



WWC Review of the Report “The Forgotten Summer: Does the Offer of College Counseling After High School Mitigate Summer Melt Among College-Intending, Low-Income High School Graduates?”: Analysis of the Boston Program^{1,2}

The findings from this review do not reflect the full body of research evidence on summer counseling for college-bound high school graduates.

What is this study about?

The study examined whether two summer counseling programs for college-bound students, one in Boston, MA, and one in Atlanta, GA, increased college enrollment and persistence into the sophomore year. This WWC report focuses on the design, analysis, and findings from the Boston site; a separate single study review provides information about the design, analysis, and findings from the Atlanta site.

The summer counseling intervention was intended to reduce what the study authors call summer “melt,” a phenomenon in which students have been accepted to college but fail to matriculate. According to the authors of the study, college-bound students, especially those of low socioeconomic status, may lack the financial and college literacy to complete typical matriculation requirements. The program targeted students’ financial and college literacy by providing information about the steps necessary to matriculate and assisting students with completing those steps, such as taking placement tests, arranging for housing, acquiring medical insurance, obtaining financial aid, and registering for courses.

Recent high school graduates in Boston who had applied for a local scholarship program were randomly assigned either to receive an offer of college counseling over the summer or to not receive the

offer of counseling. Students assigned to the intervention group received counseling support from uAspire, a non-profit organization that provides college financial aid advising and scholarships. Students in the comparison group were not offered counseling, but counselors were instructed not to deny assistance to any comparison group students who sought help.

The impact of the intervention was examined on immediate enrollment in college and persistence into the second semester and second year of college.³ The authors also report on enrollment and persistence for low socioeconomic status students.

Features of Summer Counseling

Students were contacted by counselors through phone, e-mail, and text and Facebook messaging. Students were then offered counseling that focused on completing required steps for enrolling in college in the fall. The students were offered a \$25 gift card to attend an in-person meeting. Counselors provided a range of information to students about the matriculation process, including information about financial aid, key summer deadlines, and how to complete paperwork. Counselors noted that most of the counseling focused on issues of financial aid.

What did the study find?

The study authors reported that 83% of the students offered the summer counseling program enrolled immediately in college in the fall of 2011, compared to 78% of students in the comparison group. This difference was not statistically significant. However, 72% of summer counseling program students persisted into their sophomore year, versus 64% of comparison group students. Study authors reported this difference was statistically significant. This finding was confirmed by the WWC.

See Appendix C for more information about the results from this study. Appendix D provides information about supplementary findings.

WWC Rating

The research described in this report meets WWC group design standards without reservations

The Boston study was a well-executed randomized controlled trial with no attrition.

Appendix A: Study details

Castleman, B. L., Page, L. C., & Schooley, K. (2014). The forgotten summer: Does the offer of college counseling after high school mitigate summer melt among college-intending, low-income high school graduates? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 33(2), 320–344. doi:10.1002/pam.21743

Setting The study took place in Boston in the summer between high school and college. Participants had all been seniors in Boston public high schools who participated in an advising program provided by uAspire and applied for a scholarship. The counseling intervention occurred over the summer and included outreach via phone, e-mail, text, and Facebook, plus in-person counseling. The counseling sessions took place primarily at the provider's (uAspire) Center for College Affordability in Boston.

Study sample In the Boston site, there were 406 students in the intervention group and 521 students in the comparison group, for a total of 927 students in the overall sample. All students had graduated from public high schools in Boston. Ethnic minority students comprised more than 90% of the sample (32% Black, 24% Latino, 20% Asian, and 15% multiracial or other race/ethnicity). Nearly 85% of the Boston sample completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Of those who did complete the FAFSA, 62% had an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) of zero and another 23% had an EFC that was nonzero, but still within the range of Pell-grant eligibility. Sixty-five percent of sample students were female.

Intervention group Counselors attempted to contact each intervention group student via phone, e-mail, text, and Facebook to offer support. Upon reaching students, advisors offered a \$25 gift card to attend an in-person meeting. During the first in-person meeting, counselors completed a college assessment protocol that included the following elements: (1) review of the student's financial aid award letter and guidance on financial aid tailored to the amount of unmet need; (2) discussion of the calendar of summer deadlines at the college the student planned to attend, and help with understanding and completing paperwork from the college; and (3) assessment of any social or emotional barriers to college enrollment faced by the student. After the assessment, counselors and students developed a list of tasks that needed completion before starting college in the fall. Counselors followed up with students individually to check on their progress. After the initial meeting, counselors and students communicated mostly via phone, e-mail, and text, though counselors also conducted in-person follow-up meetings with some students.

Counselors maintained records of interactions with students in both intervention and comparison groups. Authors noted that many of the counselors' interactions with students focused on issues of financial aid. Counselors also reported addressing a variety of informational questions, such as how to access a college's web portal, how to complete required paperwork, and what the matriculation process entailed. More than 75% of students in the group communicated with an advisor, and 52% had at least one face-to-face meeting with an advisor.

