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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**STOPPING SUMMER MELT: STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS' PERSPECTIVES ON
 SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES.**

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Abstract

Every year high school graduates in the United States gain admission to an institution of higher education and plan to enroll at that institution the fall immediately after high school, but, over the summer months, a certain percentage of those students end up not enrolling as they fail to navigate the transition and complete the necessary steps to enroll. This phenomenon is referred to as *summer melt*. This qualitative research inquiry considered the perceptions of student affairs professionals at institutions of higher education who work closely with new, incoming college students. Through the phenomenological approach, the researcher explored the perceptions of fifteen student affairs professionals with regard to the impact of summer melt and the strategies and tactics used to mitigate it. Several conclusions and implications emerged from the inquiry: adverse impact on students and institutions, need to enhance communication on enrollment processes, and importance of intrinsic connections.

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Introduction:-

Although college enrollment rates for students graduating high school have risen over recent years, there are still a consistent proportion of college-ready and college-intending students who do not pursue those college-bound plans after high school (Castleman & Page, 2014). This phenomenon, in which high school graduates who have gained admission to at least one institution of higher education but stumble on the path to enrollment during the transition period in the middle of high school graduation and college, is referred to as *summer melt* (Rall, 2016). Castleman & Page (2014) approximate a national summer melt rate of 10%. With increasing disparities in college access and a finite number of students to help successfully impact inequity, institutions of higher education cannot lose sight of these students who have shown the ability to be successful at college (Rall, 2016).

In contradiction with common belief that the pipeline of high school students to college ends when a student is accepted to a college and accepts that chosen college's offer of admission, the process of moving from high school to college continues throughout the summer (Arnold, Fleming, DeAnda, Castleman and Wartman, 2009). College enrollment professionals understand that a small proportion of students admitted to their respective institutions will decide to attend a different college or university over the summer following graduation from high school (Arnold et al., 2009). These students are what make up a number of those summer melt students from the perspective of an admissions or enrollment office. However, these students do not fit the previously defined parameters of summer melt because they did not get lost on the path to college during the summer transition; they simply found a different path to college. The real issue is when the pipeline from high school graduation to college begins to leak at that late-

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in-the-game moment during the summer transition (Arnold et al., 2009). For these students, college admission does not result in college enrollment (Arnold et al., 2009). Even though these students met all high school graduation requirements, were admitted to at least one institution of higher education, had the goal of attending college, and committed to a selected college or university by making an enrollment deposit, they still fail to enroll in postsecondary education (Rall, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

While a number of high school graduates have successfully been admitted to at least one institution of higher education and have the intention of enrolling the fall immediately following graduation, a proportion of those students ultimately do not end up following through with those plans for pursuing higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore student affairs professionals' perspectives on the summer melt phenomenon and the strategies used to diminish it. The study specifically explored:

Research Questions

1. What are student affairs professionals' perceptions on the summer melt phenomenon?
2. What strategies do student affairs professionals employ to mitigate summer melt?
3. What recommendations do student affairs professionals promote to mitigate summer melt?

Research Design and Methodology:-

Qualitative research design was used to investigate the impact summer melt has on college access. A qualitative research design places emphasis on the significance of a problem or phenomenon through the lens of the partakers' and social groups' lived experiences (Creswell, 2018). The goal of qualitative research is enlightenment, understanding, and extrapolation, in contrast to the goals of forecasting and generalization of findings in quantitative research (Hoepfl, 1997). Inductive reasoning, significance of individual meaning, and focus on the complexity of a problem are characteristics of a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2018). The phenomenological approach is a type of qualitative inquiry. The phenomenological approach's goal is to recognize phenomena and to shed light on the specifics of it through the perceptions of its participants (Lester, 1999). This approach relies on qualitative methods such as participant discussions, observations and interviews (Lester, 1999). Exploring how student affairs professionals' perceive their efforts to guide college-bound student through the summer transition period is pertinent to what this research sought to study. The researcher used the phenomenological approach to gather and analyze these perceptions.

The population of the study included student affairs professionals who a) guide first-time, incoming college students either through the financial aid, admissions, orientation, or registration processes, b) synthesize and analyze enrollment management data, or c) craft communication to first-time, incoming college students.

Participants of the study were selected through purposeful or selective sampling. Schatzman & Strauss (1973) explain that selective sampling evolves from the allotted time for the research, the research framework, interests of the researcher, and restrictions that may come with the research setting. In selective sampling the researcher chooses participants to align with the focus of the study (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Patton (2002) supports the reasoning for purposeful sampling by his description of it as a selection of information-rich cases of deep inquiry that yields in-depth understanding and insights. The sample for this study consisted of 15 student affairs professionals from a large research university, a mid-sized university, a small liberal arts college, and a mid-sized community college. The individuals worked in the areas of admissions, enrollment management, scholarship and financial aid, advising, student engagement, and marketing.

The researcher developed a questionnaire consisting of 16 open-ended questions used for data collection. These questions sought to elicit responses from the participants to glean the level of knowledge and understanding of summer melt, perspectives on the influence of summer melt and who it proportionately affects, and insights on strategies used to prevent summer melt. All 15 survey respondents submitted answers to the questions anonymously.

