

 SEM AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Predicting Enrollment Melt Among Community College Applicants

By Gala M. Ledezma

This study examines enrollment melt patterns in a community college campus, aiming to quantify the predictive factors associated with students' likelihood of melting. Using a combination of survey and administrative data from applicants to a California Community College campus in Southern California, the author estimates changes in enrollment probability associated with various student-level factors, such as applications to multiple institutions and confidence in academic performance. This research aims to enhance comprehension of enrollment melt dynamics, providing insights that can guide strategies to tackle enrollment challenges in community colleges.

Among the barriers that hinder college access, melt has emerged as a concerning issue. Summer melt refers to the phenomenon where students who have been accepted into college do not enroll in the fall semester (Castleman and Page 2014a). Research indicates that a significant percentage, ranging from 8 to 40 percent, of college-intending students do not ultimately enroll in the fall (Castleman and Page 2014a). Furthermore, college enrollment patterns differ among various student groups, with a higher likelihood of low-income students delaying or opting out of college enrollment (Castleman and Page 2014a; Sanchez 2020; Wells and Lynch 2012). Although much of the existing research on enrollment melt centers on four-year universities, it is important to investigate this phenomenon within

the unique context of community colleges, as these institutions are critical entry points for underrepresented and disadvantaged postsecondary students.

Enrollment Melt¹ in Community College

Previous literature suggests that students melt due to a combination of challenging pre-enrollment respon-

¹ Much of the existing melt research focuses on high school students' transition to college, called summer melt, which refers to the subset of enrollment melt that occurs during the summer months between high school graduation and the start of the college semester. This study uses the term enrollment melt to refer to the broader phenomenon in which students who have been admitted into a college ultimately do not enroll in the fall semester. Recognizing that students who attend community college may have non-traditional pathways, this article uses a term that encompasses the overall loss of students between the acceptance stage and the actual enrollment stage.

sibilities and insufficient support during the summer which imposes constraints on prospective students (Castleman and Page 2014b; Rall 2016). For instance, linguistic complexity in enrollment materials, such as financial aid documents, has been identified as a factor complicating the onboarding process and contributing to enrollment melt (Taylor and Hartman 2019). Notably, college-bound high school students who have access to summer counseling support that provides personalized help with these pre-enrollment tasks are more likely to enroll in their intended university (Castleman, Arnold, and Lynk Wartman 2012; Castleman, Page, and Schooley 2014; Tackett, Pasatta, and Pauken 2018). Similarly, institutions have successfully mitigated melt by monitoring student engagement and centralizing onboarding tasks (Allen Stuck and McDevitt 2014). However, the story of informational barriers and pre-enrollment tasks paints an incomplete picture in the context of community colleges, particularly due to their distinct admissions and enrollment dynamics.

The baseline enrollment patterns in community colleges exhibit a greater level of chaos compared with four-year universities, stemming from community colleges' open-enrollment practices. Whereas students in traditional four-year universities must submit a statement of intent to register, students in community college can apply to and attend multiple community college campuses. This phenomenon, known as student swirl, reflects the intricate and non-linear educational pathways students navigate across various institutions, including community colleges and four-year universities (Borden 2004; de los Santos and Wright 1990). This poses challenges when studying enrollment melt, as it becomes difficult to ascertain students' actual intentions to attend. The absence of costs to apply, and lack of penalties for failing to enroll, further complicates the situation. Students may view community colleges as a backup option, leading them to apply to multiple campuses each semester based on class availability or geographic needs. Students challenge traditional enrollment structures by attending multiple institutions to achieve their unique educational goals. In order to support students who attend multiple universities, there is

a pressing need to characterize enrollment patterns and outcomes (Clemetsen, Furbeck, and Moore 2013).

Furthermore, community college students are notably more diverse in terms of academic background and educational goals compared with their counterparts at four-year colleges. Community colleges cater to non-traditional student populations, including older adults, parents, and full-time workers. Consequently, enrollment patterns in community colleges differ from those observed at four-year institutions. For example, the intensity of enrollment (*i.e.*, full-time or part-time status) and continuity of enrollment (*i.e.*, consecutive enrollment across semesters) vary significantly (Crosta 2014). Unlike students entering four-year universities, who intend to earn a four-year degree, community college students may have diverse goals such as transferring to a four-year institution, earning an associate degree, obtaining a vocational certificate, or acquiring specific professional skills.

