CONSORTIUM ON
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c c s r

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

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Acknowledgements

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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.

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.

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:

Note: These figures are based on the Potholes Sample (see Appendix B for details).
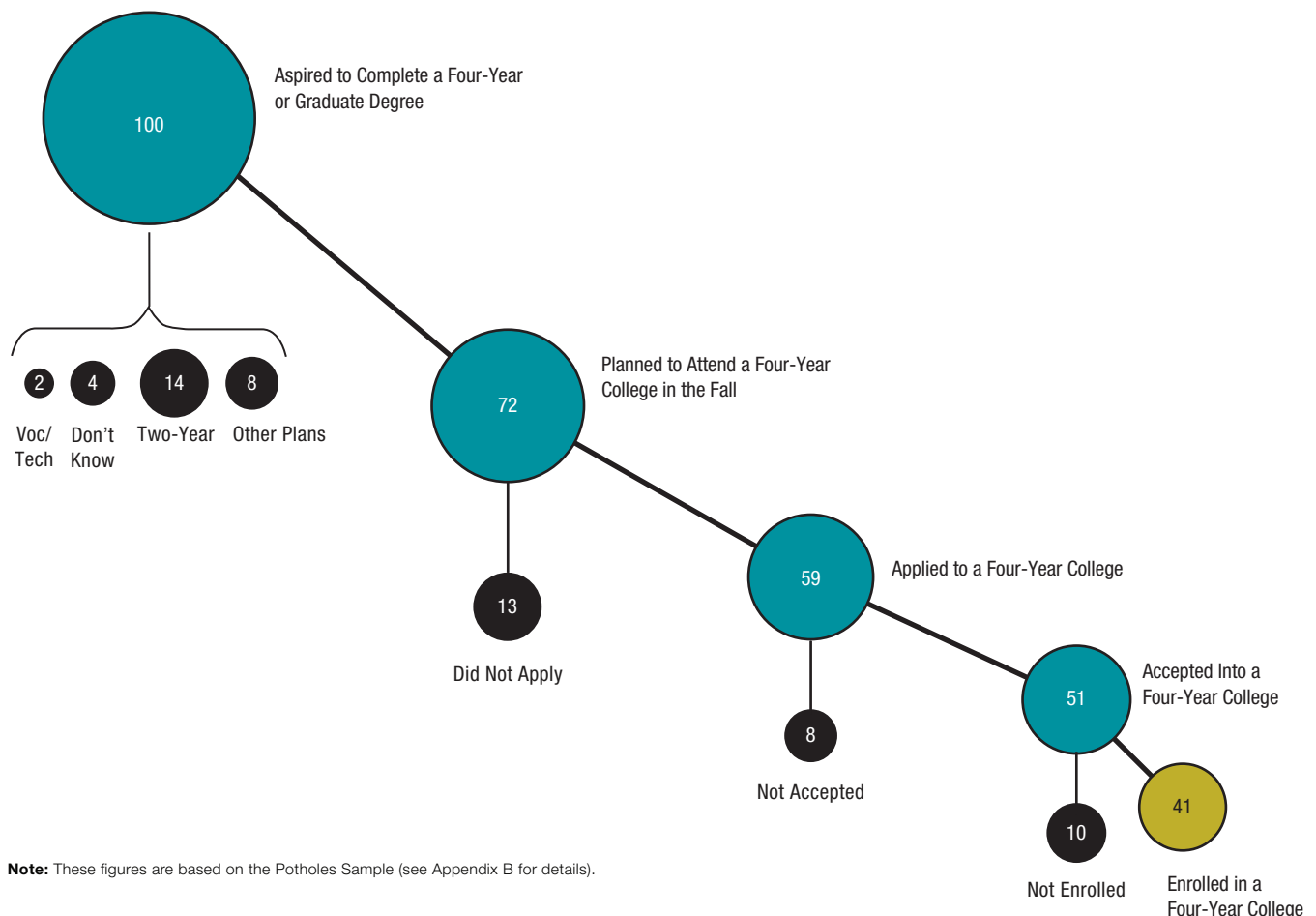
- **Students of all levels of qualifications have difficulty taking the steps to enroll in a four-year college.**
Students who aspired to attain a four-year degree and graduated with low GPAs and ACT scores, and thus very limited access to college, were unlikely to plan to attend, apply to, or be accepted 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.

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:

No College   **Enrolled in a Two-Year College**   **Enrolled in a Four-Year College**
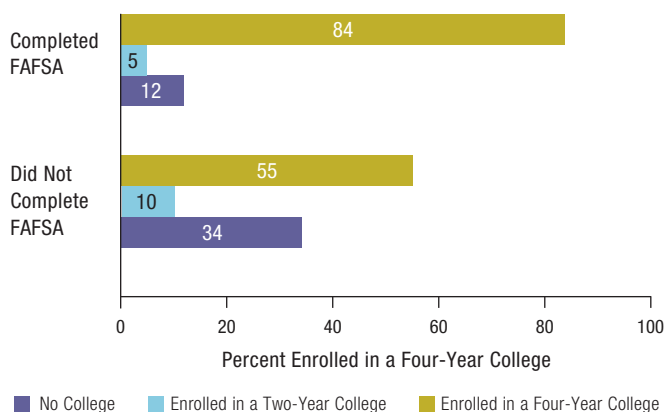
Note: FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) completion rates come from student responses to the 2005 CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire. Numbers are based on the Potholes Sample (see Appendix B for details).

- **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 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 interpretative 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).

