

# SUMMER MELT

a barrier to higher education for low-income, first-generation college-goers

Many students who leave high school planning to enroll in college have their plans derailed over the summer and end up not enrolling in college, a phenomenon known as summer melt. These are students who have taken concrete steps toward college such as applying for admission and completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Students who are low-income are more likely to melt.<sup>1</sup>

Researchers have hypothesized that the reason summer melt occurs is that students face a series of complex decisions they must successfully navigate over the summer, a time when most students no longer have access to high school-based sources of support to help them through the process.<sup>3</sup> For example, students may not receive their financial aid awards until after high school graduation, at which point they need to determine which aid to accept, whether or not to borrow loans, sign a promissory note and possibly face the process of financial aid verification. In many cases, students may be unaware that they need to take such steps, only to learn that their classes have been dropped because they failed to do so when the semester begins.

Studies that provide low-cost interventions, such as text messaging services that prompt students to complete these steps and allow students to text with college counselors when they need additional support, have been shown to reduce the incidence of summer melt.<sup>4</sup>

Nationally, summer melt affects between 10% and 40% of college-intending students.<sup>2</sup>

## Why this Matters in Tennessee

Tennessee does not systematically track summer melt, but data collected shows that while 85% of seniors apply for TN Promise and 80% complete the FAFSA, only 62% enroll in college.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that Tennessee has a summer melt rate between 20% and 25%. Given that 55% of jobs will require a postsecondary credential by 2025, the data implies that Tennessee would be best positioned to reach this benchmark if summer melt were addressed for more students. TCASN has partnered with Nashville's Opportunity NOW summer youth employment initiative to develop a summer melt curriculum for participating students. While some college access programs across the state such as AdviseTN and the Ayers Foundation Scholars Program provide interventions over the summer to reduce summer melt, the majority of high school graduates do not receive college-going support over the summer.

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## Questions to Consider

- How can Tennessee more systematically measure summer melt and how it affects degree attainment?
- How can summer interventions to reduce melt reach more students?
- Does state funding to higher education provide opportunities for institutions to assist students over the summer in order to reduce summer melt?

<sup>1</sup> Harvard Strategic Data Project Summer Melt Handbook

<sup>2</sup> Castleman & Page (2013). "A Trickle or a Torrent? Understanding the Extent of Summer 'Melt' Among College-Intending High School Graduates."

<sup>3</sup> Page & Scott-Clayton (2015). "Improving College Access in the United States: Barriers and Policy Responses."

<sup>4</sup> Castleman & Page (2013). "Summer Nudging: Can Personalized Text Messages and Peer Mentor Outreach Increase College Going Among Low-Income High School Graduates?"

<sup>5</sup> Tennessee Department of Higher Education Data for High School Class of 2017