The distinctive features of community colleges, including open-enrollment admissions, chaotic enrollment patterns, and diversity of educational goals, complicate the ability to study enrollment melt. Recognizing the specificities of community college dynamics, studies must adopt an approach that deviates from the traditional perspective used to examine melt in four-year institutions. To this end, this study uses Wickersham's College Pathway (Re)Selection Model (2020) as a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate decision-making processes of community college students (Figure 1, on page 61). Students may reconsider their enrollment decisions after applying to a community college, and this model offers insights into the dynamics that could shape such reconsideration.

Research Aims

This article explores the factors linked to students' likelihood of experiencing enrollment melt. The Pathway (Re)Selection Model offers theoretical insights into the predictive measures that could elucidate student decision-making related to enrollment melt. However, the model primarily suggests why these measures are relevant rather than specify the likely direction of their

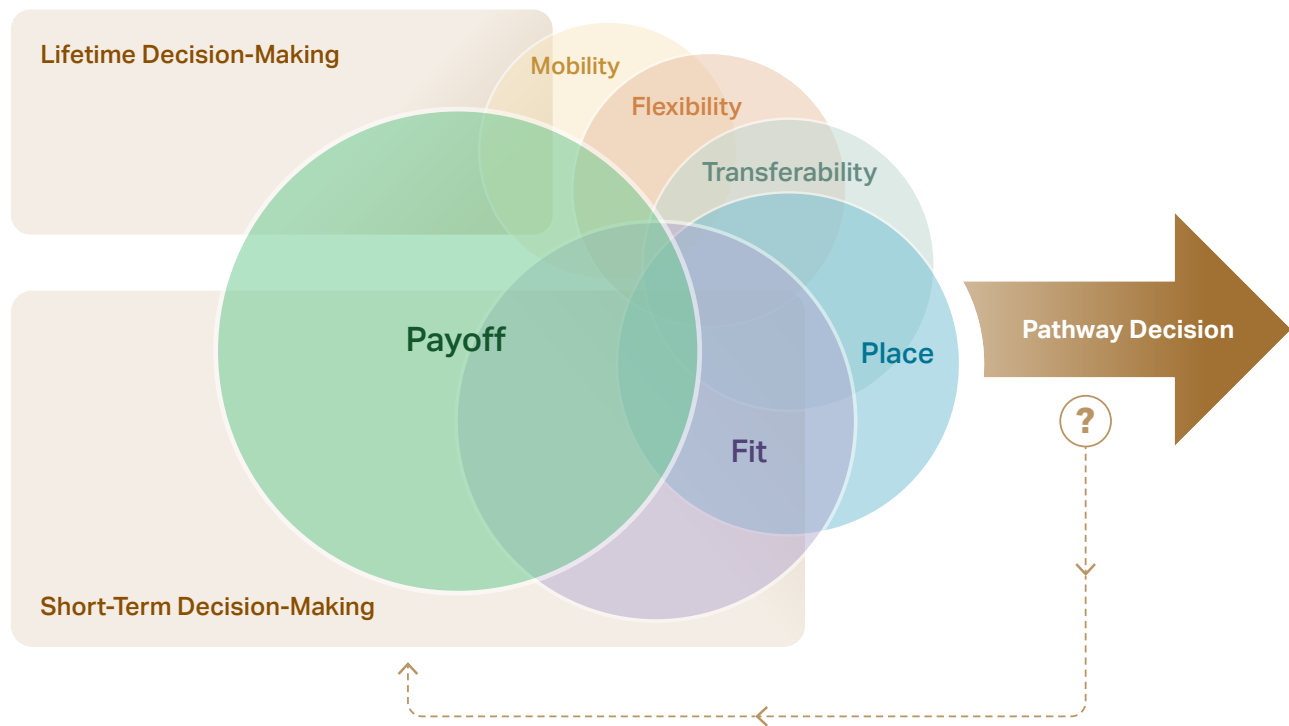


FIGURE 1 ► College Pathway (Re)Selection Model Among 2-Year College Students

Source: Wickersham 2020

relationship, on average. Determining the direction and strength of these relationships remains a crucial empirical question. For instance, according to the theory, financial need is expected to shape a student's decision to enroll in college. Does having financial need make a student less likely to experience melt because they recognize the higher potential payoff of a college degree? Or