

At New York's LaGuardia Community College, ideas42 piloted a series of redesigned communications to help students successfully transition into their first semester. This proof of concept work produced some valuable lessons about the complexities faced by students transitioning to community college and the limitations of using communications-based interventions on tight timelines.

Each year, thousands of prospective students apply and are subsequently admitted to colleges around the country, but then fail to take the required steps to actually become a student. “Summer Melt,” as the problem has been called, affects many students but is particularly likely to occur among low-income and minority students, who may lack the resources and tacit knowledge to navigate the process required to register and attend.

To explore how a behaviorally-informed intervention might help these students work through the murky process and get to Day 1, we joined with LaGuardia Community College in New York.

Enrollment and registration process involves many steps

Initially, the LaGuardia enrollment team believed the enrollment problem stemmed from admitted students' failure to attend an orientation session, called New Student Advisement & Registration (NSAR). They assumed that if students attend NSAR, they would then follow through on the rest of the steps needed to make it to their first day of classes as a student. After looking at enrollment drop-off data, we recognized that the issue was broader—students were dropping out from the process between admission and then enrollment and registration at many different stages.

The LaGuardia enrollment and registration process has several steps: **placement testing** (mandatory testing to sort students into either college-level or remedial classes), **digital enrollment** (an online declaration of one's intent to attend), **matriculation** (the assignment by LaGuardia of the student to a place in the incoming class), and **registration** (the selection of classes, done in person with an advisor by first-time students). We expected that an intervention staged between admission to LaGuardia and registration for classes, targeting *each* of the individual steps in the process, could help boost enrollment by helping students act on their intention to attend.

Understanding the context

In our initial work with LaGuardia, we sought to understand the magnitude of the enrollment problem and the specific contextual features that might be driving it. We began our diagnosis with an analysis of available data from LaGuardia, City University of New York (CUNY) and the National Student Clearinghouse. An important initial finding was that 78.83% of students who completed placement testing but did not enroll at LaGuardia did not go on to enroll at any other school. This disproved the hypothesis that students admitted to LaGuardia were simply choosing to attend another school.

In trying to understand the most important times and/or steps at which to intervene, we examined drop-off figures in data provided by CUNY and LaGuardia. About 27% of admitted students never take the placement test, and we chose not to intervene among those students because we could not be sure of their intent to attend LaGuardia or any other school. Of the students who do take a placement test, 59% never enroll anywhere. This led us to choose the time between testing and registration as the highest value moment for an intervention.

We also engaged in direct observation of the user experience for incoming students. This took the form of navigating the CUNY and LaGuardia websites, including a significant portion of the application process, as well as observing critical aspects of the in-person admission and enrollment process, including testing and registration. We interviewed key staff from the school, including representatives from the Student Information Center (SIC), Placement Testing Office, Financial Aid Office, and Student Services offices. We performed student interviews, seeking to understand what caused students to enter the process of enrollment but not finish it.

A strategy takes shape

The short timeline of the experiment meant that we couldn't address all of the bottlenecks we identified, but each of them could be significant factors in the process, and shouldn't be overlooked in future work. In brief, our diagnosis found that:

- *Non-academic lives are status quo* – students who are used to a set of life circumstances that is different from being in college may be driven away from enrollment and attendance because it represents a painful and costly break from the status quo.
- *Lack of student identity* – incoming students may not yet feel like students, either at LaGuardia or anywhere else. This is likely to be more pronounced at a community college and also likely interacts with the status quo of non-academic life.
- *Hassles and negative feedback during the process* – the application and enrollment process is rife with hassles, which quickly turn people away from action. Negative feedback abounds as well (for example, only getting notices from the school when you're late, have done something wrong, or haven't completed something). Any combination of these can easily derail action on the part of a prospective student.
- *Extended periods of time* – the average time from acceptance to successful enrollment is quite long, often months, and provides an excellent opportunity for procrastination, forgetting, or a simple change of mind. Any of these can derail prospective students from enrolling.

Simple, economical solutions

We devised a testable strategy that would combat the barriers students encounter between admission and enrollment. Since LaGuardia is able to completely control a significant portion of the messaging to students after their admission, we focused on email and text message communications from the school to students as our intervention channel. Using these platforms also enabled us to create an intervention that is scalable and testable.

Our design work focused on three goals, and while the goals did not map exactly one-to-one to our list of bottlenecks, we expected that if our design was successful, we would be able to effect meaningful change in enrollment behaviors. All 20 communications from LaGuardia were aimed at one or more of the following:

1. *Change the status quo*: We sought to frame our messaging in ways that would help prospective students to conceive of a new status quo, namely that school attendance and their new identity as a student would be the new normal. We addressed potential students as incoming freshmen and “LaGuardians” wherever possible, as well as referring to their arrival on campus as a foregone conclusion.

- 2. Enable pre-commitment:** Getting students to publicly commit to attending school could both help solidify their new status quo and identity while also increasing the likelihood of follow-through because of the tendency to avoid activities that cue what is called “cognitive dissonance.” We had hoped to offer multiple channels for pre-commitment, preferably escalating in scope, but unfortunately constraints limited us to a single email. In this email we encouraged students to publicly declare their attendance at LaGuardia on social media channels and/or to respond to the email with their thoughts about why they looked forward to attending in the upcoming semester.
- 3. Smooth hassles and improve tone:** The fewer hassles in the path of a student who wished to register, the more likely they would be to convert that intention into action. Similarly, a more positive and welcoming tone encourages engagement.

Difficulty moving the needle

To evaluate the effectiveness of our proposed designs, ideas42 worked with LaGuardia’s Student Information Center to conduct a randomized controlled trial (RCT), in which we randomly assigned admitted students into two groups. The control group received LaGuardia’s standard stream of email communications and the treatment group received our behaviorally-informed emails. Unfortunately, due to the constrained project timeline, and the complexity of delivering the intervention with limited partner capacity and staff time, we had difficulty implementing the experiment as designed. This imperfect implementation may have contributed to our overall lack of significant findings.

We observed no significant difference in overall open rates or click-through rates between the treatment and control group. The same was true for the number of emails opened. We also observed no significant differences in enrollment, testing, or registration between treatment and control groups. We did observe a significant difference in time to registration, with treatment attending NSAR an average of 5.6 days earlier than control ($p < 0.00$).

The need for future research

Ultimately, as implemented, the e-mail and text message-based intervention did not materially impact outcomes for students transitioning to LaGuardia Community College. This points to the fact that even with clear communication, the enrollment and registration process is complex to navigate. We hope our work and our experience will inform future work around “Summer Melt.” Our diagnosis confirmed the many roadblocks along the path to a higher education, and we encourage colleges to continue working to make college enrollment simpler and faster. Our diagnoses also suggest promising avenues for future research to develop interventions that will help students overcome status quo bias and adopt a student identity.