Introduction

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] The gap in college aspirations across racial/ethnic groups and income levels has narrowed significantly; newer estimates suggest that the majority of low-income students and nearly three quarters of all Latino and African-American students aspire to complete at least a bachelor's degree.[2]

These changed aspirations reflect the dramatic shift in the economic landscape facing today's students. Rising payoffs to skills and stagnating earnings among the non-college educated mean that completing some form of postsecondary education is critical if students are to succeed in the new economy. Occupational projections suggest that the majority of new jobs available in the U.S. economy will require at least some postsecondary education or training, and the jobs that require the most education have the fastest projected increases in earnings.[3]

Rising aspirations have direct implications for high schools. When only a small proportion of students aspired to attend college, it was easy to delegate the task of college preparation to a small group of elite high schools and programs or a small number of dedicated teachers and counselors. The task posed to educators by today's high school students and their families is daunting. What will it mean to change high schools from institutions that prepare a select group of students for college enrollment to institutions that prepare the majority of high school students for this goal?

The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has become a national leader in taking on this issue. In 2003, CPS established the Department of Postsecondary Education and Student Development, charged with ensuring that all CPS students have access to the courses, opportunities, and experiences that will prepare them for a viable postsecondary education or career. As part of this initiative, CPS became the first major school system in the country to track and report the college participation rates of its graduates using data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). This initiative also included new supports to build strong postsecondary guidance systems and accelerated efforts to expand participation in rigorous coursework, such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

Central to realizing the potential of CPS's postsecondary planning efforts is better understanding where CPS currently stands as a school system and what matters most in shaping students' postsecondary access, choices, and experiences. High school educators and the school system need to then consider the implications of these findings for their efforts to improve students' postsecondary outcomes. 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 Schools 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 in shaping access to and graduation from college.

This report, the second in the series, follows up on several important but unresolved issues identified in our first report. Why is there such a large gap between the educational aspirations of students and their college enrollment? Why do CPS students tend to enroll in a limited number of colleges, many of which have very low institutional graduation rates? Why do we see such dramatic differences across high schools and across racial/ethnic groups in college attendance? While poor high school performance is part of the answer to these questions, we could not completely explain the patterns of college enrollment solely on the basis of students' high school qualifications and demographic characteristics. Our first report suggested that "high schools must pay attention to guidance and support if students are to translate qualifications into college enrollment," but our report did not provide evidence to help educators think about how to do this. The purpose of this second report is to begin to fill this gap by looking closely at the ways in which students who aspire to attend four-year colleges participate in the college search and application process.

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. Over the past three years, we followed 105 juniors in three Chicago high schools, interviewing them as they navigated the college search and application process and ultimately as they did or did not enter college. This report examines how CPS students manage the college search and application process and at what points they face difficulties.

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. This means thinking about what kinds of colleges they will likely be admitted to, what kind of college experience they want, and what 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 parts 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 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).

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 whether students are likely 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.

Whenever a school system takes on a new problem and begins to look at the related data, it may raise issues that are both uncomfortable and controversial. Many such issues are identified in this report. We want to recognize the CPS administration and high school leaders for being willing to engage in this difficult process. The issues we talk about in this report are not specific to Chicago. The problems and barriers we identify are faced by urban and low-income students throughout the United States. The difference is that CPS is leading the nation in trying to address these issues, allowing us to better understand the experience of its students. The answers to the problems we have identified will be complex. There are many high schools in Chicago that are working hard on these problems and already have made significant progress. This report is not intended as a judgment of the efficacy of these efforts. Rather, it is intended to provide schools with critical frameworks and information they can use to assess their own efforts and engage in constructive dialogue over how to interpret our findings and develop innovative solutions. We hope that the school system, individual high schools, and postsecondary institutions will use this report as an opportunity to rise to the challenge of our students' aspirations.

The Problem: Translating Aspirations into College Access and Attainment

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Juniors Answer this Question:

*"Pretend I don't know anything about how to get to college.
What do you need to do between now and the end of senior year?"*

Zahra

African-American Student with Qualifications to Attend a Very Selective College or University

You need to talk to your counselor. . . . So I'd probably go to two counselors to get information about colleges, open house dates, tours . . . You need to write good essays, so you need to get them edited . . . [The deadline] depends on if you want to do early admission or regular . . . I say now that I'm going to go to the [college] that offers me the most money, but then I think about how I came to [my high school], and it's like once you go to the campus–if you really like it, that's where you should go.

Andrew

African-American Student with Qualifications to Attend a Somewhat Selective College or University

[You need to] stay in school and go to class and get good grades and get some of those service learning hours . . . You go to the college fairs and you pick up the applications or whatever. You fill it out . . . and I guess you mail it . . . I will probably apply to any school that I get an application from when I go to the college fair—[and go to] whichever one I can get the best offer.

Miguel

Latino Student with Qualifications to Attend a Very Selective College or University

I'm not even sure [what the steps are], they just told me to try to get applications in by the beginning of the year and they have to fill them up and then after that, after Christmas break you have to turn in your financial aid sheet . . . I still don't have any [applications] . . . I'm still kind of like confused about it, because I'm not really sure what to do.

What does it take to get to college? As these CPS juniors illustrate, the answer to this question is not particularly straightforward for many students. Students who aspire to attend college face a complex array of tasks in their junior and senior years. Getting to college requires CPS students to struggle with very specific questions about the college search and application process. How do you learn about different colleges? How do you apply? How do you decide what college is right for you? How do you finance the increasing costs of college?

As more and more students plan to attend college, the application process has become its own growth industry. Go into any bookstore and you will find an entire section devoted to these questions. There are books describing different colleges, books on how to find the right college, books on how to write effective college applications, and books on how to finance college. Well-informed students are turning to these sources for directions to navigate the daunting road they face in the transition from high school to college.

