

ENROLLMENT  
MANAGEMENT

# Increasing Enrollment Through Inter-Office Coordination and Student Support

### **About Student Success Toolkits**

The Student Success Toolkits from Trellis Strategies provide evidence-based recommendations for colleges and universities to improve student outcomes. The toolkits summarize the latest research in student success and outline practical steps for administrators and practitioners.

### **About Trellis Strategies**

We are a strategic research and consulting firm dedicated to advancing postsecondary education and strengthening the workforce by delivering unparalleled insights into the modern learner experience, from application through graduation. With over 40 years' experience serving higher education institutions and helping students navigate complex processes, we have the knowledge, insight, and experience to help organizations turn their data into action and action into results.

### **About the Author**

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### **Recommended Citation**

Plumb, M. H. (2024). *Increasing Enrollment Through Inter-Office Coordination and Student Support*. Trellis Strategies.



# The summer before college, students face tough decisions and long to-do lists.

For aspiring college students, getting admitted to their school of choice is only the first step. Before stepping into the classroom, admitted students must tackle placement exams, secure housing, and submit final admissions documents. While juggling to-do lists from multiple college offices, students are also confronted with difficult, life-altering decisions: How much debt should they take on? What courses will be most valuable? How can they balance coursework with their family and work obligations? Furthermore, low-income students, first-generation students, and those returning to education well after high school all encounter special hurdles on the path to college.<sup>1-3</sup>

Many students face these administrative challenges at a time when they have very few support resources.<sup>3,4</sup> During this stressful period of transition, a single roadblock can mean that an otherwise engaged and excited prospective student feels unable to pursue higher education. A student flagged for FAFSA verification might erroneously take it as a sign they cannot afford college.<sup>5</sup> A student struggling to choose classes and register may become discouraged when they don't hear back from advising staff. Furthermore, missing one of the many financing and enrollment deadlines can prevent a student from completing registration on time.<sup>2,3</sup>

As a result, approximately 20 percent of committed prospective students—those who are accepted to an institution and take some steps towards attendance—do not end up enrolling.<sup>4-6</sup> Broader studies of high school seniors who report plans to go to college find that roughly 40 percent do not ultimately attend classes the following fall.<sup>7,8</sup> Sometimes referred to as “summer melt,” the issue of accepted students not enrolling is a problem both for students and institutions. Across the board, rates of summer melt trend higher for students of color, low-income students, and those intending to attend two-year institutions.<sup>3,4,8</sup> In non-matriculation surveys run by Trellis Strategies, prospective students frequently report challenges in communicating with admissions staff, technical difficulties during registration, and concern about financial security.

Increased guidance from colleges and universities can help these students make it to class.<sup>9,10</sup> Many campuses can increase their enrollment yield through low-cost measures that simplify processes and connect students with existing resources, effectively meeting goals despite the financial and demographic challenges facing higher education.

## Research-backed recommendations



**Streamline the enrollment process through inter-office coordination.**



**Take a customer service approach to communication with admitted students.**



**Respond to students' financial concerns with compassion and structure.**



**Recruit the whole student by advertising existing campus resources.**



**Set students up for success with effective orientation & summer bridge programs.**



# Qualitative Insights: Experiences of students who are accepted but never enroll.

Responses to non-matriculation surveys administered by Trellis Strategies.



"I was unable to obtain my transcript from a previous college. I was so excited to start then I was met with that roadblock. Sorry, I wish I would have been able to attend; it's really a dream of mine to go back to school."

"Could not get in touch with anyone to help me enroll or talk to anyone about my situation."



"I have been trying to enroll for a year now. I am a transfer and I had not been to school since the pandemic. I tried getting assistance and guidance with an advisor as well as a FAFSA account reset. I did not receive help. I felt discouraged and I am still trying to enroll into school. If I had help, I would be attending currently."

"I have a special case and was requesting more information. I was told I would get a call back with answers to my questions and no one ever returned my call."



## CASE STUDIES HIGHLIGHTS

Key Data: Successes in increasing enrollment.

A summer bridge partnership between two Houston high schools and a local community college **increased enrollment by 19 percentage points** in comparison to the rest of the graduating class.<sup>7</sup>

A two-way informational text message campaign **resulted in a 7 percentage point increase in college enrollment** among graduating high school students in Lawrence and Springfield, MA.<sup>11</sup>

See page 10 for more case studies.