Findings

After collecting the data, data analysis was conducted by coding and categorizing the responses and detecting emergent themes and patterns. The researcher interpreted themes and patterns in the responses and identified commonalities. The findings are discussed per research question with the respective emergent themes.

5.1 RQ1: What are student affairs professionals' perceptions on the summer melt phenomenon?

The interpretation of the meaning of responses and the identified commonalities provided a basis for detecting and grouping emergent themes. The emergent themes for RQ1 are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes Formulated from Questionnaire for RQ1

Response	Frequency	% of all Responses
Impact on underrepresented students	16	20.0%
Hindrance on meeting enrollment goals	13	16.3%
Affects enrollment and student programming planning	11	13.8%

Impact on underrepresented students

Nine participants noted 16 different times over five survey questions that the summer melt phenomenon disproportionately impacts underrepresented students at their respective institutions. The participants mentioned a variety of specific demographics of students that place them in the underrepresented category. These demographics included students of color, first-generation students, ethnic and racial minorities, English language learners, international, and low-income students. The demographics mentioned most often were first-generation students with 10 mentions, ethnic and racial minorities with eight mentions, and low-income students with seven mentions.

Participant 10 stated: Summer melt impacts low income, students of color, and first-generation students the most. This population only makes up a small percentage of enrolling students on a college campus, however it is an area that college enrollment managers are not aware.

Hindrance on meeting enrollment goals

Twelve participants discussed 13 different times over five survey questions how summer melt makes it impossible or more challenging to meet enrollment goals for their respective institutions. Most notable was the decrease in the number of incoming students an institution planned to enroll at the beginning of an academic year. The trend of an increase in summer melt was discussed by several participants, making the job of meeting increasingly higher enrollment goals more and more challenging each year.

Participant 13 shared: It impacts my department really in regard to numbers. We are basing our student enrollment goals on specific numbers within each of our territory and with students who decide to not attend my institution and only letting us know in the summer really can impact the number of students we will enroll, making it difficult to recruit students to fill that "spot" considering many have already made their decision on where they are attending by the middle of July.

Affects enrollment and student programming planning

The unpredictability of summer melt with regard to how many potential incoming students of an institution it will impact and which incoming students will decide to not ultimately enroll was discussed by several participants. This unpredictable nature of summer melt can create adverse situations for student affairs professionals when it comes to enrollment management, budgeting, and student programming planning. Eleven participants stated over five survey questions that summer melt negatively affects their ability to plan for the upcoming academic year.

Participant 4 observed: It is important for us to be able to project how many students we will have so we can make sure we are good stewards of our resources. Everything from class seats, staffing, to the amount of T-shirts we order for giveaways are impacted by summer melt.

5.2 RQ2: What strategies do student affairs professionals employ to mitigate summer melt?

The interpretation of the meaning of responses and the identified commonalities provided a basis for detecting and grouping emergent themes. The emergent themes for RQ2 are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes Formulated from Questionnaire for RQ2

Response	Frequency	% of all Responses
Deployment of communications across a variety of channels throughout the enrollment process	20	25.0%
Nudging students to complete next steps	15	18.8%
Decreasing financial barriers	10	12.5%

Deployment of communications across a variety of channels throughout the enrollment process

Participants discussed the need to communicate with incoming students, the parents of incoming students, and high school guidance counselors throughout the entire enrollment process to prevent the potential of summer melt. Also, participants brought up that these communications come in a variety of forms including texting, social media, email, phone calls, in-person conversations, webcasts, and direct mail. All participants discussed these tactics and strategies at least once in their responses.

Participant 2 noted: We only initiated text messaging about four years ago and that has helped. We also utilize Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and most recently, Snapchat. Our staff send frequent reminders to the students to complete all requirements via email, text messaging, and phone calls. We also send invitations to parents and guardians about parent events which we hope triggers them to also check in with their students.

5.2.2 Nudging Students to Complete Next Steps

Tracking the progress of incoming students throughout the enrollment process and subsequently communicating what steps in the enrollment process are left to complete to those incoming students is another popular and effective strategy executed by student affairs professionals to mitigate summer melt. Student affairs professionals seek to guide incoming students through the college enrollment steps and give them nudges or reminders to complete these steps if they appear to get stuck. These nudges or reminders reach students through the various modes of communication highlighted in the first emergent theme previously discussed. Eight participants stated over five survey questions that reminding students of next steps in the enrollment process and nudging them to complete those steps were crucial strategies for decreasing summer melt.

Participant 10 explained: A strategy we use is checking in with students via phone, email, and texts. Sending mail pieces to inform student of their next steps or what to expect when the student transitions into college. Also, sending checklists to student of what they completed and still need to complete.

Decreasing Financial Barriers

Removing or, at least, decreasing the weight of financial barriers on incoming students and their families was discussed as a strategy to decrease summer melt. Different tactics were shared to support this strategy. Tactics included efforts like increased communications on completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), improving the processes of applying for and receiving financial aid, increased scholarship dollars and opportunities, and providing transportation to campus when a student and their family could not afford it. These tactics sought primarily to either educate incoming students on ways to make college more affordable or to increase access to financial aid and scholarships for incoming students. A total of six participants shared strategies related to this theme over five survey questions.