Research consistently finds that low-income students, particularly first-generation college students (students who are the first in their family to attend college), do not effectively participate in the college search and application process.[4] Often, a lack of information and support creates significant barriers to college access. How can CPS students better navigate the road to college? How can high schools best support students in effectively participating in the college search and application process? And, what are the "potholes" along the road that may divert students from their aspirations? This report looks at these questions using data from a multi-year research project at the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago. In this chapter, we review previous research and lay out our framework for the "potholes on the road to college" and provide the Chicago context for our analysis in this report.

Rising Aspirations for College

Thirty years ago, the task of applying to college was not on the agenda of most juniors and seniors in American high schools. Rising aspirations mean, however, that most CPS juniors and seniors are grappling with the question of how to best navigate the road to college. Like their counterparts nationally, Chicago students have high educational aspirations. In CCSR's April 2005 survey, 83 percent of 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 (see Figure 1). Parents seem to be supporting their children's aspirations. Fully 90 percent of CPS seniors stated in CCSR's 2005 survey that their parents wanted them to attend college in the fall after high school graduation (see Figure 1). Latino CPS students, reflecting national trends, were slightly less likely to aspire to complete a four-year degree and slightly fewer reported that their parents wanted them to attend college. Still, 95 percent of Latino seniors stated that they hope to complete some form of postsecondary education and 87 percent stated that their parents wanted them to attend college.

FIGURE 1

Almost all CPS graduates hope to complete some form of postsecondary education, and their parents want them to attend college

What is the highest level of education you plan to complete?

What do you think your parents/guardians want you to do next year?
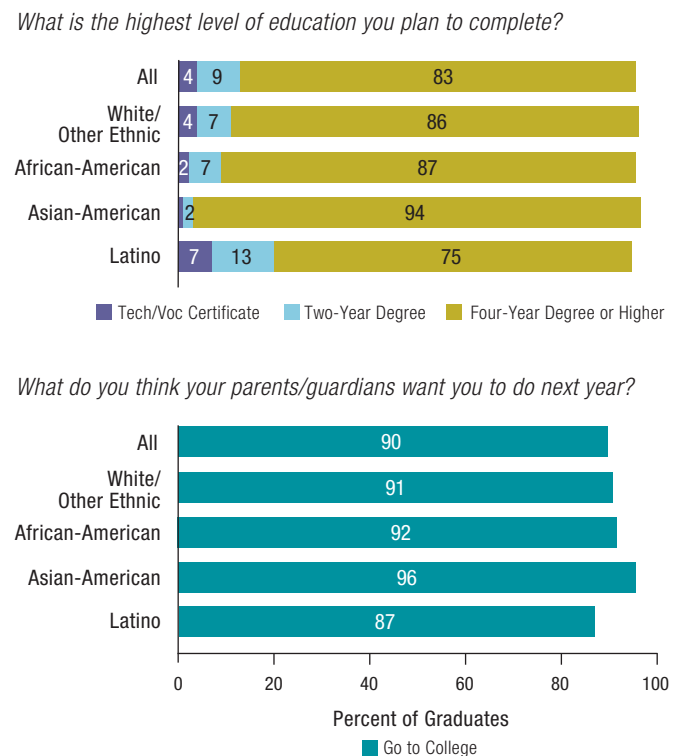
Note: These numbers are based on student responses to the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey. They do not include students in special education or students attending alternative high schools. A total of 6,850 graduates reported on their own aspirations and 6,277 graduates reported on their parents' aspirations.

High and rising aspirations to attend college is not a problem in and of itself. The problem, as we document in this and the previous report, is that CPS students have difficulty translating their aspirations into college enrollment. Figure 2 shows college enrollment in the fall after high school graduation among 2005 CPS seniors who aspired to attain any type of postsecondary degree. Among 2005 graduates, only 61 percent of seniors who aspired to continue their education enrolled in any postsecondary institution the fall after graduation. Among those who aspired to attain a four-year college degree (see Figure 3), 65 percent enrolled in a college but fewer than half enrolled in a four-year college. Latino and African-American students are the least likely to enroll in college. Only half of Latino students who planned to continue their education enrolled in college, and only 37 percent of Latino students who hoped to complete at least a four-year degree enrolled in a four-year college. Latino students are much less likely to enroll in a four-year college, despite being only slightly less likely than their CPS classmates to aspire to attend college. Thus, the gap between aspirations and enrollment is largest for Latino students, but remains a consistent problem for students across all racial/ethnic groups.

The Prevailing Explanations

How do we understand why so many CPS students who aspire to complete a four-year college degree have difficulty attaining their aspirations? Over the past several years, the national policy discussion has coalesced around two central explanations: (1) low academic preparation and (2) the declining real value of financial aid combined with rising college costs. There is strong evidence that racial/ethnic minority and low-income students are much less likely to leave high school with the qualifications that give them access to college and are critical to college performance and persistence.[5] We examined this in our first report, and we summarize the relevant findings in the next section.

Rising college costs are also an important barrier. Low-income students face dramatically different postsecondary options from their more advantaged peers because of the rising costs of college, the declining real value of federal financial aid, and the resulting higher net college price faced by low-income families.[6] In 2007 alone, the average tuition and fees, excluding room and board, at United States colleges rose at double the rate of inflation to $6,185 at public four-year colleges and fully $23,712 at private four-year colleges.[7] Financial

More than 90 percent of CPS graduates hope to complete a college degree, but only 61 percent of those graduates enroll in college by the fall after graduation

Of graduates who aspire to complete at least a two-year degree:
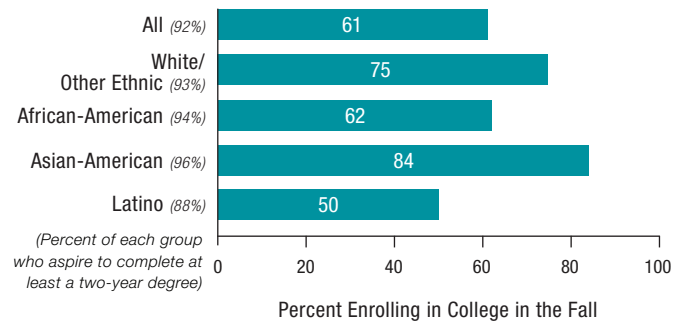
(Percent of each group who aspire to complete at least a two-year degree)

Percent Enrolling in College in the Fall

Note: These numbers are based on student responses to the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey and NSC data. They do not include students in special education or students attending alternative high schools.

