



## Understanding the Conditions for Postsecondary Success

# To&Through Issue Brief: College Choice

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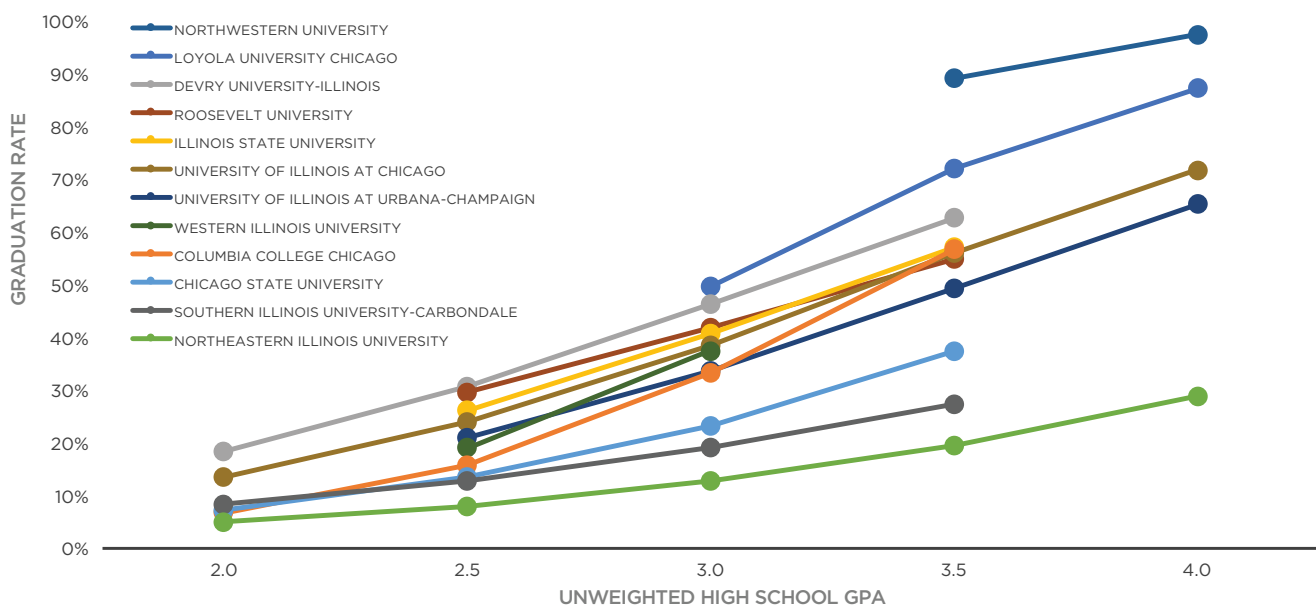
A two-page brief summarizing the UChicago Consortium's latest research on why college choice matters and strategies schools are using to help students navigate the college selection process.

## What does UChicago Consortium research say about why college choice matters?

Research from UChicago Consortium shows that for students to successfully navigate the road to college graduation, they must fully engage in a many-stepped process including college search, college choice, and college enrollment. Some of these steps are technical in nature—including the timely submission of college and financial aid applications and forms—but others are more complex, particularly for students who are the first generation in their families to attend college.

An important factor that can inform students' choice is a college's institutional or underrepresented minority graduation rate. Regardless of their academic qualifications, students' likelihood of graduating from a given college mirrors the institutional graduation rate. This is also true for students with strong grades in high school; in fact, college choice matters the most for students with strong academic qualifications.

Other important factors for students to consider in making a college choice include whether or not a college represents a good match for their qualifications and a good fit with their needs and interests. A college "match" occurs when a student applies to and enrolls in a college with a selectivity level that matches the kind of colleges that accept other students with similar high school qualifications. College "fit" goes beyond just beyond selectivity and institutional graduation rate. A good fit meets a student's educational and social needs and best supports his or her intellectual and social development. A student is far more likely to persist through college if he or she feels a sense of belonging and engagement.



These lines come from logistic regression models performed for each high school, predicting graduation with GPA. The regression lines are based on data from all students at each college based on their actual (not rounded) GPA. However, points are included on the graph for a college only if at least 20 students at that college had a rounded high school GPA at that point.

## What strategies are some high schools using to work on college choice?

### Creating a strong, school-wide college-going culture

Students who attend high schools in which teachers report a strong college-going culture—where a school leader has established college attainment as a clear and shared goal for students, where teachers are well-versed on the most important factors for college admission and success, and where teachers and counselors are involved in supporting students in completing their college applications—are 12 percentage points more likely to apply to and 14 percentage points more likely to enroll in a four-year college than students who attend high schools in which teachers do not report a strong college-going culture.

### Encouraging students to apply to multiple colleges and strongly consider institutional graduation rates

Students who apply to at least three, and particularly six or more, schools are much more likely to be accepted. This effect is especially strong for students with lower levels of qualifications. Many schools require every senior to submit at least three applications. Moreover, either during the application process or when a student is choosing which college to attend, some schools encourage students to look at institutional graduation rates as a proxy for how well the college or university supports its students.

### Ensuring students complete the FAFSA as early as possible

Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is an essential step in the road to college. Completing the FAFSA as early as possible is critical; many colleges and states have early deadlines or give financial aid on a first-come, first-served basis. For the last decade, CPS has centrally tracked how many students are completing the FAFSA and worked with counselors to support students who haven't.

### Building a post-secondary team that oversees students' college-going process and the school's college-going culture

Trusted adults like school counselors, administrators, outside community partners, and senior teachers can build a post-secondary team to guide high school students to and through the college-going process. Building strong systems of support for the college search and application process during junior and senior year can have a positive effect on college enrollment. At some schools this team meets monthly or bi-weekly to review data on students' college applications, admissions, financial aid, and scholarships. Some teams also get involved during the summer and fall after graduation, looking to intervene with graduates students who were admitted to college, but might not enroll.

## References

Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., Coca, V., and Moeller, E. (2008). *From high school to the future: Potholes on the road to college*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.