does it indicate a higher likelihood of melt, perhaps due to the perceived high costs associated with community college? While theory guides the selection of these measures, understanding the actual direction and magnitude of these relationships is still a key empirical inquiry. The analysis aims to quantify these correlations and establish their average direction among a limited sample of applicants, focusing on students who submitted applications during the summer months preceding the fall semester but did not ultimately enroll when the semester began. This study provides a quantitative, data-driven approach to characterize enrollment trends,

offering valuable insights for enrollment management, especially in an era marked by uncertain community college enrollment patterns (Sprehe 2021).

Study Setting

This research collaboration took place with a Southern California community college, prompted by administrators' concerns about applicants not completing onboarding steps. The survey was designed to capture preliminary insights into students' experiences with the onboarding process. The community college received a total of 3,859 applicants for the Fall 2021 semester. All applicants were invited to participate in a pre-semester survey via email, providing a snapshot of decision-making leading up to registration. The survey had a 10.6 percent response rate. To supplement the analysis, survey data was linked with administrative records to ascertain whether students eventually enrolled in the fall semester.

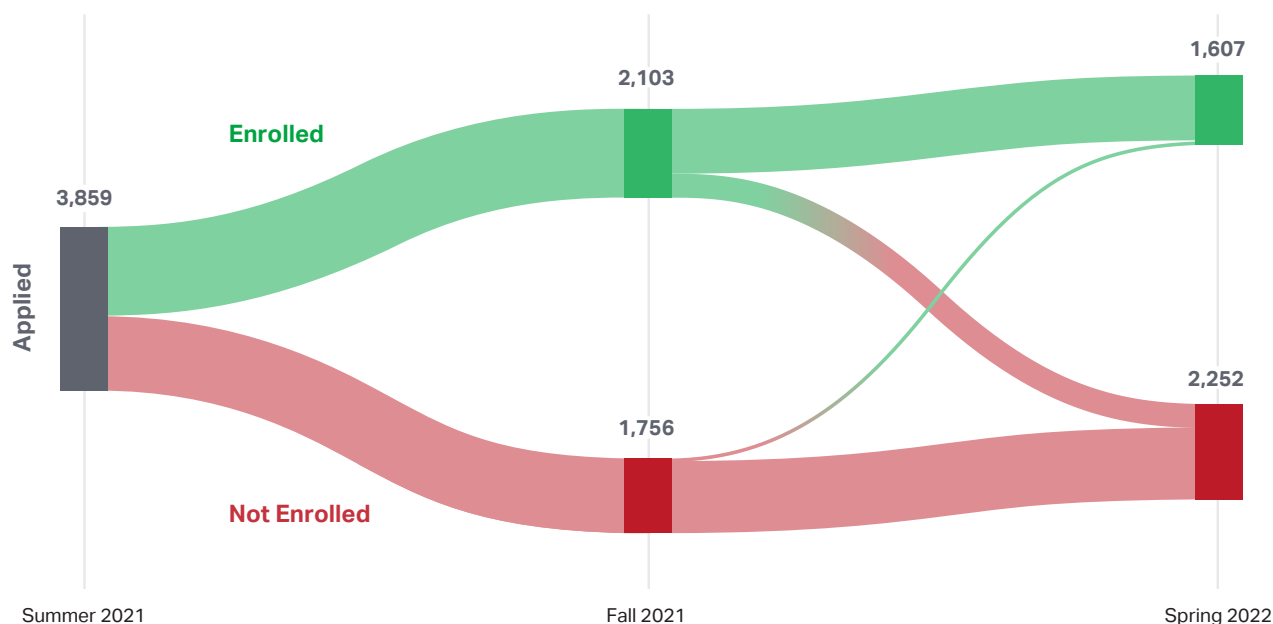


FIGURE 2 ➤ Enrollment Pathways for the Fall Applicant Cohort

Note: Based on Fall 2021 administrative data from the California community college campus