# Streamline the enrollment process through inter-office coordination.

As matriculation tasks are spread across the university—from financial aid to housing to the health center—coordination between different offices will help all staff best support incoming students.<sup>12</sup>

## Create an internal dashboard to coordinate enrollment progress across offices.

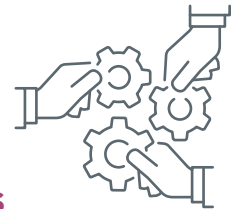
Tracking progress towards matriculation on a macro scale allows admissions staff to identify stages of the process where students encounter roadblocks. Furthermore, a centralized dashboard provides staff across the institution with insight into all the tasks which students must complete. For example, Trellis Strategies offers a customized dashboard tool which facilitates timeline and goal-sharing between different offices on campus.

## Audit enrollment processes and simplify workflows for both staff & students.

Sharing data through an internal dashboard may also illuminate areas of the enrollment process that could be simplified or improved, whether by removing unnecessary requirements or packaging tasks together to reduce the overall steps to enrollment. Streamlining the enrollment process makes it easier for both students and staff to track progress and helps prevent students from falling through the cracks. This audit is also an opportunity to identify and improve communication pathways between staff and incoming students.

## Communicate streamlined processes to students.

When staff in different offices are communicating with each other, they can also coordinate their communication with admitted students. Building a coherent, streamlined registration workflow for students—through checklists, cohesive communication strategies, and/or guided online processes—enables them to better track upcoming deadlines and manage their enrollment progress. Institutions can further support students with low-touch nudges (see page 6) and enrollment advising to make sure students understand the tasks they need to complete.



**STREAMLINING THE ENROLLMENT PROCESS makes it easier for both students and staff to TRACK PROGRESS AND HELPS PREVENT STUDENTS FROM FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS.**

**“I experienced technical difficulties and confusing problems during the process that made it harder to register for all the classes I was recommended before the deadline.”**

*Student experience from a non-matriculation survey administered by Trellis Strategies*



## Key Takeaway

✓ Many prospective students miss out on further education because of administrative challenges during registration. Institutions should take steps to simplify their admissions process, coordinate between offices to provide seamless student services, and provide prompt support to students when they encounter roadblocks.



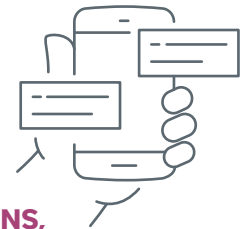
# Take a customer service approach to communication with admitted students.

Communication failures surrounding financial aid and enrollment requirements can be a significant roadblock to students' matriculation. Colleges and universities can combat this and improve admissions yield by taking a customer service approach to student communications: provide clear, accessible instructions, reach out proactively to admitted students, and follow up promptly to questions and requests.

Text message campaigns, especially those that offer two-way interaction, can have a profound effect on enrollment for a low cost.<sup>9,11-16</sup> Staff can send automated reminders to students, and students can easily ask quick questions about tuitions bills, get guidance on special circumstances, or set up meetings. Such programs often receive positive feedback from both students and counselors.<sup>17</sup>

Multiple studies have found that "just in time" communication—notifying students about a crucial upcoming deadline and providing concrete steps they should take now—is the most effective.<sup>18,19</sup> Texting campaigns that include two-way engagement should set reasonable expectations about how quickly the student may expect a response.<sup>17,20,21</sup> While researchers have tried to scale student enrollment support, studies have repeatedly found that personalized support directly from the college is the most effective.<sup>19,20,22,23</sup>

In addition to outreach interventions, institutions can also make improvement to existing resources, such as lowering the reading level of admissions instructional materials<sup>24-27</sup> and optimizing online enrollment tools for mobile accessibility.<sup>28,29</sup> See the Trellis Strategies toolkit "Best Practices for Communicating Enrollment & Financial Aid Requirements" for more resources to improve student-facing communication.<sup>30</sup>



**TEXT MESSAGE CAMPAIGNS, especially those that offer two-way interaction, CAN HAVE A PROFOUND EFFECT ON ENROLLMENT FOR A LOW COST.**

"No one bothered to contact me regarding how to register. I emailed two times and received no response. I asked for a phone number or counselor but after several attempts gave up."

*Student experience from a non-matriculation survey administered by Trellis Strategies*



## Key Takeaway

Structured outreach campaigns help prospective students understand requirements and manage deadlines. Crucially, admissions teams should also clearly define expectations and processes for quickly responding to student questions.



# Respond to students’ financial concerns with compassion and structure.

College debt, inadequate financial aid, and other financial worries are some of the most common reasons students provide for why they do not matriculate or stop-out of college.<sup>3</sup> While some financial factors affecting students are outside of the institution’s control, financial aid staff should make sure that students are aware of all the resources that are available to them and provide compassion support for these difficult decisions.