Eighty-three percent of CPS graduates hope to complete at least a four-year college degree, but fewer than half of these graduates enroll in a four-year college in the fall

Of graduates who aspire to complete at least a four-year degree:
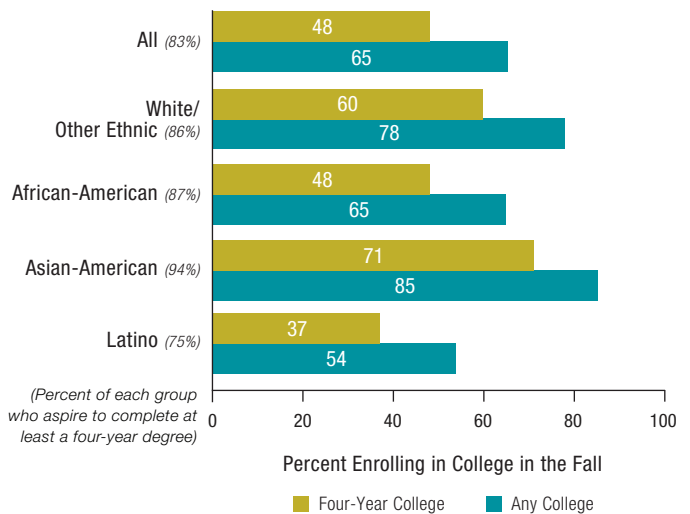
(Percent of each group who aspire to complete at least a four-year degree)

Percent Enrolling in College in the Fall

■ Four-Year College ■ Any College

Note: These numbers are based on student responses to the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey and NSC data. They do not include students in special education or students attending alternative high schools.

aid has not kept up. A recent U.S. Department of Education report found that the average percentage of family income needed to cover college costs after grant aid has increased substantially; by 2003–04 at public colleges, families in the lowest income quartile still had an unmet need of almost half their family income, compared to 10 percent for families in the highest income quartile.[8] There is a rich literature demonstrating the extent to which these increases in costs create barriers to college enrollment and completion.[9] Research finds that levels of financial aid and college costs are strongly associated with the likelihood of college enrollment, four-year college enrollment, and college persistence.

In the last several years, a spate of national reports have focused on these first two explanations—low qualifications and high costs—calling for investments in high school reform in order to increase students' academic preparation and policies to address the rising college costs.[10] Implicit in these policy approaches is the assumption that the only barriers to enrolling in college that minority, low-income, and first-generation college students face are academic qualifications and financial resources. However, prior research finds that, compared to their more advantaged peers, low-income and first-generation college students do not have similar access to the guidance, information, and support needed to effectively navigate the college application process.[11]

This lack of information and support may be as important a barrier to enrolling in college as academic qualifications and financial resources. Michael Kirst and Andrea Venezia (2004) found that few minority students and their families fully understand the requirements of college application and admission and that many lack knowledge of the financial aid system and often overestimate the actual costs of college attendance.[12] In addition, research has consistently found that first-generation college students often do not have access to adults who know the necessary steps to get ready for college, particularly how to search for colleges and how to manage college and financial aid applications.[13] As a result, these students often fail to take the steps necessary to enroll in college and often conduct quite limited college searches.

Research on college access and choice highlights the importance of the norms for college, access to college information, and concrete guidance and support in shaping aspirations, engagement in school, and college access.[14] These are often termed social capital explanations. While a focus on qualifications is a human capital explanation and a focus on college costs is a financial capital explanation, sociological research suggests that differences in access to social capital play an important role in why low-income and first-generation college students have difficulty translating aspirations into enrollment.[15] Thus, sociological research on college choice suggests that low-income and first-generation students may have difficulty translating aspirations into enrollment because they do not have access to norms for college, college information, and concrete guidance and support (e.g., social capital) in their families, communities, and, most importantly, high schools.

How important is it for educators and policymakers both locally and nationally to pay attention to social capital in this policy debate? This is the central question we struggle with in this report as we focus on understanding how CPS students participate in the college search and application process and the role of high schools in shaping students' college enrollment. We know that qualifications are an important barrier for CPS students and, in the next section, we summarize findings in this area from our first report. Although financing college is a major barrier for CPS students, who are overwhelmingly low-income, we do not specifically analyze how college cost barriers impact college enrollment patterns in this report. We do, however, examine how a lack of social capital and failure to navigate the financial aid process compound the cost barriers that low-income CPS students face.

Rising college costs, however, make it even more important that students effectively participate in the college search and application process and effectively apply for financial aid. While students report on CCSR surveys that their parents want them to attend college, many CPS students come from families and live in communities where there is less access to knowledge about how to manage the complex American system of college search and application. After summarizing our findings on qualifications, we then provide this

important context on the family background of CPS students, and then review prior research findings on what barriers first-generation college students may face as they begin to navigate the sets of tasks necessary to apply to and enroll in college.

