



BEYOND THE NUMBERS CONVENING 2014

Breakout Session Summary

Interventions to Impact College Enrollment and Persistence on the Ground

Patterns in college readiness, matriculation, and persistence reveal a need for new interventions to improve college access and success for students. Education agencies are developing initiatives aimed at improving low-income students' ability to apply to well-matched colleges, make informed enrollment and financial decisions, and successfully complete a degree. This session highlights new interventions that use packets, phone calls, and text messages to provide targeted information to students about college opportunities, application fee waivers, loan forms, and financial aid.

Cassandra Larson, executive director of Access to Opportunity Program Management at the College Board, began the session by describing the Access to Opportunity (A2O) project. A2O's goal is to ensure that college-ready students from different backgrounds have opportunities to take rigorous courses, apply to well-matched colleges (academically, socially, and financially), and enroll and complete their college education. "The goal is to help students get ready, get in, and get through," says Larson. *Realize Your College Potential*, a packet sent to 30,000 high-achieving low-income students with follow-up phone calls to share information about colleges, graduation rates, financial aid, and fee waivers is one of many resources the College Board has produced in pursuit of this mission. Others include *Apply to 4 or More*—a packet that offers college application fee waivers to low-income students. By establishing partnership with education agencies, the College Board offers these resources as interventions to increase college enrollment rates.

One partner, the Delaware Department of Education (DDOE), has recently rolled out a *Getting to Zero* strategic plan. **Shana Payne, director of the Delaware Higher Education Office**, described the college enrollment challenge when sharing that "18% of [DDOE] students who have demonstrated readiness to go to college do not." To address these statistics, the DDOE hosted a College Application Month during which 98% of the 1900 students from 20 participating schools completed at least one college application. According to Payne, this is an "information gap" that will be further understood by tracking key data points, and creating and widely distributing reports on schools' college application statuses, FAFSA completion rates, and student acceptances. The state is working to get to 100% FAFSA completion.

Local districts and states are not the only organizations actively pursuing interventions to increase college enrollment and persistence rates among high school graduates. **Erin Cox, president of uAspire**, spoke about the importance of affordability. To ensure that students are making smart financial choices about post-secondary enrollment, uAspire has begun an initiative called "I Know What I Owe." By collecting and analyzing thousands of award letters to identify financial award trends by higher education institutions, Cox learned that "students and families desperately need help understanding financial aid award letters." Thanks to these analyses, guidance counselors have changed the way they

advise students in light of some schools' unaffordability. For Cox, "college acceptances should be celebrated but students should not make decisions before they have all the information."

Lastly, **Lindsay Page, assistant professor of education at the University of Pittsburgh**, highlighted the many hurdles and steps students must navigate after being accepted to college. Page's research on the topic of barriers to postsecondary success have revealed that verification of income on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), proper interpretation of aid award letters, and completion of necessary supplemental loan applications are all key challenges to successful college enrollment. Page shared "since many of these tasks start in the winter, students often fall behind and have to play catch-up; this becomes difficult over the summer when students lack access to formal help." Summer Melt—a phenomenon in which students who have been accepted to college fail to enroll the fall following their senior year—is a research focus area for Page. Recently, she has designed and evaluated interventions that provide students with targeted advice through text messages. Students have the option to opt-out of receiving text message alerts or request more assistance. These text-messaging interventions have resulted in positive impacts on on-time college enrollment and persistence over several semesters. This finding is particularly true among students who attend two-year colleges and may not spend much time on campus. In October 2014, Page will release a book on the topic of summer melt, titled *Summer Melt: Supporting Low-Income Students Through the Transition to College*.