Reminders about financing requirements and key deadlines should be integrated into standard communications with incoming students (see page 6), including clear student-facing resources for them to understand their expenses and payment options. Institutions can also audit their financial aid processes for simplicity, such as minimizing documentation requirements for appeals.<sup>31</sup> Where possible, one-on-one counseling—especially for low-income and first-generation students—can help them better understand all of their options.<sup>2</sup>

**“My student aid was denied and when I tried to fix it, nothing happened. I did not have the money to pay for classes at that time.”**

*Student experience from a non-matriculation survey administered by Trellis Strategies*



## Key Takeaway

 Financial aid is a key topic for enhanced communication and student support. Institutions should give clear guidance to admitted students, establish mechanisms and expectations for one-on-one support, and connect students with resources to identify other sources of aid and otherwise prepare for the financial impacts of college.



### THE LEAKY FAFSA PIPELINE

FAFSA completion is strongly associated with successful enrollment, and challenges with filing FAFSA can pose a significant roadblock to aspiring college students,<sup>6,32</sup> especially among low-income students who are selected for verification.<sup>5,33</sup> Several states have begun requiring FAFSA completion among high school seniors,<sup>34</sup> and stakeholders are optimistic that the 2024–2025 FAFSA redesign will have a long-term positive impact for students, including by reducing the need for verification.<sup>35</sup> Institutions can further support their incoming and continuing students by providing notices about upcoming financial aid deadlines, support for common questions, and in particular guidance around FAFSA verification.



# Recruit the whole student by advertising existing campus resources.

Financial distress and basic needs insecurity has a profoundly negative effect on student success, and providing students with resources to support their overall financial wellbeing can improve persistence and graduation rates.<sup>36-41</sup> Many college students are not aware of the campus resources that are available to them or are not sure they deserve such support;<sup>42,43</sup> actively reaching out to students about support systems can thus be a key part of recruitment, retention, and re-enrollment strategies. Colleges and universities can be proactive about student success—looking from admissions yield to retention and graduation rates—by connecting admitted students to existing resources related to transportation, childcare, and more.

Many students also have employment-related concerns as they pursue higher education, whether because they need to balance class schedules with current work obligations, or because their hoping the financial investment of college will be offset by future career advances. Institutions can encourage these students through the enrollment process by offering advising on different degree pathways and taking early action to provide career support. Online and evening courses, flexible degree programs, and labor market alignment can all be productive topics for recruitment.

In general, students want to attend an institution that cares about their whole self, academics and beyond.<sup>44-46</sup> The enrollment period is a key moment to reassure students that their chosen school will support them.

“Seems like something is always stopping me or in the way. No transportation, having to work full time, and being a mom. Overthinking that I can’t do it.”

*Student experience from a non-matriculation survey administered by Trellis Strategies*



## Key Takeaway

- Challenges with transportation, childcare, work schedules, and basic needs insecurity can be major barriers for students; but many campuses and communities have resources ready to support them. Proactively connecting admitted students to these resources can set them up for success while giving them confidence in their decision to pursue further education.



**The ENROLLMENT PERIOD is a key moment to reassure students that their CHOSEN SCHOOL WILL SUPPORT THEM.**





# Set students up for success with effective orientation & summer bridge programs.

Proactive support the summer before college has been shown to increase not only enrollment,<sup>7,18,47</sup> but also the likelihood of students enrolling full time<sup>48</sup> and their persistence into sophomore year.<sup>49</sup> Institutions typically design summer bridge programs to provide academic preparation for college; ideally, students leave the program with a few transferable college credits. However, these programs also provide a key opportunity for anticipatory socialization and in-person support for administrative tasks.<sup>7,50</sup> These benefits are particularly acute for low-income and first-generation students, who may lack other support structures.

See page 10 for several case studies of how stakeholders have increased enrollment through enhanced summer advising.

## Key features of a successful bridge program

- Customized enrollment checklists, and support for financial aid & other matriculation tasks
- Low barriers to entry, broad recruitment, and easy transportation (may be facilitated by partner high schools)
- Involvement of parents or other family members, and connection to family-oriented services
- Formative and summative evaluation to support continuous improvement

“Did not receive a call or any information on how to attend, or what the next steps were. I’ve been out of school almost 20 years plus, I don’t even know where to begin.”

