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Common perceptions about college-going are not reality for CPS graduates, finds a new study
UChicago researchers examine more than 6,000 paths that CPS graduates took through college

The college enrollment rate for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) graduates has steadily increased over the past decade and attending college has become the predominant plan following high school. College completion rates, however, have remained relatively flat.

A new study from the [University of Chicago Consortium on School Research \(UChicago Consortium\)](http://consortium.uchicago.edu) and the [To&Through Project](#) examines the college paths and outcomes of approximately 63,000 CPS graduates in the classes of 2010, 2011, and 2012, from the time they first enrolled in college to the point six years later when they stayed or left college, with or without a credential in hand. In [Navigating the Maze: Understanding CPS Graduates' Paths Through College](#), researchers use data to debunk four common perceptions about going to college that did not hold true for CPS graduates.

- 1) *The Direct Path*
Being continuously enrolled in one college and graduating with a degree or certificate was not the standard path for CPS graduates. Students in the study took more than 6,000 post-secondary paths in the six years after high school graduation.
- 2) *Two-to-Four Year College Transfer*
Beginning at a two-year college and transferring to a four-year college was not a common—or frequently successful—path for CPS graduates. Students who immediately enrolled in a four-year college were far more likely to complete a four-year degree in six years: 48 percent compared to 7 percent for students who immediately enrolled in a two-year college.
- 3) *Taking “Time Off School”*
Taking a semester off may be an early-warning indicator of non-graduation for CPS students. Approximately 90 percent of CPS graduates who took a semester off (or “stopped out”) did not complete a degree within six years. Most students took time off—about one-half of four-year college enrollees and more than 80 percent of two-year college enrollees stopped out at least once within six years.
- 4) *Taking a Gap Year*
Delaying enrollment or taking a “gap year” resulted in lower college completion rates for many CPS students. Only 8 percent of students who delayed college enrollment completed a degree or credential within six years.

“When making decisions about going, or not going, to college, students, families, and counselors need reliable information about the outcomes that are associated with those choices,” said Jenny Nagaoka, Deputy Director, UChicago Consortium. “By examining transitions and patterns in college mobility, we can begin to understand how the current system can be re-imagined to better support students.”

“Our findings show a high rate of CPS graduates transferring and stopping out of college, which suggests that the higher education system is failing many of our students,” said Alex Seeskin, Director, The To&Through Project. “Colleges need to do everything in their power to stay connected to students and remove barriers to college completion that are frequently outside of a student’s control.”

For example, Northern Illinois and Western Illinois Universities have created deliberate [support strategies](#) to bring in and retain CPS graduates, such as scholarships, test-free/optional admission, changes to billing and hold policies, and tutoring support. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, both universities [experienced double-digit increases](#) in enrollment

and retention of CPS graduates. “The fact that roughly one-half of students who stop out end up returning to college is a sign that despite often difficult circumstances, CPS graduates are motivated to complete a college degree,” said Alexandra Usher, Senior Research Analyst, UChicago Consortium. “With innovation in higher education policies and practices, both students and colleges can thrive.”

Key Findings

- About 46 percent of CPS graduates enrolled in a four-year institution and 47 percent enrolled in a two-year institution at some point during their post-secondary journey.
- It was more common for CPS graduates to enroll in a four-year college and then transfer to a two-year college (29 percent of four-year college enrollees) than to enroll in a two-year college and transfer to a four-year college (22 percent of two-year college enrollees).
- Nearly 83 percent of immediate two-year college enrollees took a semester off (stopped out) at least once within six years, compared to 51 percent of immediate four-year college enrollees.
- Around 90 percent of students who took at least one semester off from college did not complete a degree or credential within six years.
- The vast majority of students who completed a four-year degree within six years immediately enrolled in a four-year college after graduating high school and remained continuously enrolled until completion.
- Young women were more likely to both immediately enroll and to persist than young men, both in four-year and two-year colleges.
- Ten percent of students who did not enroll in college within six years had an average high school GPA above 3.0—a missed opportunity for high-achieving students.

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About the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

With the goal of supporting stronger and more equitable educational outcomes for students, the [UChicago Consortium](#) conducts research of high technical quality that informs and assesses policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, families, and communities as we support the search for solutions to the challenges of school improvement. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and practice but does not advocate for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school improvement by identifying what matters most for student success, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.

About the To&Through Project

In collaboration with educators, policymakers, and communities, the [To&Through Project](#) aims to significantly increase high school and postsecondary completion for under-resourced students of color in Chicago and around the country by providing education stakeholders with research-based data on students' educational experiences and facilitating dialogue on its implications for adult practice.