

Summer Melt IES: Digital Messaging to Improve FAFSA Completion and Income Verification and Improve College Enrollment and Success

This project includes two parts: the first focuses on digital messaging to improve FAFSA completion and the second focuses on digital messaging on the entire college application process.

Successful completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a key milestone on the pathway to college for many US students. Yet, the complexity of the FAFSA completion process creates barriers to college access and success particularly for students from low-income backgrounds and those who would be the first in their family to attend college. For example, college-intending students may fail to file their FAFSA at all, may delay filing and miss priority deadlines, or may fail to successfully complete steps in the income verification process, if required. In this project, we will marry data available through Apply TX on individual students' FAFSA completion status, local FAFSA completion supports, and text messaging as a low-cost and effective means of communication to provide students and families with targeted information about the FAFSA and their status in the FAFSA completion process and to connect them with additional FAFSA support when needed. We will implement this project in selected high schools during the 2014-2015 academic year. Outreach will focus on Class of 2015 high school seniors.

Specifically, we will implement a text message-based, personalized outreach campaign that will: (1) provide students and families with customized information about the importance of completing or renewing the FAFSA, along with real-time status updates about their FAFSA submission; (2) simplify information for students and families about how to complete the FAFSA; and (3) connect students and families to personalized counseling assistance to complete the FAFSA as well as the subsequent verification process, if they are required to complete verification steps. The messaging campaign will provide prompts to complete these critical financial-aid related tasks and facilitate connections among students, families, school counselors / advisors and other community-based supports. Cell phone contact information for students will be obtained through the Apply TX counselor portal. It is current practice that students are asked to provide their cell phone contact information through Apply TX as well as consent that this information be utilized for outreach to students. We will work with participating districts to consider and devise a plan for gathering cell phone information and consent to message for those students who have not applied for college through the Apply TX platform.

Messaging will begin in January 2015 and will continue through approximately the end of April 2015. Students' FAFSA status information is updated in the Apply TX data system on a weekly basis. As this information is updated, the content of the messaging sent to students will be updated according to their FAFSA completion status. All students who successfully complete the FAFSA will receive messages in the spring of senior year providing simplified guidance on interpreting their financial aid award letters. Students who have not completed the FAFSA will receive a final reminder about the importance of FAFSA filing. Students' assigned school counselor (or other designated school staff member who supports college-going) will be the ostensible sender of all text messages. All messages will invite students to respond to request help from this person. The designated school staff member will have access to a web-based portal designed by OneLogos Education Solutions through which they can monitor students' FAFSA completion status, receive incoming text-based communication from students, and respond to students' messages via text. Finally, while this project is framed around FAFSA completion,

we will work with participating districts to determine how to integrate reminders about TAFSA completion into the messaging content.

The second part of this project will follow a similar structure but will broaden the scope of the text-based outreach. In particular, we will send text messages to students beginning in their junior year of high school and continuing through the summer after their senior year in high school. The goal of the messages is threefold: (1) to provide college and financial aid information in a simplified, digestible manner; (2) to deliver timely reminders of important application and financial aid tasks; and (3) to provide students with guidance on how to successfully complete these tasks.

By starting outreach early in the college admissions timeline, we will be able to message students about a broad range of college-related tasks, including college entrance exam registration and test taking, college applications, FAFSA completion, and pre-matriculation college transition tasks (e.g., signing master promissory notes).

Because messaging will begin with high school juniors, rather than seniors, we will work with participating schools to devise a strategy for gathering student cell phone information and consent to message. We will additionally work with district and school leadership to consider whether messaging should be extended to students' parents as well.

OneLogos will serve as the messaging provider for this intervention. As in the first part of this project, messages will encourage students to text back with any questions or concerns. Counselors (or other designed school-based staff) will receive and respond to these messages through the OneLogos portal. For messaging that occurs during the school year, the expectation is that this will be considered a component of counselors' school-year responsibilities. Participating staff will be provided with additional compensation to provide support to students with college transition tasks in the summer after high school graduation.