Comparison group

The comparison group students did not receive outreach, though they were assigned to a counselor. Counselors were instructed not to deny support to any comparison group student who actively sought help. According to logs maintained by the counselors, about 1% of the comparison group students had contact with an advisor.

Outcomes and measurement

Program impacts were examined on initial enrollment and on persistence into the next semester and into the second year of college. For a more detailed description of these outcome measures, see Appendix B.

Support for implementation

The study authors provided the uAspire counselors with a protocol for their outreach activities and supplied the assessment protocol that guided the counselors' advising.

Reason for review

Several federal grant funding programs require that funding applications be supported by strong evidence of effectiveness based on WWC standards. This study was identified for review by the WWC because it was cited by a grant applicant.

Appendix B: Outcome measures for each domain

Enrollment	
<i>Immediate enrollment</i>	Information on initial enrollment in college in the fall of 2011 was obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse.
Credit accumulation	
<i>Persistence into the second semester</i>	Information on persistence into the second semester of college in the spring of 2012 was obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse. The results on this outcome are supplementary findings and are reported in Appendix D.
<i>Persistence into the sophomore year</i>	Information on persistence into the sophomore year of college in the fall of 2012 was obtained from the National Student Clearinghouse. The Postsecondary Education review protocol prioritizes the longest follow-up period as primary. Therefore, persistence into the sophomore year was selected as the primary outcome in the credit accumulation domain.

Table Notes: The study also examined whether students enrolled and persisted at (1) the specific institution in which they intended to enroll as of high school graduation and (2) the type of institution (i.e., 2-year vs. 4-year, public vs. private) in which they intended to enroll as of high school graduation. These outcomes were used to examine whether students followed through on their expected plans after high school and are not eligible for review under the Postsecondary Education review protocol.

Appendix C: Study findings for each domain

Domain and outcome measure	Study sample	Sample size	Mean (standard deviation)		WWC calculations			p-value
			Intervention group	Comparison group	Mean difference	Effect size	Improvement index	
Enrollment								
<i>Immediate enrollment</i>	Boston sample	927 students	83.0%	78.4%	4.6%	0.18	+7	< .10
Domain average for enrollment						0.18	+7	Not statistically significant
Credit accumulation								
<i>Persistence into the sophomore year</i>	Boston sample	927 students	71.6%	63.8%	7.8%	0.22	+9	< .01
Domain average for credit accumulation						0.22	+9	Statistically significant

Table Notes: For mean difference, effect size, and improvement index values reported in the table, a positive number favors the intervention group and a negative number favors the comparison group. The effect size is a standardized measure of the effect of an intervention on individual outcomes, representing the average change expected for all individuals who are given the intervention (measured in standard deviations of the outcome measure). The improvement index is an alternate presentation of the effect size, reflecting the change in an average individual's percentile rank that can be expected if the individual is given the intervention. The statistical significance of the study's domain average was determined by the WWC. Some statistics may not sum as expected due to rounding.

Study Notes: No corrections for clustering or multiple comparisons and no difference-in-differences adjustments were needed. Sample sizes were provided by the authors. The p-values presented here were reported in the original study. The study is characterized as having a statistically significant positive effect because the effect for at least one measure within the domain is positive and statistically significant, and no effects are negative and statistically significant, accounting for multiple comparisons. For more information, please refer to the WWC Standards and Procedures Handbook (version 3.0), pp. 25–26.

Appendix D: Supplemental findings by domain

Domain and outcome measure	Study sample	Sample size	Mean (standard deviation)		WWC calculations			p-value
			Intervention group	Comparison group	Mean difference	Effect size	Improvement index	
Enrollment								
<i>Immediate enrollment</i>	Boston, EFC = 0	487 students	88.6%	76.3%	12.3%	0.53	+20	< .001
<i>Immediate enrollment</i>	Boston, EFC > 0, Pell-grant eligible	177 students	85.7%	83.3%	2.4%	0.11	+4	> .10
<i>Immediate enrollment</i>	Boston, not Pell-grant eligible	120 students	83.5%	94.3%	-10.8%	-0.72	-26	< .10
Credit accumulation								
<i>Persistence into second semester</i>	Boston	927 students	80.7%	74.2%	6.5%	0.23	+9	< .05
<i>Persistence into second semester</i>	Boston, EFC = 0	487 students	86.5%	72.6%	13.9%	0.54	+20	< .001
<i>Persistence into second semester</i>	Boston, EFC > 0, Pell-grant eligible	177 students	88.7%	85.1%	3.6%	0.19	+8	> .10
<i>Persistence into second semester</i>	Boston, not Pell-grant eligible	120 students	79.7%	95.7%	-16.0%	-1.04	-35	< .05
<i>Persistence into sophomore year</i>	Boston, EFC = 0	487 students	77.6%	64.4%	13.2%	0.39	+15	< .01
<i>Persistence into sophomore year</i>	Boston, EFC > 0, Pell-grant eligible	177 students	81.9%	66.2%	15.7%	0.51	+19	< .05
<i>Persistence into sophomore year</i>	Boston, not Pell-grant eligible	120 students	64.9%	78.9%	-14.0%	-0.42	-16	> .10