Participant 15 shared: We have tried to increase the value of our institution throughout the recruitment process. Also, better financial aid communications like earlier, faster responses, and earlier built aid packages.

RQ3: What recommendations do student affairs professionals promote to mitigate summer melt?

The interpretation of the meaning of responses and the identified commonalities provided a basis for detecting and grouping emergent themes. The emergent themes for RQ3 are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3:-Themes Formulated from Questionnaire for RQ3

Response	Frequency	% of all Responses
Collaboration with high school guidance	17	21.3%

counselors		
Establish relationships and connections between incoming students and the college, its faculty/staff, and current students	17	21.3%

Collaboration with high school guidance counselors

The importance of collaborating with the high school guidance counselors of incoming students was emphasized as a key factor in mitigating summer melt from the perspective of student affairs professionals. The staff on college campuses working with incoming students see high school guidance counselors as a conduit for sharing information and providing direction to incoming students and the families of incoming students. High school guidance counselors serve as a key component of the professional bridge between high school and college for many students who need support and direction to navigate the transition. The importance of collaboration between the student affairs staff at a college and high school guidance counselors was expressed by fourteen participants seventeen different times over five survey questions.

Participant 15 explained: It is important to learn from counselors and schools what their students need, what challenges they are facing, and how we can support students. Creating meaningful relationships with the high schools will be mutually beneficial.

Establish relationships and connections between incoming students and the college, its faculty/staff, and current students

The establishment of relationships and connections between an incoming student and a college's faculty, staff and current students is paramount to an incoming student's successful transition over the summer from high school to college. Incoming students need to feel a connection to the college they plan to attend, and these relationships with the individuals already on the college campus play an integral role in establishing that connection. Twelve of the survey participants stated 17 different times over five survey questions that creating and building upon these connections and relationships was a key to mitigating summer melt.

Participant 3 stated: It is essential for academic affairs, enrollment management and student affairs to collaborate to ensure students are effectively advised, registered and mentored during new student orientation. One effective strategy is to establish the student connection to their college upon admittance to sustain interest throughout the student engagement funnel.

Conclusions and Implications:-

Summer Melt's Adverse Impact on Students and Institutions of Higher Education

Summer melt has a negative impact on both the students planning to enroll at an institution of higher education and on the institutions themselves. The group of students most acutely affected are underrepresented students, which includes students from low-income families, ethnic and racial minorities, and first-generation students. These groups of students face systemic barriers to higher education, and for these students to stumble off the path to higher education when they have made it so close to the finish line is a wasted opportunity for improving access and equity in higher education. It is incumbent upon leaders in higher education to implement strategies, systems and processes that work to prevent this from happening. Not only are colleges and universities missing this access and equity opportunity, they are also falling short of meeting enrollment goals in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Demystifying the Enrollment Process through Increased and Enhanced Communication

The multitude of confusing matriculation tasks that need to be completed and the sheer complexity and unclear explanation of the required paperwork often deters students from progressing onto enroll in college (Castleman and Page, 2013). Leaders in higher education and student affairs professionals who work with incoming students can chip away at this problem for students trying to navigate the enrollment process by making the entire process and each step within it less confusing. The primary way to accomplish this is to communicate with the students, parents of students and high school guidance counselors consistently and clearly. Consistency may be achieved by having carefully constructed communication plans that deploy messages along the student's enrollment path in a just-in-time fashion through a multi-channel approach. Clarity may be accomplished by crafting messages that avoid jargon and assume the audience has no prior information or understanding of the enrollment processes and steps.

The Importance of an Intrinsic Connection

In addition to the systemic causes of summer melt, the literature suggests that developmental and psychological factors internal to the student may also contribute. At the time these students are navigating the path over the summer from high school to college, they are also experiencing a stage of substantial cognitive development that influences self-awareness, logical reasoning, and decision-making abilities (Castleman and Page, 2013). Some students may have all of the information and resources to successfully transition from high school to college, but they may not be intrinsically, cognitively, or emotionally prepared. The importance of a student having an intrinsic connection to the institution they plan to attend may be an essential component to overcome this problem and to mitigate summer melt. Those student affairs professionals working with these students may seek to collaborate with the faculty and current students on their respective campuses to have purposeful outreach and summer programming to create connections and relationships with the incoming students.

Collaboration between Colleges and High Schools

The summer between high school graduation and the first semester of college is often a chasm of professional support for college-intending students. This chasm is bookended by the support of high school guidance counselors before graduation and the support of student affairs professionals at the college a student plans to attend. Colleges and high school guidance counselors should strive to work with one another to make the transition from high school to college manageable for students. Much of this responsibility will rest upon the student affairs professionals at colleges. Student affairs professionals may fulfill this responsibility by providing training and updates on their respective colleges' enrollment processes and steps to high school guidance counselors. High school guidance counselors should maintain a relationships with knowledgeable and reliable student affairs professionals at the institutions their students most often attend.

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