



CONSORTIUM ON
CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH
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General questions/arrange interviews

Weak school support, financial aid hurdles derail even top students on road to college; Latinos most at risk

School culture, teacher relationships critical for college enrollment

Too many urban high school students do not successfully navigate the daunting process of enrolling in four-year colleges and often do not enroll or default to colleges for which they are overqualified, according to a study of Chicago graduates released Wednesday by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago.

“Educators and policy makers must realize that preparation will not necessarily translate into college enrollment if high schools do not provide better structure and support for students in the college process,” said Melissa Roderick, a co-director at the Consortium, a University of Chicago professor and the lead author of the study, *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College*. “And, if the most highly qualified students do not attend colleges that demand high qualifications, then their hard work has not paid off. It sends precisely the wrong message.”

For Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students who reported aspiring to a four-year degree, only 59 percent applied to a four-year college and only 41 percent successfully navigated this process and ultimately enrolled the fall after graduation. This drop off is even worse for Latino students who wanted to earn a bachelor’s degree, with only 46 percent applying and 30 percent enrolling in a four-year college in the fall after graduation—a gap that persisted regardless of students’ immigration status.

Furthermore, only about a third of students who aspire to complete a four-year degree enroll in a college that matches or exceeds their qualifications. That drops to 28 percent of Latino students, compared to 45 percent for African-American students. While “match” is just one consideration in finding the right college fit, it is an important one because earlier Consortium research demonstrated that graduation rates among the most popular Illinois colleges varies dramatically— even among graduates with a high school grade point average of 3.5 or above.

“There is a widespread assumption that if you are a very smart minority kid, colleges are knocking down your door,” Roderick said. “But we found no evidence of that.”

This three-year longitudinal study already has triggered reforms in the nation's third-largest district, systems that can be replicated in other urban schools that have made postsecondary access a priority for high school graduates. A new financial aid tracking system will allow all Chicago high schools to get daily updates on the filing status of their students' FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) forms.

This system is critical because filing a FAFSA is an important predictor of whether students ultimately enroll in college. Among students who were accepted into a four-year college, the study revealed that 84 percent of those who completed a FAFSA ultimately enrolled in college—compared to 55 percent who didn't fill out a FAFSA.

The report's authors point out that tracking FAFSA completion is a significant improvement, but it won't dramatically change outcomes unless schools work earlier to help families and students understand what financial aid is, what funding is available, how the stated tuition differs from what they will be asked to pay, and how delaying applying for federal financial aid affects the sources of funding for which students may be eligible.

Since 2004, CCSR has tracked the postsecondary experiences of successive cohorts of Chicago graduates and examined the relationship among high school preparation, support, college choice, and postsecondary outcomes. The goal of this research is to help CPS, other urban districts and national policy makers understand what it takes to improve the college outcomes for urban and other at-risk students who now overwhelmingly aspire to college. The Consortium's first report in this series, *From High School to the Future: A First Look at Chicago Public School Graduates' College Enrollment, College Preparation, and Graduation from Four-year Colleges*, showed that increasing qualifications is the most important strategy to improving students' college participation, access to four-year and more selective colleges, and ultimately college graduation rates.

This second report in the series tackles some of the unresolved issues identified in the first report; namely, why students tend to enroll in a limited number of colleges, and why college enrollment varies so dramatically across different schools and racial groups. The study relies on qualitative and quantitative data for seniors in 2005—student and teacher surveys, transcripts, college enrollment data reported by the National Student Clearinghouse, and student interviews. Consortium researchers also spent nearly two years interviewing and tracking the academic progress of 105 students in three Chicago high schools. The ten case studies included in the “Potholes” study each highlight a student who struggled at a different point in the postsecondary planning process.

“My parents told me to do whatever I want, that money isn't an issue, but I think it is. So...I'm going to pick a college that would make it easier for my family,” said Javier, a first generation Mexican-American who enrolled in an automotive technical school despite an academic record that qualified him for a selective university. Javier, (whose name was changed to protect his anonymity), relied exclusively on his school for information about college, but reportedly never had a one-on-one conversation with an educator who recognized his academic potential.

Sabrina was a hard-working African-American student who earned a 25 on her ACT and an A- grade point average in honors courses but never enrolled in college in the fall after graduation. “I just keep seeing those essays. I'm like, ‘OK, I'm going to get back to that. And then...I just feel like I don't have enough time in the day.”

Even Franklin, who had modest academic qualifications but still conducted a thorough college search and landed in a well-matched state college, realized early on that he was essentially on his own when it came to

his college search “We couldn’t always rely on [school staff] being there to help us through every little step. Even though the guidance is good, as a student you still have to push forward and get it done.”

Many students interviewed for the study decided to attend a two-year college or private vocational school instead of a four-year college—not because they preferred this option but because they grew frustrated with the process and opted for what felt like the safe choice. Parents and teachers pushed students to attend college, but students still lacked structured support and concrete guidance. Students worried about college costs and lacked information on how financial aid worked. They didn’t know how to pick a college and were paralyzed by the fear of making the wrong choice.

Among the other key findings of relevance nationally:

- **Some 95 percent of 2005 Chicago graduates hoped to complete some form of postsecondary education and 90 percent stated that their parents wanted them to attend college after graduation.**
- **Teachers and schools matter more than parents in the college process, especially for first-generation college students.** Across all analyses, the single most consistent predictor of whether students took steps toward college enrollment was whether their teachers reported that their high school had a strong college going culture where they and their colleagues pushed students to go to college, worked to ensure that students would be prepared, and were involved in supporting students in completing their college applications.
- **Applying to multiple colleges makes it more likely that students will be accepted to a four-year college.** The effect of multiple applications was most significant for students who have lower levels of qualifications; these students were 8 percentage points more likely to be accepted if they applied to three to five schools, and 19 percentage points more likely to be accepted if applying to six or more schools.
- **Students with marginal qualifications were much more likely to enroll in a school that matched their qualifications if they had college planning discussions with someone at their school.** The more qualified students also were strongly influenced by whether they had a strong connection with a teacher.

Overall, the report suggests that educators and policy makers need to pay close attention to whether first-generation students are effectively participating in the college search and application process. Such an effort is essential to achieving the goals of high school reform and convincing students that working hard in school and valuing achievement will pay off for them in the future. To accomplish this task, the report suggests that school systems and policy makers work together to:

- **Build strong systems of support for the college search** and application process during the junior and senior years of high school.
- **Provide students access to information and guidance in obtaining financial aid** that allows them to compare the true costs of different college options.
- **Create strong college-going cultures in high schools** that set high expectations for college attendance and provide information, relationships and access to expert support.

Colleges and universities also can play a role in making this process easier for first-generation students by reaching back into high schools to recruit and support students and provide financial aid assistance.

Founded in 1990, the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago conducts research of high technical quality that influences policy and practice in Chicago and nationwide.