



Understanding the Conditions for Postsecondary Success

From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College

The goal of this research report is to help Counselors, educators, district leaders, and policymakers understand the adaptive challenges and practical steps to improve postsecondary outcomes for first-generation students and students of color, who now overwhelmingly aspire to go to college. The report uses qualitative and quantitative data from seniors in Chicago Public Schools in 2005.

The executive summary of the report is included in this Toolkit. For the entire report, [click here >>](#)

To view the corresponding research presentation, [click here >>](#)



CONSORTIUM ON
CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Executive Summary

From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College



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Executive Summary

Over the past several decades, the United States has witnessed a dramatic shift in the educational aspirations of high school students, particularly among low-income and minority students. Thirty years ago, the task of applying to college was not on the agenda of most students in American high schools. In 1980, only 40 percent of all tenth-graders and only 20 percent of low-income tenth-graders hoped to complete at least a bachelor's degree.¹ In 2005, 83 percent of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) seniors stated that they hoped to earn a bachelor's degree or higher, and an additional 13 percent aspired to attain a two-year or vocational degree.

Since 2004, the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) has tracked the postsecondary experiences of successive cohorts of graduating CPS students and examined the relationship among high school preparation, support, college choice, and postsecondary outcomes. The goal of this research is to help CPS understand the determinants of students' postsecondary success and to identify key levers for improvement. Our 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*, provided a baseline of where CPS stood as a school system. We looked at how many students enrolled in college and what types of schools they attended, and we examined the role of students' qualifications (e.g., grades, test scores, and course-taking patterns) in shaping access to and graduation from college. The conclusion of our first report, confirming a significant body of research on the link between high school performance and college access and graduation, is that increasing qualifications is the most important strategy for CPS students to improve college participation, access to four-year and more selective colleges, and ultimately college graduation rates.

This report, the second report in the series, looks beyond qualifications to examine whether CPS students who aspire to four-year colleges are effectively participating in the college search and application process and where they encounter potholes on the road to college. Drawing on prior research, we examine both how students manage the college application process and what types of colleges students apply to and ultimately enroll in. First, are CPS students who aspire to attend a four-year college taking the steps they need to enroll in a four-year college? Second, do CPS students effectively participate in college search and

get the support they need to make informed choices about what colleges they could apply to and what colleges may best fit their needs?

A critical goal of this report is to understand where CPS students encounter difficulty and success as they navigate the college search and application process, as well as the extent to which high school educators can create environments that support students in thoroughly engaging in this process. Thus, throughout this report, we pay particular attention to differences in students' experiences across high schools. We examine whether the norms for college enrollment of high school environments shape students' likelihood to plan to attend, apply to, and enroll in four-year colleges. Supporting students in the college search and application process also requires that high schools be organized to maximize information and guidance for students as they cross critical hurdles. While this report is not intended to provide a blueprint for what high schools should be doing, wherever possible we have tried to examine the impact of these critical steps in determining whether and where students who aspire to attend a four-year college ultimately enroll.

Examining Students' College Search, Application, and Match Process: The Data and Organization of this Report

In this report we use both qualitative and quantitative data to identify the barriers students face, and we focus specifically on the extent to which high school practices and environment shape students' participation in the college search and application process and their college enrollment patterns. We surveyed seniors about their college plans and activities and used CPS's postsecondary tracking system to follow successive cohorts of CPS graduates into college. We also talked to students. In addition to using qualitative data to elaborate on some of the findings presented in this report, we also present case studies from our qualitative study, each of which highlights a student who struggled at a different point in the postsecondary planning process. These case studies draw on our longitudinal, qualitative study of 105 CPS students in three high schools. They represent common themes that emerged from our qualitative work. All of the case studies can be downloaded at: ccsr.uchicago.edu/potholes.