Low Qualifications Are a Barrier to Four-Year College Access but Are Not a Complete Explanation

Previous research has shown that racial/ethnic minority and low-income students are much less likely to leave high school with the qualifications (e.g., test scores, grades, and coursework) that give them access to college, particularly four-year colleges, and are critical to college performance and persistence.[16] Our first report highlighted this problem in Chicago. We analyzed CPS students' college attendance patterns and developed a rubric to characterize the selectivity of colleges CPS graduates would likely be accepted to, given their high school performance (unweighted GPAs and ACT scores) and advanced course-taking (see *How We Define College Access for CPS Graduates*).

Open admission policies at two-year and some non-selective colleges mean that all students who graduate from CPS are eligible to enroll in some type of college, regardless of their high school performance. However, our last report found that low ACT scores and low GPAs presented significant barriers to enrollment in four-year colleges, particularly more selective colleges.

How We Define College Access for CPS Graduates

Throughout this report, we look at students' involvement in the college search and application process by their high school qualifications. We characterize students by the qualifications rubric we developed in our first report that identifies the type (four-year versus two-year) and selectivity of college that students would likely have access to given their course performance (unweighted GPA in core classes), their ACT scores, and their involvement in college preparatory AP and IB coursework. Our first report showed that many CPS graduates have very low qualifications. Our analysis found that while poor performance in high school is not a significant barrier to enrolling in college, it constrains students' college options considerably and limits their likelihood of success. Students' grades emerge, moreover, as the most important predictor of college enrollment and success.

The rubric we developed for our first report indicates the minimum GPA and ACT scores that CPS graduates would need for a high likelihood of acceptance to certain classifications of colleges (see Table 1).[i] The ACT cutoffs we use are generally lower than the definitions used in college ratings such as

Barron's.[ii] Because all high school graduates have the option of attending a two-year college, we categorized graduates with ACT scores and GPAs that fall even below the level necessary for likely admittance to a nonselective four-year college as being limited to attending two-year colleges.

In this report, we have also taken into account the role of advanced coursework (i.e., enrollment in an IB program or taking at least six honors courses and two AP courses) in classifying the type of colleges to which students have access. Students who have ACT scores and GPAs that would have placed them at the higher end of our selective access category and who took advanced coursework are moved to the very selective category. Because we use unweighted GPA in our rubric and colleges use weighted GPA and rigor of the courses students take in their admissions decisions, we feel that this is a more accurate picture of the type of college to which these students could gain admittance. Under our rubric, students must get a 3.0 unweighted GPA and a 24 on the ACT to be classified as having access to a very selective four-year college. With the consideration of coursework, an additional 3 percent of 2005 graduates are

classified as having access to a very selective college. These are students who take at least two AP and six honors courses or are enrolled in an IB program and have at least a 2.0 GPA and a 24 on the ACT, at least a 3.0 GPA and a 21 on the ACT, or at least a 3.5 GPA and an 18 on the ACT.

It is helpful to think about how qualifications would shape access to public universities. In Illinois, a student would have access to the majority of the four-year public universities around the state if he or she was qualified to attend a "somewhat selective college." These four-year public universities would include University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago State, and Northern and Southern Illinois Universities. Students who are qualified to attend a "very selective college" would have access to the best public college in the state: the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. For the national context, see Appendix A.

TABLE 1

Categories for access to college types based on CPS graduates' GPAs and ACT scores and patterns of college enrollment

Composite ACT Score	Unweighted GPA in Core Courses				
	<2.0	2.0–2.4	2.5–2.9	3.0–3.4	3.5–4.0
Missing ACT	Two-Year Colleges	Nonselective Four-Year Colleges	Somewhat Selective Colleges	Selective Colleges	Selective Colleges
<18	Two-Year Colleges	Nonselective Four-Year Colleges	Somewhat Selective Colleges	Somewhat Selective Colleges	Selective Colleges
18-20	Nonselective Four-Year Colleges	Somewhat Selective Colleges	Somewhat Selective Colleges	Selective Colleges	Selective/Very Selective Colleges
21-23	Somewhat Selective Colleges	Somewhat Selective Colleges	Selective Colleges	Selective/Very Selective Colleges	Selective/Very Selective Colleges
24+	Somewhat Selective Colleges	Selective/Very Selective Colleges	Selective/Very Selective Colleges	Very Selective Colleges	Very Selective Colleges

Note: Students in the Selective category who are either in an IB program or have taken at least two AP and at least six honors courses are moved up to the Very Selective category.

Most importantly, low qualifications were a significant barrier to graduating from these colleges. Thus, the conclusion of our first report—and 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 improving CPS students' access to and ultimate graduation from four-year and selective colleges.

CPS has already made progress in this area. In our first report, we found that more than half of 2003 CPS graduates had such low grades and ACT scores that they would most likely only be qualified to attend a two-year or nonselective four-year institution. However, as seen in Figure 4, between 2003 and 2005, the percentage of CPS students whose high school performance would give them access to only a two-year or nonselective four-year college fell from 52 to 48 percent. The percentage of CPS students who would likely be accepted at a selective or very selective college slightly increased from 20 to 23 percent. Clearly, there

is a long way to go. In 2005, slightly more than half of CPS students graduated with qualifications that would give them access to the majority of four-year public universities in Illinois (i.e., somewhat selective colleges), and only about one in four (23 percent) graduated with ACT scores and grades that would make it likely that they be accepted to a selective or very selective institution (such as the selective DePaul University or Loyola University, or the very selective University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign). Even with this progress, only slightly more than one half of CPS students graduate from high school with the qualifications that would give them access to the majority of four-year public universities in Illinois.

Qualifications are particularly low among African-American and Latino students; approximately one-half of African-American and Latino seniors graduate with such low qualifications that they only have access to two-year or nonselective four-year colleges (see Figure 5). In comparison, only 26 percent of White/Other Ethnic[17] and 18 percent of Asian-American graduates have qualifications that low. Furthermore, about one-quarter of White/Other Ethnic and Asian-American graduates have access to very selective colleges, while very few Latino and African-American graduates have access to these top colleges.