Among the 3,859 applicants, only 2,103 students (54.5%) proceeded to enroll in the fall semester, highlighting the considerable magnitude of enrollment melt among the community college applicants at this specific campus (see Figure 2). Table 1 (on page 63) presents a comparison between the survey sample and the entire Fall 2021 applicant cohort, providing further context for this analysis.

The survey sample consists of students who are positively selected. The most significant disparity lies in the enrollment rates for the fall semester, where 88 percent of students in the survey sample enrolled, while only about 55 percent of all fall applicants enrolled. Thus, the results from this sample may offer conservative estimates of factors related to enrollment melt.

Data

The data used in this study were obtained from two distinct sources: surveys provided by the applicants themselves and administrative data provided by the community college. Using Wickersham's Pathway (Re)

Selection Model to understand student decision-making, this study incorporated a variety of predictive measures, explained below.

Fall Enrollment

The primary variable used to measure melt was *Fall Enroll*, a binary indicator set to one if students registered for any class in the fall semester. Because the primary focus of this study was on successful matriculation rather than persistence, emphasizing the critical stage when students initially enroll, the primary outcome was enrollment irrespective of whether students successfully completed the course. Per administrative records, approximately 88 percent of students in the survey sample enrolled in the fall semester.

Underrepresented Racial Minority (URM) Students

When making their college decisions, URM students may prioritize pathways that foster a sense of belonging, allow connections with individuals who share

TABLE 1 ► Survey Sample Demographics

	Survey Sample (n=241)		All Fall 2021 Applicants (n=3,859)	
	n	%	n	%
Gender¹				
Women	142	58.9	2,048	53.1
Men	96	39.8	1,745	45.2
Race/Ethnicity²				
White	180	74.7	2,497	64.7
Latino/a/x	31	12.9	731	19.0
Asian	21	8.7	355	9.2
Black	6	2.5	122	3.2
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0	27	0.7
American Indian/Alaska Native	3	1.2	31	0.8
Parental Education				
Less Than High School	17	7.4	557	15.1
High School	35	15.2	763	20.6
Some College	34	14.7	630	17.0
Associate Degree	13	5.6	321	8.7
Bachelor Degree	73	31.6	919	24.9
Graduate Degree	59	25.5	508	13.7
Educational Goal				
Transfer Intent ³	170	70.5	2,417	62.6
Matriculation				
Enrolled Fall Semester	213	88.4	2,103	54.5

¹ Gender unknown for 1.2% of survey sample and 1.7% of entire fall applicant cohort

² Race/ethnicity unknown for 2.4% of entire fall cohort; student entered "decline to state" or "other"

³ Transfer goal includes student who stated they wish to transfer to a four-university, with or without an associate degree; student entered "decline to state" or "other"

their racial background, and promote social and economic mobility. (Gopalan and Brady 2020; Matos 2015; Samuelson and Litzler 2016). Notably, this study was situated in the California Community College (CCC) system, which serves approximately two million students who are predominantly from underrepresented racial minority groups (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office 2022). In the survey sample, students were counted as URM if they were Black, Latinx, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Approximately 17 percent of students in the survey sample were URM.

Financial Need

Financial need, recognized as a crucial factor in understanding enrollment decisions, was assessed through two survey questions concerning students' expectations of receiving need-based financial awards. Eligibility for these specific grants required students to have low-income status. In the absence of administrative data on income status, these survey questions served as an indicator of financial need. Approximately 51 percent of students in the survey sample expected to receive a need-based award.