For students to enroll in a suitable four-year college, they must effectively negotiate two sets of tasks. First, they must take a series of basic steps for four-year college enrollment: they must submit applications on time, apply for financial aid, gain acceptance, and ultimately enroll. Second, throughout this process, beyond hitting benchmarks, students must also be fully engaged in the often overwhelming task of finding the right college for them. This means thinking about what kinds of colleges they will likely be admitted to, what kind of college experience they want, and which colleges fit those descriptions. They must search for and decide upon a set of colleges that best meet their needs and provide a good college match. As we will illustrate in Chapter 1, CPS students are predominantly low-income, first-generation college-goers, and previous research finds that these students are particularly likely to encounter problems in both of these sets of tasks.

Clearly, these two sets of tasks are intertwined and are part of a larger process of college search and selection, but it is important to distinguish between these two ideas: taking the steps to enroll in college and engaging in the process of finding the right college. Students could take the steps necessary to enroll in a four-year college but fail to conduct a broad college search, limiting their applications. Or, students could conduct a broad college search, but miss important steps or deadlines. In Chapter 2, we focus on the first set of tasks: do students who aspire to attain a four-year college degree take the steps necessary to enroll in a four-year college? In Chapter 3, we look at the second set of tasks and consider the messier question of college match. In these two chapters, we analyze how students' negotiation of these tasks, as well as their schools' college climate, impacts *whether* they enroll in a four-year college (Chapter 2) and *where* they enroll (Chapter 3).

Key Findings

1. CPS students who aspire to complete a four-year degree do not effectively participate in the college application process.

Among CPS students who aspire to attain a four-year degree, only 41 percent took the steps necessary in their senior year to apply to and enroll in a four-year college. An additional 9 percent of students managed to enroll in a four-year college without following the standard steps, for a total of 50 percent of all CPS students who aspired to a four-year degree. Our look at CPS seniors' road from college

aspirations to enrollment identifies three critical benchmarks that even well-qualified students too often failed to make. First, many students opt to attend a two-year or vocational school instead of a four-year college. Fewer than three-quarters (72 percent) of students who aspired to attain a four-year degree stated in the spring that they planned to attend a four-year college in the fall. Second, many students who hoped to attend a four-year college do not apply. Only 59 percent of CPS graduates who stated that they aspired to attain a four-year degree ever applied to a four-year college. Third, even students who apply to and are accepted at a four-year college do not always enroll.

- **Students of all levels of qualifications have difficulty taking the steps to enroll in a four-year college.**

Students who aspired to attain a four-year degree and graduated with low GPAs and ACT scores, and thus very limited access to college, were unlikely to plan to attend, apply to, or be accepted to four-year colleges. However, many of the more qualified students did not consider attending a four-year college, and even some who planned to attend did not apply. Only 73 percent of students qualified to attend a somewhat selective college (the majority of four-year colleges in Illinois) expected to attend a four-year college in the fall, and only 61 percent applied. Similarly, only 76 percent of students qualified to attend a selective four-year college applied to a four-year college, even though students with access to a selective four-year college were accepted at very high rates when they applied.

- **Latino students have the most difficulty managing college enrollment.**

Latino students were the least likely to plan to enroll in a four-year college after graduation and the least likely to apply to a four-year college. Only 60 percent of Latino graduates who aspired to attain a four-year degree planned to attend a four-year college in the fall, compared to 77 percent of African-American and 76 percent of White/Other Ethnic graduates. Fewer than half of Latino students who aspired to a four-year degree applied to a four-year college, compared to about 65 percent of their African-American and White/Other Ethnic counterparts. One common explanation for why Latino CPS students do not enroll in four-year colleges is that they are immigrants. However, we found that immigrant status does not fully explain the gap in college enrollment between Latino and other students; after controlling

for immigrant status, qualifications, and other student characteristics, Latino students are still 13 percentage points less likely to enroll in a four-year college than African-American students.

2. Attending a high school with a strong college-going culture shapes students' participation in the college application process.