Although qualifications are clearly a significant barrier to college enrollment, qualifications alone did not explain differences in college enrollment across CPS high schools. Differences in qualifications were also insufficient in explaining racial/ethnic differences in college enrollment. One of the most important findings of our first report was that Latino students were much less likely to attend college, even when compared to peers in similar high schools with similar GPAs and ACT scores. Finally, differences in qualifications did not explain why CPS students who aspired to attend four-year colleges often enrolled in two-year and nonselective colleges. In many high schools, the number of students who were qualified to attend somewhat selective, selective, or very selective college exceeded the number that actually attended college at all.

To more rigorously examine this issue, we conducted a multivariate analysis of the differences by race/ethnicity among CPS graduates in their likelihood of

The percentage of CPS graduates who have access to selective and very selective colleges has increased slightly since 2003
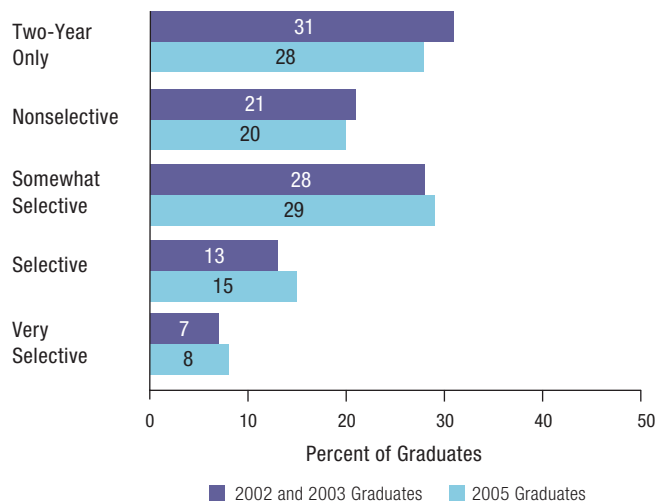
Percent of Graduates

■ 2002 and 2003 Graduates   ■ 2005 Graduates

Note: These numbers do not include students in special education or students attending alternative or charter high schools.

In 2005, about half of African-American and Latino graduates only had access to two-year or nonselective colleges
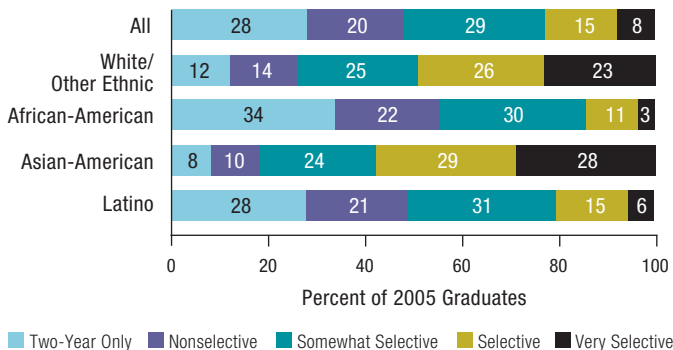
Percent of 2005 Graduates

■ Two-Year Only ■ Nonselective ■ Somewhat Selective ■ Selective ■ Very Selective

Note: These numbers do not include students in special education or students attending alternative or charter high schools.

entering college in the fall after graduation, controlling for qualifications, family background, and immigrant status. In Figure 6, the light blue bar shows that Latino graduates were 12 percentage points less likely than African-American graduates to enroll in college. White/Other Ethnic graduates, on the other hand, were 13 percentage points more likely than African-Americans to enroll in college. After controlling for qualifications, the difference in college enrollment rates between African-American students and White/Other Ethnic students is eliminated. However, qualifications

do not explain why Latino graduates are less likely to enroll in college than their African-American counterparts. Indeed, the gap between Latino students and African-American students increased from 12 to 15 percentage points, after controlling for students' varying qualifications.

Family background and immigrant status are frequently cited as reasons why some students, particularly Latino students, do not enroll in college. Indeed, Figure 6 shows that students who are immigrants—both those who came to the United States before and after age 10—were less likely to attend college. Mother's education and socioeconomic status also explain some of the gap in college enrollment between Latino and African-American students. However, our analysis suggests that immigrant status, socioeconomic status, and mother's education do not completely explain why Latino graduates are less likely to enroll in college; a gap of 8 percentage points still remains between Latino and African-American students.

In contrast to the gaps among students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, the gap in college enroll-

ment between male and female graduates can be explained by the relatively poor qualifications of male graduates. In our last report, we found that 40 percent of male graduates had qualifications that limited their access to two-year colleges, whereas only one-quarter of female graduates had qualifications that low.[18] Because the poor qualifications of male graduates explain the gender gap in college enrollment, we do not explicitly explore the role of gender in the college search and application process. While it appears that male and female students have very different experiences in high school, in our analyses for this report, we did not find gender to be a significant predictor of how well students navigate the college enrollment process.

Increasing the qualifications of CPS students is a compelling solution to the aspirations-attainment gap. However, a focus on qualifications alone assumes that if low-income students had the same level of qualifications as their more advantaged counterparts, they would have equal access to college. This is clearly not true. Even if college costs were not an issue, many CPS students, particularly Latino students, do not come from families or communities where they have access to college-educated adults who can guide them in managing the college search and application process.

CPS Students Tend to Come from Families and Neighborhoods with Fewer Resources to Support their College Aspirations

This report focuses specifically on how CPS students participate in the college search and application process. All high school students need significant adult support and guidance as they begin to think about applying to college. This is a daunting task for parents, particularly for those who do not have access to knowledge about how to support their children in managing the complex system of college search and application.