*Student experience from a non-matriculation survey administered by Trellis Strategies*



## The power of collaboration

In the interest of improving their own college attainment metrics, many high schools are beginning initiatives to extend counseling services into the summer; however, research suggests that outreach from college counselors is especially effective.<sup>51</sup> Collaboration with feeder school districts—whether through summer bridge, dual enrollment, or simply sharing data—can be a powerful tool for regional colleges.<sup>10,52,53</sup>

Institutions can also consider partnerships with other organizations and community groups where prospective students tend to seek support. Some scholars suggest this can have a particularly large effect for minority and low-income students who may not have strong relationships with traditional educational institutions.<sup>54,55</sup>



**OUTREACH FROM COLLEGE COUNSELORS IS ESPECIALLY EFFECTIVE.**

## Key Takeaway



Many modern learners—especially first-generation college students and those returning after a gap in formal education—don’t have a clear road map for higher education. A comprehensive orientation program (and other proactive support from the admissions office) can give prospective students the tools they need to pursue their education goals.

# CASE STUDIES

## Summer bridge and orientation programs in action

### **SUMMER BRIDGE FOR HOUSTON HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES**

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A summer bridge program at a Houston area community college—created in partnership with two local high schools—increased the student enrollment rate by 19 percentage points in comparison to the rest of the high schools’ graduating class. Students were recruited to the program by guidance counselors if they expressed interest in attending the target community college, and the main prerequisite to entry was a completed FAFSA. While the main curriculum (two courses which began a few days after the students’ high school graduation) focused on academic preparation, the program also connected students to family services, financial aid support, and assistance with other college requirements. Approximately three quarters of students left the bridge program with six transferable credit hours.<sup>7</sup>

### **ORIENTATION AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF DENVER**

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In the 2010s, the Community College of Denver experienced 23 percent summer melt among students who had registered for classes, with rates up to 44 percent among black male students. Many of these students were missing key financial aid deadlines between orientation and the first day of term. By restructuring orientation to include a customized case management program focused on just-in-time information (via phone calls) and customized checklists with on-boarding requirements, CCD decreased summer melt by 8.5 percentage points from fall 2018 to fall 2019.<sup>18</sup>

### **uASPIRE ADVISING FOR COLLEGE-INTENDING STUDENTS**

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In projects facilitated by college access organization uAspire in Boston, MA, and Fulton County, GA, proactive outreach and counseling the summer before freshmen year increased college enrollment by 3 percentage points; among students with a \$0 expected family contribution at the Boston site, the program increased on-time enrollment by 12 percentage points. Furthermore, targeted students were nearly 8 percentage points more likely to persist into sophomore year in comparison to other enrolled students. Intervention impacts were higher at the Boston site where students were more familiar with uAspire and their services, pointing to the importance of student trust. The program cost approximately \$100–\$200 per student served, making it a cost-effective alternative to grant aid recruitment programs with a similar impact.<sup>49</sup>

### **SUMMER COUNSELING FOR GRADUATES FROM BIG PICTURE SCHOOLS**

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Big Picture Schools are innovative high schools that provide a high level of college preparation support. However even with this unusual level of support, 20 percent of their college-accepted graduates did not ultimately enroll. By extending their college transition counselor support into the summer, the schools halved that melt rate. Counselors helped students interpret materials they received from schools, connected them with college admissions professionals, and assisted with applying for and evaluating financial aid packages.<sup>56</sup>

# Where to start?



## Identify the roadblocks that keep admitted students from getting to class.

1

### Step 1: Gather data on when & why students do not enroll.

Understanding student behavior and experience can reveal key areas for improvement. Analysis of institutional data can help identify specific steps where students stop-out of the enrollment process. Trellis Strategies also offers non-matriculation and re-engagement surveys to provide qualitative insights into student experiences.

2

### Step 2: Coordinate onboarding steps across the institution.

Students need a clear framework to guide them from admission to the first day of class; to support this, staff must coordinate enrollment and on-boarding steps internally. Institutions can use principles from project management and customer service to track each student's journey across multiple offices, simplify enrollment requirements, and establish effective, frequent communication with students. The process of on-boarding must appear to the student as a unified, college-wide, process—not a disjointed series of engagements with different offices and departments. Trellis Strategies offers an Enrollment Tracker to assist with this coordination.

3

### Step 3: Invest in personalized mentorship.

Whether through two-way text engagement, in-person orientation, or bridge programs in collaboration with a feeder school district, hands-on support has a big impact for students. Build responsive systems that adapt to students' needs, and consider designating enrollment navigators to guide students through the process.

"I was so excited to start then I was met with that roadblock. Sorry, I wish I would have been able to attend; it's really a dream of mine to go back to school."

*Student experience from a non-matriculation survey administered by Trellis Strategies*



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