

# Summer melts immigrant students' college plans

Immigrant high school graduates, especially those from low-income homes, tend to choose schools below their abilities and often decide over the summer after graduation not to attend college at all.

**By Melissa M. Naranjo, Valerie Ooka Pang, and Jose Luis Alvarado**

**D**iana Martinez looked at the large brown envelope; her hand was shaking. The return address was from the admissions office of a university, her first-choice college. She was afraid to open it. Was she accepted?

Diana is an immigrant student who has lived in California for 15 years since she was two years old. Her family life is like many immigrant families: Her mother stays home and takes care of the family; her father holds two jobs, working at a restaurant during the week and at a bakery on the weekends and evenings. She and her younger brother are hard-working students who bring home A's and B's; Diana's high school GPA is 3.5. Growing up in the U.S., Diana and her brother have assimilated into American society. Diana was a Girl Scout who sold many boxes of cookies and she volunteers for an organization devoted to creating safe neighborhoods; her brother is a Boy Scout. They are bilingual. Their parents know their children must have exceptional English skills to be successful, but they speak Spanish at home because they also want Diana and her brother to keep up their native language.

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When Diana turned 16, she wanted to apply for a job so she could earn money for college. But, when she asked her mother for her Social Security card, her mother turned and walked away without saying a word.

### Undermatch and summer melt

Like most other Americans, immigrant students believe that earning a college degree is part of the path to achieving the American Dream. Earning a college degree leads to well-paying jobs and helps deepen an individual's connection with their community. A college education is a national, cultural expectation.

Yet many immigrant students find themselves caught up in the undermatch and summer melt phenomena. Numerous first-generation, college-bound, immigrant, high school graduates do not continue their education at a college commensurate with their abilities and academic achievements. They may apply and gain admission to selective colleges, but many do not attend any college, or they may enroll in a community college. This is the undermatch phenomenon.

Low-income, high school graduates may intend to go to a four-year college, but they may not enroll. That's a phenomenon known as summer melt, in which college-intending students decide against enrolling over the summer (Castleman & Page, 2014). Some even prepay college fees.

### Lost opportunities

A significant pool of low-income students undermatch in their college choice process. Undermatching occurs when a high school graduate either does not attend college or attends a college that is less selective than their academic preparation or achievement indicate (Bastedo & Flaster, 2014). Out of 30,000 high-achieving, low-income students in each high school cohort, only 18% apply to a selective college (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Similarly, another study found as many as half of low-income students in the U.S. may undermatch in their college choice (Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013).

Why does undermatching occur? Various factors have been associated with an increased likelihood of undermatching, including low levels of parental education, living in an urban area, and being Latino (Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011). Although longitudinal studies indicate that high-achieving, low-income students have been under-represented at selective colleges for decades (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010), undermatching is just now gaining national attention because of increased efforts to improve college access and opportunity.

Undermatching also has been shown to correlate

## Coming to America

### Jose Luis Alvarado



*Jose Luis Alvarado, about age 10*

I was born in the U.S.-Mexico border city of Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico. I am the youngest in my family with two older brothers and a sister. My father had his green card well before I was born, and he crossed the border daily to work as a field laborer and construction worker in the U.S. As we grew older, my parents decided it was time for the family to immigrate so that we could attend school in the U.S. I was 10 years old when we immigrated and settled in the rural community of Brawley, Calif. This transition was eased by the fact that my

grandmother and aunt already lived there.

Growing up, I faced the challenges that youth living in poverty face: gang involvement, substance abuse, and teen parenthood. In spite of being tracked as a non-college-bound student, I was the first in my family to earn a college degree. I earned teaching credentials in bilingual and special education, and educational administration as well as a master's degree from San Diego State University. I earned my Ph.D. from the University of Virginia. I am now dean of the College of Education at California State University Monterey Bay.

Many immigrant students who find themselves in an undermatching situation come from low-income families.

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Summer melt goes along with undermatch. Many low-income, immigrant students excitedly tell their teachers and peers they will attend their selected four-year college after high school but may never enroll. During the summer, college-intending students may encounter many obstacles that keep them from enrolling. Castleman and Page (2014) estimated the rate of summer melt across all socioeconomic groups at 10% to 15%. For low-income students, the summer melt rate ranges from 20% to 44% of students. Cost, anxiety about leaving home, and difficulty understanding college forms and course requirements are among the most common reasons that students drop off the college track over the summer. Many of these tasks are challenging, complex, and highly bureaucratic, especially for students and families with limited financial means, English language literacy, or college savvy. Furthermore, these tasks occur during a period in which students are no longer working with school counselors or college-access programs but before they are officially connected to college staff and advisers. Nonetheless, research suggests that students' postsecondary plans are highly responsive to support and guidance during the summer months preceding college (Castleman, Arnold, & Wartman, 2012; Castleman & Page, 2014).