College Experiences of Family and Friends

The experiences shared by family and friends can foster a student's sense of place and fit that may influence their decision to enroll in a local community college. Rather than use administrative measures of highest completed parent education, this study opted for a comprehensive measure derived from the survey data. The survey assessed students' proximity to college information through their connections with friends, parents, and other family members familiar with California's college systems. *Family/Friends CCC* is a binary indicator set to one if students have friends or family members with CCC-specific experience. This measure offers distinct advantages over the administrative measure of parent education. First, it recognizes the broader experiences gained during the application and registration process, which are overlooked if only degree completion is considered. Second, this measure acknowledges peers and other family members (*e.g.*, siblings and cousins) that can contribute to the sharing of college information (Ceja 2006; Holland 2011, 2017; Knight, *et al.* 2008; Perez and McDonough 2008). Approximately 88 percent of students had friends and family with CCC-specific experiences.

Completion of Education Plan

After applying to this specific community college, students are encouraged to meet with a counselor and create an education plan that maps out the courses they must take to reach their unique academic goals. The survey asked participants if they had completed this pre-enrollment task, with 38 percent indicating they had.

Application to Attend Other Colleges

Assessing enrollment melt in the context of community colleges presents difficulties because students do not have an exclusive commitment to an institution. Students who apply to multiple colleges may be exploring options in various areas, considering their ties to different locations or the potential for credit transfer between different institutions. The binary indicator *Other College* equals one if students indicated they had applied to other colleges, and zero if they applied only

to this community college campus. About 21 percent of students in the sample applied to multiple colleges.

Transfer Goal

In the CCC system, applicants are required to indicate their educational goals at the time of application, which can include improving basic skills, earning a vocational certificate, or pursuing transfer to a four-year university. The binary indicator *Transfer* was set to one if students expressed their intention to transfer to a four-year university on their application. Approximately 71 percent of the students in the survey sample indicated their intention to transfer to a four-year university, highlighting the prevalence of this goal among community college applicants.

Certainty

The certainty index serves as an indicator of student confidence in projecting academic outcomes. According to the Wickersham model, academic certainty could gauge how well students' academic expectations align with their chosen pathways. Higher certainty may suggest a stronger alignment, while lower certainty may indicate a need for further exploration or consideration.

Students were asked to indicate the percent chance of falling into specific GPA categories (*see* Table 2, on page 65).

The responses to this question produced six entries that sum to 100. The certainty index was calculated by determining the standard deviation of these six entries. For instance, a student with entries {100, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0} would have a certainty index of 40.8, while a student with entries {20, 20, 15, 15, 15, 15} would have a certainty index of 2.6. The underlying assumption is that students with higher standard deviations, indicating that predictions are concentrated in certain categories, express greater certainty. Unlike previous research that uses Likert measures of self-reported certainty (Dunlosky, *et al.* 2005; Fritzsche, Händel, and Kröner 2018; Händel and Dresel 2018; Händel and Fritzsche 2015; Miller and Geraci 2011), this study used a measure of revealed certainty by calculating the spread of student predictions. Within the survey sample, the mean cer-

tainty index was 23.9, with a standard deviation of 9.4. (See Table 3.)

Methods and Results

This study used a logistic regression model to investigate the relationship between the set of predictors and the binary outcome of fall enrollment. Logistic regression estimates the changes in probability associated with each predictor, providing valuable insights into the direction and magnitude of the factors influencing enrollment decisions. To derive meaningful insights from the logistic regression, predictive margins were calculated to determine the average marginal probability changes associated with the predictors and the standard errors of these marginal probability estimates (see Table 4, on page 66).

URM

As previously stated, this study focused on URM students to shed light on potential disparities in melt rates, considering the significant presence of URM students within the CCC system and their underrepresentation in four-year universities. The first version of this model (Column 1) shows the changes in the probability of enrollment associated with URM among the survey sample. Applicants who belong to a URM group were 12.1 percentage points less likely to enroll in the fall semester compared with non-URM applicants, on average. The model is further built upon by including additional variables to determine whether the variation associated with the URM coefficient can be explained away by other factors. The URM coefficient in the preferred model specification with all sets of student-level variables (Column 3), which suggests that URM applicants were 12.2 percentage points less likely to enroll

in the fall semester relative to non-URM applicants, does not change much from the URM-only model. The steadiness of the URM coefficient across both models indicates that the variation associated with URM is not explained away by the student-level predictors included