Parents without knowledge of the U.S. education system may be particularly disadvantaged in supporting their children in the college search and application process. As seen in Figure 7, one-third of Latino and White/Other Ethnic seniors and almost 60 percent of Asian-American seniors reported that they were born outside of the United States. Fully 80 percent of Latino

FIGURE 6

Differences in academic qualifications do not explain differences in college enrollment among racial/ethnic groups with similar college aspirations

Probability of other racial/ethnic groups enrolling in a college compared to African-Americans:

Legend:
- No Controls
- Controlling for Qualifications *(high school grades, test scores, and curriculum)*
- Controlling for Qualifications and Background *(socioeconomic status and nativity/age of immigration)*
- Controlling for Qualifications, Background, and Mother's Education

Note: Results shown come from logistic regression models. Graduates included in the models were limited to those who aspired to complete at least a two-year degree as reported on the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey. Sample does not include students in special education or students attending alternative high schools.

students, more than 95 percent of Asian-American students, and more than 40 percent of White/Other Ethnic students report that their mothers were born outside of the United States. Thus, a large proportion of CPS students face the challenges of navigating an unfamiliar American college education system. These challenges can be compounded when parents themselves have low levels of education.

While high proportions of Latino, Asian-American, and White/Other Ethnic students in CPS are immigrants or have parents who are immigrants, Latino students are particularly disadvantaged because so few of their parents have any college experience. Figure 8 presents seniors' reports of their mother's highest level of education. Fully 60 percent of Latino seniors state that their mother has no schooling beyond high school, and 18 percent reported that they did not know their mother's level of education. In comparison, only one-third of African-American students, and fewer than 40 percent of Asian-American and White/Other Ethnic students reported that their mother had not attended any college.

Although senior survey reports of family background may not be completely reliable, Census data show similar racial/ethnic differences in CPS students' neighborhoods. Figure 9 compares the relative status of students in CPS by the average concentration of poverty and education and occupational status of adults in their neighborhoods.[19] African-American students are distinguished by their relative economic disadvantage. The average African-American senior lives in a neighborhood with a much higher concentration of poverty, a half standard deviation higher than the city average. However, even though African-American students live in more impoverished neighborhoods, on average, the adults in their neighborhood have higher than average education and occupational status, although these levels are significantly below their White/Other Ethnic and Asian-American counterparts. Most importantly, Latino students are the least likely to live in neighborhoods where they have access to adults with high levels of education and who work in professional and managerial occupations, even though their neighborhoods have lower levels of poverty than the average African-American student.

About one-third of Latino and White/Other Ethnic graduates and more than half of Asian-American graduates in CPS were born outside the United States

Student reports of whether they were born in the United States and age of immigration:
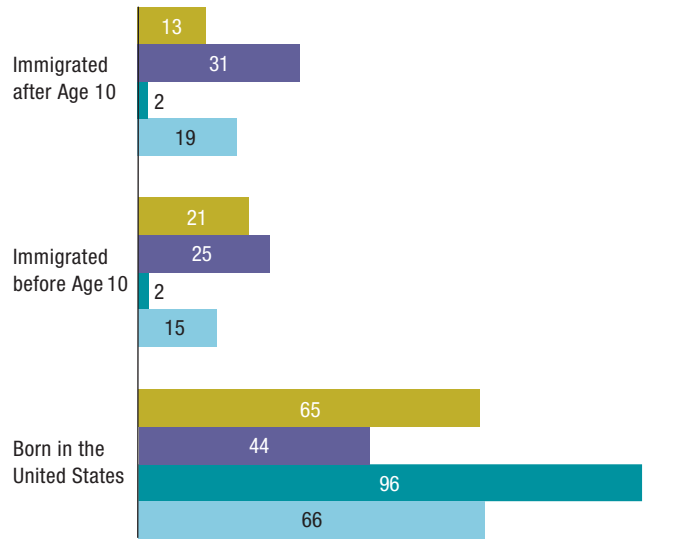
Student reports of whether their mother was born in the United States:
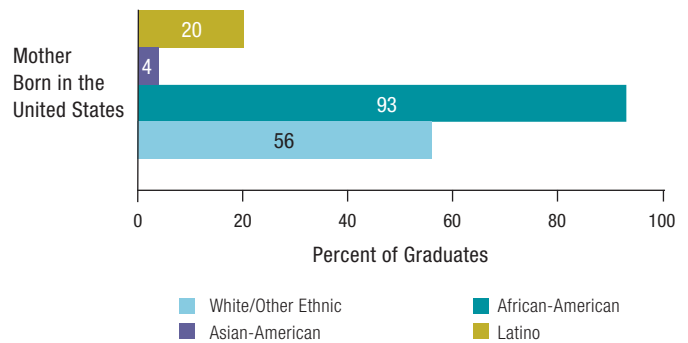
Note: These numbers are based on student responses to the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey, but do not include students in special education or students attending alternative high schools. Some 6,977 graduates reported on their own immigrant status and 6,889 graduates reported on their mothers' immigrant status.

The neighborhood and family background characteristics of CPS students suggest that many CPS students will face significant barriers as they begin to think about searching and applying for college. Many students in CPS will face significant financial barriers, and many CPS students come from families and neighborhoods where they will have less access to the norms, guidance, and concrete support needed to effectively manage the college search and application process. Having limited community access to adults

FIGURE 8

Latino graduates report significantly lower levels of maternal education

What is the highest level of schooling your mother/female guardian has completed?
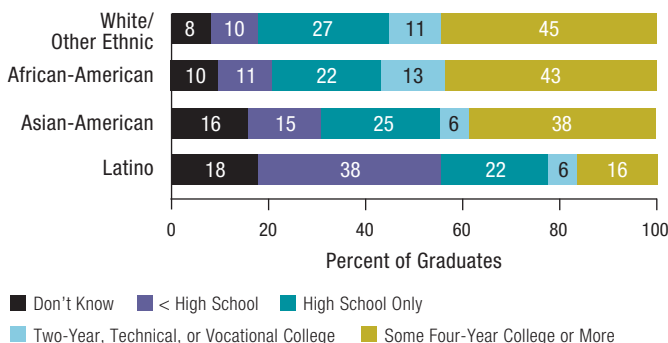
Legend:
- Don't Know
- < High School
- High School Only
- Two-Year, Technical, or Vocational College
- Some Four-Year College or More

Note: These numbers are based on student responses to the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey, but do not include students in special education or students attending alternative high schools. On the surveys 6,824 graduates reported on their mother's highest level of education.