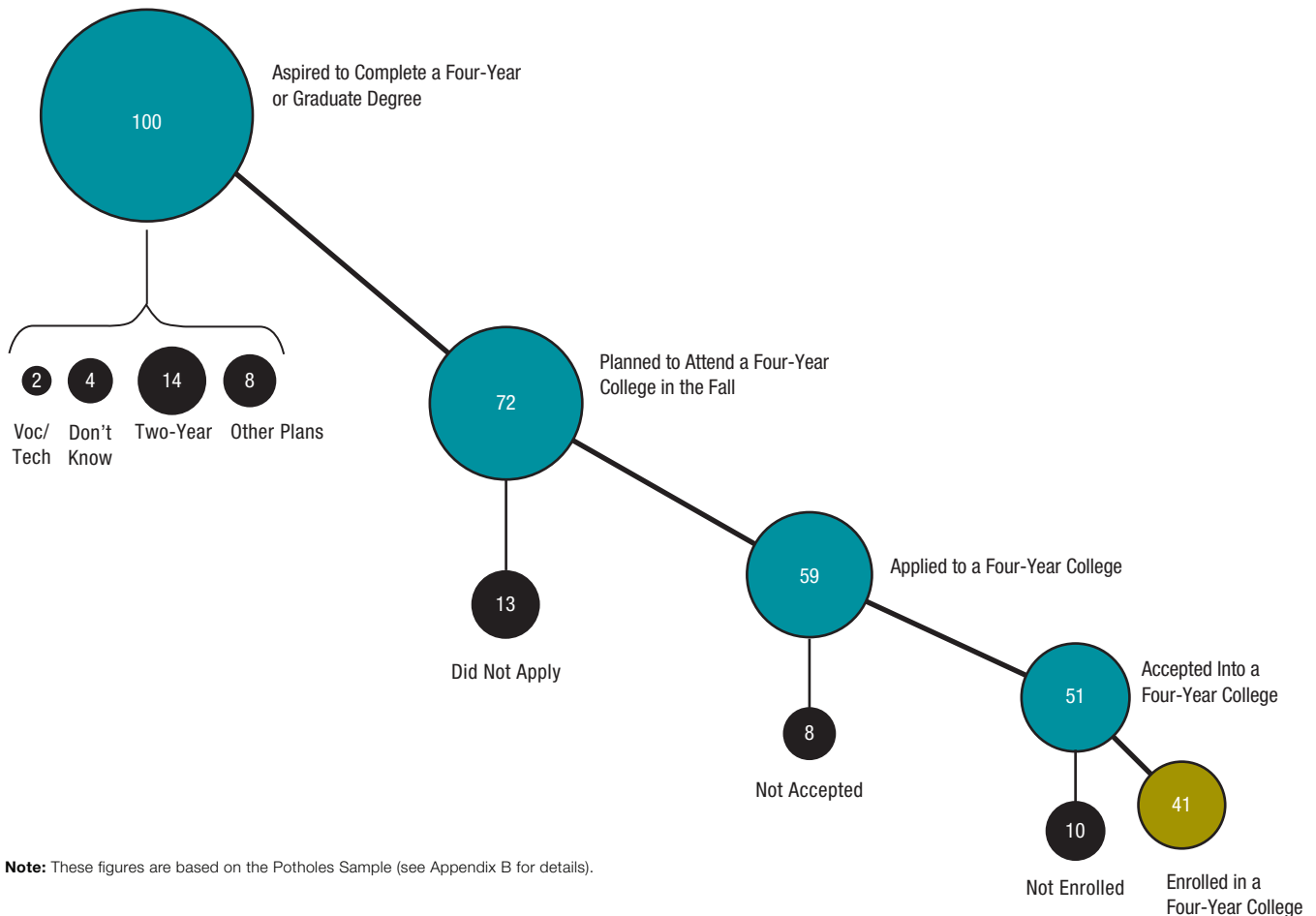
Across all our analyses, the single most consistent predictor of whether students took steps toward college enrollment was whether their teachers reported that their high school had a strong college climate, that is, they and their colleagues pushed students to go to college, worked to ensure that students would be prepared, and were involved in

