

I've written in the past about the importance of our students getting out of Tahoe after high school – whether for vocational training, military service, travel or any number of other pursuits – but one way or another, to *go*. They can always come back; Tahoe will still be here. And as a high school teacher, I'm naturally going to encourage higher education.

But I've never said it's easy.

With one of our kids finishing her third year at college and one his first, we certainly don't know it all, but we've learned a few things.

First, we learned that even if you start saving early on for college, most incomes won't cut it; and then, aside from all the college applications, essays and deadlines, there's a whole tangle of processes to navigate once you get accepted. The possible missteps are many and even those who have been to college themselves can easily get overwhelmed when trying to help their kids figure it out.

It goes a long way to explain the “summer melt” phenomenon – the reality that vast numbers of students who get accepted to colleges never show up in the fall. They find the expenses, paperwork and other requirements too much to manage and likely get discouraged.

Studies show the “melting” rate at 19% of high school students who get accepted and intend to go to four-year colleges or universities, and 37% of those bound for community colleges. That is a massive chunk of kids each year. So, what's going on?

First off, the support system that was there in high school to help students navigate the process doesn't go home with them after graduation. At STHS, counselors, teachers, administrators, coaches, and support staff – especially the incomparable Lori Nelson, who retired last year – guide students through the process, writing recommendation letters, filling out applications, researching schools, pursuing financial aid and so on – encouraging, reminding, nagging, and then eventually celebrating the fruits of those efforts when students get their acceptances. This goes on at every high school to varying degrees.

But graduation comes and goes, summer jobs get rolling, and this is where the rubber meets the road. During these key months, families that are focused on making ends meet usually lack the time and resources to deal with all the hoops that need jumping through over the summer – the placement tests, medical clearances, orientation meetings, housing applications, tuition payments, registration for courses, and a host of other tasks that put the student in the position to actually show up and attend college. So, it's no surprise that the lower one's family income, the greater the chance of “melting.”

Even students who earn all sorts of financial assistance find that expenses like housing sometimes aren't part of the package, so the family is left to wonder where upwards of 10K per year is going to come from.

Many times, the “melt” also involves psychological or even cultural components. Is the student overwhelmed by the thought of being removed from the family and community comfort zone? Is he or she needed at home for the family to function well? Is the student psychologically or socially ready – for the independence especially?

It's the fear of the unknown, for families as much as students themselves.

Looking at the whole picture, it makes me wonder. I mean, if roughly a third (on average) of our high school grads who plan to attend college don't in fact attend, that seems a pretty big national failure. That's a lot of aspirations discarded. We can't simply lay it on the high schools, and we can't simply lay it on the parents and wipe our hands.

I also don't believe colleges and universities are deliberately trying to discourage kids, even if that's the end result. But this unintentional “weeding out” process disproportionately

targets those most in need of a hand up. So there's the cynical part of me that wonders if it isn't all part of a deliberate effort to maintain the economic gap in our country – to perpetuate a vast and vulnerable underclass that will always need to take the low-wage jobs and that will never be able to muster the resources and unity to protest or disrupt the status quo.

But lest we all despair over the fate of our young people, there is much we can do here in Tahoe, and there is also a definite upside for our young grads. For one thing, Tahoe kids can earn huge college opportunities due to our “rural” designation, which gives them a competitive edge over their urban counterparts. It's not exactly what used to be called “Affirmative Action,” but an effort by higher ed institutions to draw kids from diverse backgrounds and regions. Currently, colleges and universities are also finding qualified young men in short supply, which opens additional doors for guys. These and other admissions trends revolve in a constant social experiment to balance educational opportunities, and the educational experience itself.

What it means to rural communities like ours is not only that more of our students can get into good schools, but they can earn scholarships and awards to cover much or all of the cost. I've seen these realities play out every year.

In addition to academic scholarships from colleges and universities themselves, there's federal need-based assistance and other sources of grants and subsidized loans. And then there's the hundreds of thousands of dollars awarded every year in local scholarships sponsored by service clubs, agencies, businesses, private individuals and others. If you ever doubt our community's generosity, you should attend our STHS Senior Awards Night in the spring; you will see kids rewarded financially for a wide range of achievements – not all academic, as you might expect, either.

This is the time of year our high school seniors start seriously considering all of these possibilities and decisions. College isn't for everyone, no question, but for those who do hold that dream in our community, we can all help.

Chances are, we all cross paths with some teens – whether they're nephews, nieces, grandchildren, employees, or neighbors — and we can ask them about their plans, if they need help getting information, completing applications, visiting college campuses or just encouragement.

So while we're enjoying the spring thaw, let's try to be mindful of how we all can help prevent down the “summer melt.”