High schools and colleges can employ a number of strategies to ensure a successful transition to college for low-income, first-generation students.

#### **Social media outreach** (*Facebook & Instagram*)

- Launch a summer text messaging campaign that generates messages customized to each student's intended institution to remind them of key summer tasks. Each message offers students the option of responding via text to request help from a high school counselor or college peer adviser/mentor.
- Send emails and short messages on social media to keep new students on track.

#### **High school counselor outreach**

- Administer an annual senior exit survey to document students' college intentions and gather the most current student contact information. This data can help determine which graduating students intend to go to college in the fall. Counselors can proactively reach out to students over the summer.
- Extend the job contracts of college-transition counselors into the summer to provide proactive outreach and assistance over the post-high school summer.
- Provide counselor office hours to accommodate student-parent schedules.
- Fill critical gaps in students' college literacy by helping them access/navigate their university's web portal, interpret their financial aid award letter, apply for housing, register for classes, and connect with college staff to resolve outstanding issues and complete required paperwork.
- Provide constant prompts or reminders to keep students focused on meeting college-enrollment deadlines.
- Provide ongoing social and emotional support for students and their families so they can acquire skills for coping with current barriers and overcome unforeseen challenges as they arise.
- Provide consistent financial guidance as students and their families interpret financial aid documents and contracts, make decisions among funding alternatives, and take action within the complex world of grants, loans, scholarships, and other financial aid options.

#### **College admission offices**

- Provide broader adoption of summer-bridge programs, structured specifically to address issues that often derail low-income, first-generation students' college plans.
- Provide information on issues such as financial aid via email or mail in various languages to students and their parents.
- Match students with college-age peer mentors who can provide first-hand perspectives and encourage students to continue with the college-enrollment process.
- Reach out to students and parents via email, phone, or in person to ensure that students are taking the necessary steps to enroll in their college choice.

- Make new student and parent orientations accessible and offered in a host of languages.
- Create a summer monthly newsletter for new students and their parents that includes a checklist of what every student should do before arriving on campus in the fall.

All students need the opportunity to advance in life, and a college degree will support their move toward financial stability in a career, communication skills, and responsibilities as a member of society.

### What happened to Diana?

Diana's mother did not want to answer her question about her Social Security card because Diana is undocumented. However, Diana lives in California where the law lets students like Diana — who have lived in the state for over three years and have earned a high school diploma — pay in-state college tuition. However, Diana still became one of the undermatch statistics. Diana's parents did not want her to move away to attend college. In addition to their opposition, Diana could not afford to move to another city and pay the \$9,000 tuition and \$10,000 for housing at the college of her choice. Though she was disappointed, she also did not want her parents to go into debt because of her choices. So Diana decided to live at home and attend a local community college where the tuition is about \$720 per year.

### Conclusion

Diana may never transfer to a four-year institution and therefore not earn a college degree. This may mean that she will not earn as much as if she had earned a four-year college degree. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2005, 25- to 64-year-old workers who had a college degree earned \$962 per week in comparison to individuals with a high school diploma who earned \$595 for the same amount of time (Gonzalez, 2006). In addition, those with college degrees had unemployment rates of 2.3%, while those whose highest educational level was high school had unemployment rate of about 4.3%.

The nation loses anytime a young person is unable to follow through on their dream of a college education. The individual student loses because she may be delayed or derailed from using her full potential. By attending a four-year college, Diana would have become a cultural mediator who could interpret and explain mainstream cultural practices to her family, which might eventually enable others to follow in her path. Immigrant students and their parents need to be counseled, financially supported, and encouraged to take advantage of educational opportunities to ensure that low-income, immigrant students participate in the American Dream. **K**

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"If I work hard, I'll get good grades. If I get good grades, I'll go to a top college. If I go to a top college, I'll get a great job. If I get a great job, I'll make a lot of money. If I make a lot of money, everyone will hate me. That's why I didn't do my homework."