supporting students in completing their college applications. Indeed, students who attended high schools in which teachers reported a strong college climate were significantly more likely to plan to attend a four-year school, apply, be accepted, and enroll. Importantly, having a strong college climate seemed to make the biggest difference for students with lower levels of qualifications. In addition, the college plans and behaviors of Latino students in CPS are particularly shaped by the expectations of their teachers and counselors and by connections with teachers. This suggests that Latino students may be much more reliant than other students on teachers and their school for guidance and information, and that their college plans are more dependent on their connections to school.

FIGURE 11

Only 41 percent of CPS graduates who aspired to complete a four-year degree took these steps and enrolled in a four-year college in the fall after graduation—an additional 9 percent enrolled in college without taking these steps

Tracking students through the steps to college enrollment:



3. Filing a FAFSA and applying to multiple colleges shape students' likelihood of being accepted to and enrolling in a four-year college.

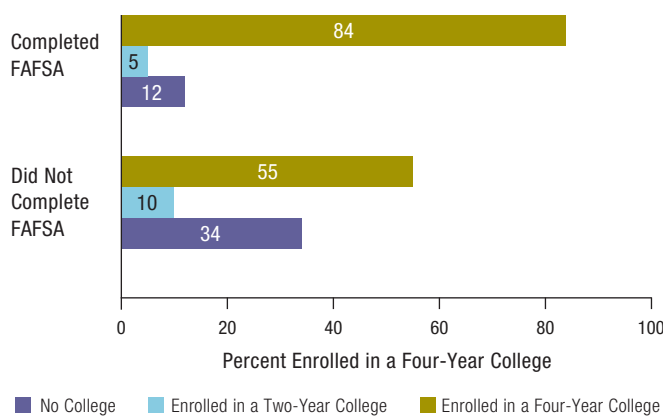
Applying for financial aid is not easy, but it may be the most critical step for low-income students on the road to college. It is also one of the most confusing steps, and it is a point at which many CPS students stumble. Our analysis finds, moreover, that many CPS students may end up facing higher costs for college because they do not take the step of filing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is needed to maximize federal, state, and institutional support. In addition, CPS has set the goal that students should apply to at least five colleges to maximize their options. Our analysis supports this approach.

- **Not filing a FAFSA may be a significant barrier to college enrollment for CPS students.**

Students who reported completing a FAFSA by May and had been accepted into a four-year college were more than 50 percent more likely to enroll than students who had not completed a FAFSA. This strong association holds even after we control for differences in students' qualifications, family background and neighborhood characteristics, and support from teachers, counselors, and parents. Not surprisingly, Latino students who aspire to complete a four-year degree were the least likely to report that they had completed a FAFSA.

FIGURE 19
Students who were accepted into a four-year college were much more likely to enroll if they completed the FAFSA

Difference in college enrollment by whether students completed their FAFSA among students who were accepted into a four-year college:



Note: FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) completion rates come from student responses to the 2005 CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire. Numbers are based on the Potholes Sample (see Appendix B for details).

- **Applying to multiple colleges makes it more likely that students will be accepted to a four-year college.**

Controlling for students' qualifications, family background, and reports of the individual support they received from teachers, counselors, and parents, students who applied to at least one four-year college were more likely to be accepted if they applied to three or more, and particularly six or more, schools. The effect of multiple applications was most significant for students who have lower levels of qualifications. It is these students who may have the most difficulty getting accepted at a four-year college. Their likelihood of acceptance is most affected by whether they are active in the application process and by whether they attend schools where the norm is applying to multiple colleges.

4. Only about one-third of CPS students who aspire to complete a four-year degree enroll in a college that matches their qualifications.

