission offer. Don Hossler and Karen S. Gallagher, *Studying Student Choice: A Three-Phase Model and the Implications for Policymakers*, 1987.

2. No national statistics on the extent or variability of the summer melt among admitted students are available. A few institution-specific reports available on the Web indicate a no-show rate of around 6-7 percent. Swarthmore College, *How to Talk Like an Admissions Dean*, 2001.
3. Education Trust, *College Begins in Kindergarten*, 2000; Harold H. Hodgkinson, 1999, *All One System: A Second Look*, 1999; Andrea L. Venezia, Michael W. Kirst, and Anthony Antonio, *Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Postsecondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations*, 2003.
4. One urban education leader refers to the period after high school graduation as “The Black Summer.”
5. None of the many recent scholarly reviews or policy reports on college access identify the post-graduate summer as a source of attrition from higher education or as a policy focus. *cf.* The Education Resources Institute Pathways to College Network, *A Shared Agenda: A Leadership Challenge to Improve College Access and Success*, 2004; State Higher Education Executive Officers, *More Student Success: A Systemic Solution*, 2007.
6. There are approximately 5000 Big Picture students in a growing network of high schools now located in 13 states. Of these students, 78 percent are students of color and 56 percent are considered economically disadvantaged. Virtually all of the students graduate from high school. Over 95 percent apply to college. Eliot Levine, *One Kid at a Time*, 2002; Joseph P. McDonald, Emily J. Klein, and Meg Riordan. *Going to Scale with New School Designs*, 2009; www.bigpicture.org.
7. Socioeconomic gaps in college-going are particularly pronounced among four-year college participants and students who start college immediately after high school. Laura W. Perna and Scott L. Thomas, *The Opportunity Agenda: A Reexamination of Postsecondary Reward and Opportunity*, 2004. By age 26, only 7 percent of youth from the lowest income quartile attain a baccalaureate degree, as compared with 51 percent of students from the highest quartile. U.S. Department of Education, cited in Robert Haveman and Timothy Smeeding, *The Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility*, 2006.
8. Levine, see note 6 above.
9. The National Student Clearinghouse is a non-profit organization that maintains college enrollment records reported by 91 percent of U.S. colleges and universities. The Clearinghouse Student Tracker makes these data available to high schools and high school districts. National Clearinghouse, *Measure the College Success of Your High School Graduates*, 2008.
10. Robert J. Sternberg, *Beyond IQ: A Triarchic Theory of Human Intelligence*, 1985. *See also*, Conley, *College Knowledge: What it Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready*, 2005.
11. This conception of colleges “starting early” differs from the usual definition of early college awareness and exposure. Laura W. Perna and W. Scott Swail, *Pre-College Outreach and Early Intervention*, 2001. Instead, we refer here to a college or university beginning to work with its newly admitted students between the time an admitted student makes a financial deposit indicating the intent to attend and the expected date of matriculation.
12. Control group members were not denied assistance if they sought summer help from high school staff members but they were not otherwise contacted during that period by the transition counselors involved in the study.
13. Adrianna Kezar. “Summer Bridge Programs: Supporting All Students.” ERIC Digest. Washington, D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service Report No. ED-HE-2000-3), 2000.
14. Theodore Elling, Kimberly VanDerLinden, and Joseph Cicala, *Evaluating Academic Success Effectively with EASE: A New Survey of Academic Engagement*, 2008.

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