Table Notes: The supplemental findings presented in this table are additional findings that do not factor into the determination of the evidence rating. For mean difference, effect size, and improvement index values reported in the table, a positive number favors the intervention group and a negative number favors the comparison group. The effect size is a standardized measure of the effect of an intervention on individual outcomes, representing the average change expected for all individuals who are given the intervention (measured in standard deviations of the outcome measure). The improvement index is an alternate presentation of the effect size, reflecting the change in an average individual's percentile rank that can be expected if the individual is given the intervention. Some statistics may not sum as expected due to rounding. EFC = Expected Family Contribution from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), a measure of family income.

Study Notes: No corrections for clustering or multiple comparisons and no difference-in-differences adjustments were needed. Sample sizes were provided by the authors. The p-values presented here were reported in the original study.

Endnotes

¹ Single study reviews examine evidence published in a study (supplemented, if necessary, by information obtained directly from the authors) to assess whether the study design meets WWC group design standards. The review reports the WWC's assessment of whether the study meets WWC group design standards and summarizes the study findings following WWC conventions for reporting evidence on effectiveness. This study was reviewed using the review protocol for individual studies in the Postsecondary Education topic area (version 3.0).

² The study also examined the impact of a similar summer counseling intervention implemented in Atlanta, Georgia, relative to a separate comparison group that was formed by random assignment. The findings from that analysis are reported in a separate single study review by the WWC because the two programs had slightly different features and separate results were reported by the authors.

³ There were two outcomes included in the study that are not described in this WWC report. The study also examined whether students enrolled and persisted at (1) the specific institution in which they intended to enroll as of high school graduation and (2) the type of institution (i.e., 2-year vs. 4-year, public vs. private) in which they intended to enroll as of high school graduation. These outcomes were used to examine whether students followed through on their expected plans after high school and are not eligible for review under the Postsecondary Education review protocol. See the table notes in Appendix B for more information.

Recommended Citation

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Glossary of Terms

Attrition	Attrition occurs when an outcome variable is not available for all participants initially assigned to the intervention and comparison groups. The WWC considers the total attrition rate and the difference in attrition rates across groups within a study.
Clustering adjustment	If intervention assignment is made at a cluster level and the analysis is conducted at the student level, the WWC will adjust the statistical significance to account for this mismatch, if necessary.
Confounding factor	A confounding factor is a component of a study that is completely aligned with one of the study conditions, making it impossible to separate how much of the observed effect was due to the intervention and how much was due to the factor.
Design	The design of a study is the method by which intervention and comparison groups were assigned.
Domain	A domain is a group of closely related outcomes.
Effect size	The effect size is a measure of the magnitude of an effect. The WWC uses a standardized measure to facilitate comparisons across studies and outcomes.
Eligibility	A study is eligible for review if it falls within the scope of the review protocol and uses either an experimental or matched comparison group design.
Equivalence	A demonstration that the analytic sample groups are similar on observed characteristics defined in the review area protocol.
Improvement index	Along a percentile distribution of individuals, the improvement index represents the gain or loss of the average individual due to the intervention. As the average individual starts at the 50th percentile, the measure ranges from -50 to +50.
Multiple comparison adjustment	When a study includes multiple outcomes or comparison groups, the WWC will adjust the statistical significance to account for the multiple comparisons, if necessary.
Quasi-experimental design (QED)	A quasi-experimental design (QED) is a research design in which study participants are assigned to intervention and comparison groups through a process that is not random.
Randomized controlled trial (RCT)	A randomized controlled trial (RCT) is an experiment in which eligible study participants are randomly assigned to intervention and comparison groups.
Single-case design (SCD)	A research approach in which an outcome variable is measured repeatedly within and across different conditions that are defined by the presence or absence of an intervention.
Standard deviation	The standard deviation of a measure shows how much variation exists across observations in the sample. A low standard deviation indicates that the observations in the sample tend to be very close to the mean; a high standard deviation indicates that the observations in the sample are spread out over a large range of values.
Statistical significance	Statistical significance is the probability that the difference between groups is a result of chance rather than a real difference between the groups. The WWC labels a finding statistically significant if the likelihood that the difference is due to chance is less than 5% ($p < .05$).
Substantively important	A substantively important finding is one that has an effect size of 0.25 or greater, regardless of statistical significance.

Please see the [WWC Procedures and Standards Handbook \(version 3.0\)](#) for additional details.