In this report, we use the concept of “match” to describe whether a student enrolled in a college with a selectivity level that matched the kind of colleges the student would likely have been accepted to, given his or her high school qualifications. College “match” is an easily quantifiable outcome, but ultimately finding the right college means more than gaining acceptance to the most competitive college possible. It is about finding a place that is a good “fit:” a college that meets a student’s educational and social needs, as well as one that will best support his or her intellectual and social development. Match is just one consideration of the larger process of engaging in an effective college search, but it is also an important indicator of whether students are engaged more broadly in a search that incorporates the larger question of fit. Furthermore, research, including our own, has consistently found that college choice matters, particularly for well-qualified students; there is wide variation in college graduation rates, even among colleges that serve similar students.²

When we examined match among CPS students, the dominant pattern of behavior for students who mismatch is not that they choose to attend a four-year college slightly below their match. Rather, many students mismatch by enrolling in two-year colleges or not enrolling in college at all. Across all students, about two-thirds (62 percent) of students attended a college with a selectivity level that was below the kinds of colleges they would have most likely been accepted to, given their level of qualifications.

- **Among the most highly qualified students in CPS, only 38 percent enroll in a match college.**

One-quarter of students with qualifications to attend a very selective college enrolled in a college with a slightly lower level of selectivity (a selective college). About 20 percent enrolled in a somewhat selective college (a college with a selectivity rating far below their level of qualifications). An additional 17 percent enrolled in a nonselective four-year college, a two-year college, or no college at all. Taken together, the most-qualified students were equally likely to not enroll in college or enroll in a college far below their match (37 percent) as they were to enroll in a very selective college (38 percent).

- **Mismatch is an issue among CPS students of all levels of qualifications.**

Students in our sample with access to selective colleges (e.g., DePaul University or Loyola University) were actually less likely to match than their classmates with access to very selective colleges. Only 16 percent of students with access to selective colleges enrolled in a match college. An additional 11 percent enrolled in a very selective college, a rating higher than their match category—what we term “above match.” Thus only 27 percent of CPS graduates in the Match Sample with access to a selective college enrolled in a selective or very selective college, while fully 29 percent of these students enrolled in a two-year college or did not enroll at all. This mismatch problem is nearly as acute for students who had access to somewhat selective colleges (the majority of four-year public colleges in Illinois).

5. Among the most highly qualified students, having discussions on postsecondary planning and having strong connections to teachers is particularly important in shaping the likelihood of enrolling in a match school.

In addition, we found that all students were much more likely to match if they attended schools with strong college-going cultures. Thus, attending a high school where teachers are oriented to prepare and support students in their postsecondary aspirations has a strong impact on whether students go on to attend a match college.

Concluding Points

No Child Left Behind has made closing the gap in educational achievement among racial/ethnic groups and between low-income students and their more advantaged peers a priority of every school in the United States. One area where we have seen dramatic reductions in gaps across race/ethnicity and income is in educational aspirations. But we know that closing the gap in high school performance is critical if we are to help students attain their college aspirations. In our last report, we found that poor qualifications undermined CPS students’ college access and performance. We argued that central to improving college access was getting students to increase their qualifications, work harder, and value their classroom performance.

If we are to ask students to work harder and value achievement, educators and policymakers must work equally as hard to deliver on the promise that if students achieve high levels of qualifications, they will have equal access to the kinds of colleges and opportunities as their more advantaged counterparts. In a world of rising college costs, CPS educators unfortunately will have difficulty delivering on that promise. But, the findings of this report demonstrate the myriad of ways in which CPS students, even the highest performers, are disadvantaged as they work to translate those qualifications into college enrollment. Too many Chicago students who aspire to attain a four-year college degree do not even apply to a four-year college. Too many students who are accepted do not enroll. In this report, we show how the social capital gap—the extent to which students have access to norms for college enrollment, information on how to prepare and effectively participate in college search and selection, and effective guidance and support in making decisions about college—shapes students’ college access. Like previous research, we find that low-income students struggle in the process of college search and application and encounter potholes that divert them off the road to four-year colleges. The good news in this report is there are ways that CPS teachers, counselors, and administrators can improve college access for students: ensuring that students who aspire to attain a four-year degree get the help they need to understand how to make decisions about potential colleges, making sure that students effectively participate in the college application process and apply for financial aid in time to maximize their financial support, and urging students to apply to colleges that match their qualifications.

