

2015-2016 Summer Melt Texting Initiative

Lessons Learned on What it Takes to Launch a Program

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At Great Lakes we focus on helping students of color, students from low-income families and those who are the first in their families to attend college. These underserved students have the most to gain from earning a degree or credential, but face the steepest challenges in getting there. One of the first barriers they need to overcome is “summer melt.” The purpose of this report is to share lessons learned by three high school districts during the development and launch of a summer melt texting program.

What is “summer melt”?

After graduation, high school students leave behind the support of the counselors who helped them gain college admission and apply for financial aid. They're on their own, often for the first time, just as they reach the final hurdles on the way to higher education. As a result, many graduates who have already been accepted to college encounter challenging and confusing hurdles—both financial and procedural—that can prevent them from making it to the first day of college in the fall.

Students must complete a series of crucial tasks over the summer to finalize financial aid, register for orientation, confirm campus housing and so on. It can be tough for any student, but is often especially difficult for those who lack a strong support system or do not come from a family with college experience.

“As many as 40% of college-bound high school graduates from underserved communities leave high school with college acceptance letters in hand, yet fail to show up for classes in the fall.”

Ben Castleman, Assistant Professor of Education and Public Policy at the University of Virginia (UVA),
Founder and Director of the Nudge⁴ Solutions Lab at UVA

Texting students to **mitigate the melt.**

Multiple studies by Dr. Ben Castleman of the University of Virginia and Dr. Lindsay Page of the University of Pittsburgh show that well-timed outreach to prospective college freshmen the summer after high school can make a difference. They found that “nudging” students by sending a handful of short texts about the steps they must take to start college—with links for immediate action and invitations to text back for more help from college advisors—substantially increased the number of students who successfully enrolled come fall.

Our key question: What does it take to **set up and run a summer melt texting program?**

To learn what it takes to implement summer melt texting programs, we committed \$99,000 to three Wisconsin school districts to launch their own programs in 2015 and commissioned Dr. Castleman to summarize the lessons learned. We chose the School District of Janesville, Madison Metropolitan School District and Stevens Point Area Public School District to represent a broad mix of students across urban and rural areas, and Dr. Castleman worked with them through the entire process—from design through implementation—to learn what goes into setting up and running a program effectively. Each district had to get approval from district leadership, enter into data sharing agreements, determine how and when to obtain permission to text students, and reach out to colleges to learn about key dates and next steps for students. Each district then used a text messaging platform developed by the Virginia-based company Signal Vine, which served as technical provider for the project, and each had access to advice from Dr. Castleman. Each district also took advantage of funding to pay counselors and other staff over the summer as they worked on tailoring personalized messages and other aspects of the program.

The text message campaigns were successful in decreasing summer melt—in the three districts, enrollment in two-year colleges increased by 3 to 9 percentage points. More important, we gained critical insights to share with other interested schools about how to design, launch and run a summer melt texting program.

10 tips for **designing and launching a summer melt texting program.**

Based on feedback from staff who participated in the three summer melt texting campaigns, Dr. Castleman offers these key tips for other districts looking to launch their own program.

- **Assign a passionate point person.** Each district chose a person to coordinate all aspects of the project. The coordinator must be passionate about the work and know the best contacts within the district to move the project forward.

For one district the point person was at the district level, and in another the point person was a school counselor. Both approaches worked—the key was the presence of a single champion willing to help clear all district hurdles.
- **Secure support from district leadership.** Some schools required district-specific agreements that had to go through a board approval process. (8 to 10 hours)
- **Consult with legal counsel.** All districts had to modify their senior exit surveys to collect student contact information and other data such as the college where students planned to enroll and consent to receive text messages. Legal counsel had to review all changes to the senior exit survey. Legal counsel can also help manage data sharing agreements with the texting software provider. (1 to 3 months)
- **Hire and coordinate dedicated counseling staff.** Each district did this differently, depending in part on union contract provisions. Hiring took longer than expected for most districts. (1 month)
- **Collect information about required matriculation tasks.** Teams worked together to do this. They looked for the top five to eight colleges that their students attended and because there was overlap between districts, they were able to divide the labor. (1 month)
- **Create “cheat sheets” for counselors to help them respond to students.** Districts found that students had very detailed questions about individual college requirements and that researching the answers took time. A relationship with the college was key here—districts that had good relationships with colleges were able to get answers more quickly. (several hours)
- **Clean student data and transfer it to the technical provider.** Those who deleted duplicate information and used well-organized data had an easier time than those who did not. Districts needed help with this from their programmers. (2 to 10 hours)
- **Work closely with the technical provider.** With support from the text messaging software provider, in this case Signal Vine, counselors got quick answers to questions and were able to adjust message timing and content. (as needed)
- **Plan for time to text students and log interactions.** All teams overestimated the number of hours it would take. One of the hardest things to do was estimate how many students would agree to receive text messages and how many would actually respond. (360 hours)
- **Be specific with messaging.** Explicit prompts that encouraged students to take action and contained content specific to the student—including dates and links—got a better response from students.

About Great Lakes: **Dedicated to making college education a reality since 1967.**

Built on the understanding that education has the power to change lives for the better, Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation & Affiliates was established as a nonprofit group focused on a single objective: helping students nationwide prepare for and succeed in postsecondary education and student loan repayment. As a leading student loan guarantor and servicer, Great Lakes has been selected by the U.S. Department of Education to provide assistance and repayment planning to more than 8 million borrowers—as well as assistance to colleges and lenders nationwide. The group's earnings support one of the largest and most respected education philanthropy programs in the country. Since 2006, Great Lakes has committed nearly \$250 million in grant funding to promote higher education access and completion for students of color, students from low-income households and first-generation students.

To learn more about Great Lakes Education Philanthropy, contact
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