TABLE 2 ► Sample Predicted First Semester Performance, by GPA and Student Certainty, Given the Following Prompt

We realize that you do not know exactly how well you will do in your classes. However, we would like to have you describe the grade point average (GPA) that you expect to receive in your first semester as a student. Please tell us the percent chance that your GPA will be in each of the following intervals

GPA Range ¹	Certainty (% Chance) ²
3.80–4.00	5
3.50–3.79	15
3.00–3.49	40
2.50–2.99	35
2.00–2.49	5
1.00–1.99	0
Total	100

¹ A=4.0, B=3.0, C=2.0, D=1.0

² The numbers entered into this column should be between 0 and 100 and add up to 100

TABLE 3 ► Descriptive Statistics of Analysis Measures

Variable/Measure¹	Full Survey Sample	Enrolled Fall, by Matriculation	
		Yes	No
Binary (%)			
Underrepresented Racial Minority	16.6	14.1	35.7
Financial Need	51.4	51.2	53.6
Friends/Family CCC	88.4	90.1	75.0
Ed Plan	37.8	40.8	14.3
Other College Options	20.7	19.2	32.1
Transfer Goal	70.5	72.8	53.6
Continuous (Mean)			
Certainty	23.9	23.6	26.4
Certainty, Standard Deviation	9.4	9.1	11.1
Observations	241	213	28

¹ Analysis sample restricted to non-missing on all variables

TABLE 4 ► Average Marginal Probability Changes in Fall Enrollment¹ (n=241)

	URM Only		All Variables	
	Coef. ²	S.E.	Coef. ²	S.E.
URM	-0.121 ^c	0.044	-0.122 ^c	0.043
Financial Need			-0.030	0.039
Family/Friends CCC			0.103 ^b	0.049
Certainty			-0.004 ^a	0.002
Ed Plan			0.133 ^b	0.053
Other College			-0.070	0.043
Transfer Goal			0.019	0.042

Key: Coef = Coefficient; S.E. = Standard Error

¹ Fall enrollment is a binary indicator that shows whether an applicant registered for fall courses (M=0.884). Analytical sample restricted to students who were non-missing on all variables.

² Results are presented as predictive margins derived from a logistic regression; coefficients in this table should be interpreted as percentage point changes.

^a p < 0.10

^b p < 0.05

^c p < 0.01

in this study. Within the context of the Pathway (Re)Selection Model, this result may suggest that URM applicants in this sample perceive a better fit at institutions other than this CCC campus. Moreover, URM students in this sample could be choosing to explore alternative pathways they perceive as offering greater mobility potential, such as entering the job market immediately.

College Experiences of Family and Friends

The coefficient associated with the *Family/Friends CCC* indicator in Column 3 suggests that applicants who have friends or family with CCC experience were 10.3 percentage points more likely to enroll relative to applicants without such college networks. Interestingly, when running the same model with an alternative measure of college networks, capturing whether students have friends or family with any college experience (public, private, or out-of-state four-year colleges), the coefficient was small and statistically insignificant (2.3 p.p. with a p-value of 0.764). These results indicate that there are distinctive aspects of CCC-specific experiences that correlate with enrollment among community college students. In the context of the Pathway (Re) Selection Model, this figure suggests that enrollment decisions might be influenced by shaping perceptions

about fit and establishing a sense of familiarity.

Certainty

The coefficient for *Certainty* in Column 3 suggests that an additional point on the certainty index was associated with a 0.4 percentage point decrease in the probability of enrolling in the fall. To put this into context, the mean certainty index was 23.9. A standard deviation increase in the certainty index would be associated with a 3.8 percentage point decrease in the probability of fall enrollment. The coefficient for certainty, while

statistically significant, is small in magnitude relative to other measures that serve as stronger predictors of melt. While higher certainty was expected to signal stronger alignment with chosen pathways, the weak but negative relationship between certainty and enrollment likelihood may indicate overconfidence or a potential misalignment between academic expectations and practical reality, which may influence their decision to enroll.