“The rising aspirations of urban students demands that high school educators see themselves as playing a new and important role in students’ lives...Ensuring that students effectively participate in the college search and financial aid processes is not just important for students’ college outcomes. It may also be a critical component of any larger high school reform effort.”

—Interpretive Summary, *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College*

To download a copy of the full report or request a printed copy, visit: ccsr.uchicago.edu/potholes

The analysis in this report suggests two important take-home messages to educators. The first is that educators 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 search, planning, and application process.³ The second take-home message is that if the most highly qualified students do not attend colleges that demand high qualifications, then their hard work has not paid off. Making hard work worthwhile must be a central goal if CPS is going to ask all students to work hard and value their course performance and achievement.

Paying attention to whether students effectively participate in the college search and application process could be an essential support for high school reform if we use it to convince students that working hard in high school and valuing achievement will pay off for them in the future. This task is not an easy one. The interpretive summary highlights three critical areas that high schools must develop if they are to help students understand why achievement matters, aspire to postsecondary institutions that demand that achievement, and obtain access to those institutions by effectively participating in college search and selection. These areas are: (1) building strong systems of support for the college search and application process during junior and senior years; (2) creating strong college-going cultures that set norms for college attendance and provide information,

relationships, and access to concrete supports and expert knowledge to build bridges to the future; and (3) providing access to information and guidance in obtaining financial aid, information about how to afford colleges, and the true costs of different college options.

Indeed, the findings of this report raise the question: What will it take to build new systems of support and new capacity at the district, school, and classroom levels? The problems outlined in this report are complex, and we have provided no easy list of solutions. The scope suggests that multiple and varied solutions will be required and must include a focus on building capacity. What are we asking teachers, counselors, and school staff to accomplish? What are the best ways of organizing systems of supports, staffing, and information that will build the capacity of teachers, counselors, and schools—and ultimately of parents and students? What kinds of incentives, programmatic and personnel resources, and management systems will best promote a strong focus on college access in a diverse set of high schools? CPS has already begun to take the first steps to build a system to support its students on the road to college with its postsecondary initiatives, but the task will also require substantial resources from the district and strong commitments from each high school to develop new approaches and capacity. We hope the analysis and data provided in this report provide a useful tool for policymakers, educators, and the larger community to begin this work.

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2004).
- 2 Titus (2004); Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth (2006).
- 3 McDonough (1997); Cabrera and La Nasa (2000); Gonzales, Stoner, and Jovel (2003).



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Consortium researchers spent nearly two years interviewing and tracking the academic progress of 105 students in three Chicago high schools. Each of the ten case studies included in the “Potholes” report tells the story of an individual student but also highlights the difficulties faced by many students 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.”—*Javier, a first-generation college student, lacked strong college guidance from his school and enrolled in an automotive technical school, despite an academic record that qualified him for a selective college.*

“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.” —*Sabrina, a highly qualified student with an overwhelming senior year workload, became too focused on one college option and never enrolled in college in the fall after graduation.*

“I have no idea. I want to go to college, but I’m at the point [where] I don’t know what I want to be. That’s pretty much how you’re spending the rest of your life...so I find it’s a pretty big decision.”—*Jennie, a well-rounded student who earned top grades in a rigorous International Baccalaureate program but made an early decision to attend a two-year college.*

“I’m going to apply to many different schools because I don’t want to get stuck and focus on one university and that doesn’t go through.”—*Franklin, a charismatic student with modest academic qualifications and strong support at home who conducted a thorough college search and landed in a well-matched state public university.*

To read their stories and download the case studies, see: ccsr.uchicago.edu/potholes