Education Plan

The coefficient for *Ed Plan* suggests that applicants who completed an education plan were 13.3 percentage points more likely to enroll in the fall than those who did not complete an education plan, on average. The coefficient for *Ed Plan* suggests that students, conditional on knowing about and completing this onboarding task, were associated with better prospects of enrolling. Creating an education plan not only supports students' aspirations but also equips them with a clear roadmap, outlining the necessary steps to achieve their educational goals.

Transfer Goal and Other College Options

Among the other predictors, *Other College* and *Transfer*, no statistically significant associations were identified.

The coefficient for *Other College* suggests that students who reported applying to other colleges were 7 percentage points less likely to enroll in the fall semester than those who indicated that this community college was their sole choice. However, this coefficient was not statistically significant from zero. Similarly, the *Transfer* coefficient indicated that applicants with a transfer goal were only 1.9 percentage points more likely to enroll in the fall semester compared with students without a transfer goal, but this finding did not reach statistical significance. Despite theoretical motivation, the lack of statistical significance suggests that these factors may not be prominent influences that shape enrollment decisions in the survey sample, relative to other predictive measures included in this study.

Limitations

This study faced several data limitations that impact the robustness of the findings. As described in the study setting section, the sample used in this study was non-representative of the fall applicant cohort, with the surveyed students exhibiting highly positive selection, particularly in terms of melt patterns. While only 55 percent of all fall applicants successfully matriculated, an unusually high proportion of 88 percent of the sample students matriculated. The coefficients of enrollment melt predictors identified in this analysis might underestimate the true magnitude of these factors among all fall applicants, as the estimates in this study are derived from a positively selected sample. There are inherent limitations of survey data in capturing the phenomenon of enrollment melt. The nature of enrollment melt makes it challenging to determine its predictors at the community college level because students who experience melt are less likely to engage with the researchers' emails or participate in surveys. These data limitations should be considered when assessing the potential strategies for enrollment management.

Implications

The findings of this study provide initial insights for developing actionable enrollment management strategies. Firstly, the study highlights substantial disparities

in melt rates between URM and non-URM applicants, indicating a pressing need for enrollment management professionals to address the specific challenges faced by URM students during the enrollment process. To this end, enrollment management professionals can implement targeted outreach and support programs tailored to URM students to maintain engagement from application to enrollment. Additionally, administrators can enhance inclusivity by developing culturally responsive enrollment materials and communication strategies tailored to the needs of URM applicants. Secondly, the study highlights the positive relationship between completing an education plan and enrollment, emphasizing the importance of structured guidance in the critical period between application and matriculation. Community colleges can strengthen onboarding processes to facilitate smoother transitions into enrollment. Thirdly, the positive correlation between social networks with community college experience and enrollment underscores the importance of fostering supportive social environments for prospective students. Community colleges can invest in strengthening alumni networks to expand support for prospective students. Moreover, colleges can implement orientation programs, workshops, and campus tours specifically designed for prospective students and their families to foster connections and familiarity with the institution. By implementing data-driven strategies, enrollment management professionals can effectively support prospective students in their educational journeys and enhance enrollment outcomes for all student populations.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to characterize enrollment melt patterns in a community college and understand why students who apply to a campus do not enroll. Using survey data from students who applied to attend the campus in the summer period preceding the fall semester, the study found that completing an education plan, having CCC-specific college networks, and URM status were significant factors associated with enrollment decisions among the limited sample of students in the study. The findings offer valuable preliminary in-

sights, but it is important to exercise caution in generalizing these results, given the data limitations this study encountered. As data permits, future studies should expand the scope of predictive measures beyond those considered in this study. For instance, investigating students' consumer behaviors, such as their use of the internet to explore college and inform enrollment deci-

sions (Taylor 2020), among other potential factors, could provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics influencing enrollment outcomes. Future research with improved data quality may help refine understanding of these dynamics. Continuing to explore these areas can further enhance understanding of enrollment melt and inform strategies to mitigate its impact.

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