FIGURE 9

African-American graduates live in poorer neighborhoods, but Latino graduates live in neighborhoods with fewer educated adults

Legend:
- African-American
- Latino
- Asian-American
- White/Other Ethnic
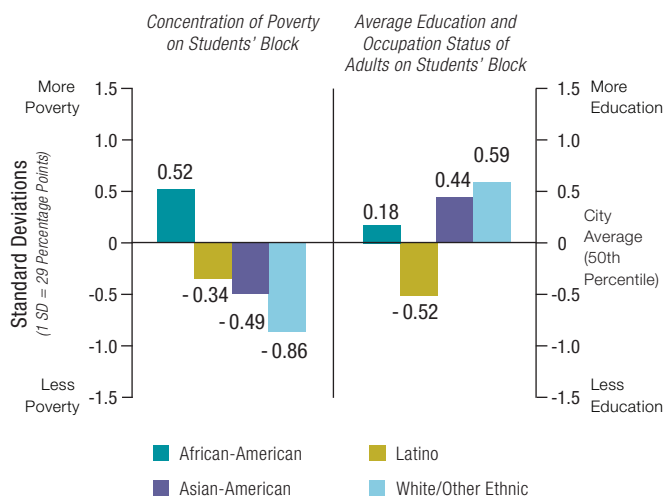
Note: "Concentration of Poverty" and "Average Education and Occupation Status of Adults on Students' Block" were based on 2000 U.S. Census information on the block group in which students lived. These variables are described in greater detail in Appendix D. These data come from students who were not in special education or in alternative high schools. 13,732 graduates had Census information.

with college-going experiences makes CPS students especially dependent upon their teachers, counselors, and other nonfamilial adults in obtaining information and support in making educational plans and navigating the process of college application.[20]

Low Access to Social Capital Poses a Significant Barrier to College Enrollment

We have shown that CPS students, like many urban students, come from families and neighborhoods that do not have a strong college-going history and thus may lack access to strong norms for college attendance and concrete guidance and information needed to effectively navigate the college search and application process. Prior research on college access points to two ways in which these students' family backgrounds, in the absence of strong supports in their high schools, may create barriers to their college enrollment: (1) students not taking the steps necessary for being accepted to a four-year college and for securing financial aid, and (2) students not considering a wide range of colleges and instead enrolling in traditional feeders.

First, research finds that urban students with high aspirations often have difficulty taking the concrete steps needed to effectively apply to and enroll in four-year colleges.[21] Whether CPS students take these steps is the focus on our analysis in Chapter 2. For example, Avery and Kane compared seniors with similar aspirations who attended Boston Public Schools to seniors attending suburban high schools in the Boston area. They found dramatic differences in the extent to which students in these two samples had taken the steps necessary to apply to college. Among students who planned to attend a four-year college, only slightly more than half of the Boston sample, compared to 91 percent of the suburban sample, had obtained an application from the college they were interested in attending. Only 18 percent of the Boston sample versus 41 percent of the suburban sample had applied to a four-year college by the fall of their senior year.

Taking the steps to enroll in college requires that students understand how to complete college applications as well as apply for financial aid.[22] Research finds, however, that students' confusion about financial aid and

real college costs are an additional barrier.[23] Further, there is an increasing recognition that the complexity of the federal student aid system, and particularly the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), poses an important barrier to low-income students. Many students lack knowledge of what financial aid is available, what they are eligible for, and when and how to apply. Low-income students are more likely to state that financial aid is too complicated to apply for, believe that the costs of college are too high for them to apply, and are less likely to apply for financial aid early in order to maximize their likelihood of receiving state and institutional aid.[24]

In summation, research on college access suggests that CPS students may face barriers to four-year college enrollment because they may have difficulty managing the process of college application and financial aid and miss important steps in the process. But effectively participating in the college application process also requires that students find colleges that best meet their needs. A second important strand of research suggests that low-income and first-generation college students also do not have access to the support they need to effectively identify what kinds of colleges they might like to attend, the range of options that are available to them, and how much they will be expected to pay for college—costs net of financial aid.[25] Low-income students are also vastly underrepresented at top-tier colleges, including flagship state universities, and this underrepresentation cannot solely be attributed to differences in college qualifications.[26] College costs may be one factor explaining why qualified low-income students are less likely to apply to and enroll in top universities. Research on talent loss, moreover, finds that without access to information and strong guidance, many urban, low-income students rely on their own familial and friendship networks that often only have limited college information.[27] This limitation results in many urban students focusing their entire college search within the enclave colleges of the traditional feeder patterns—largely public, two-year, or nonselective and somewhat selective four-year colleges.[28] Thus, many first-generation college students conduct what we refer to as "constrained college search," which often leads to "mismatch," enrollment in colleges that are less selective than students are eligible to attend. We examine this mismatch pattern in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2

Potholes on the Road to College: Are Students Taking the Steps to Apply to and Enroll in a Four-Year College?

As Moises and Grady on the next page illustrate, preparing for college is a long and complex process. Achieving the high qualifications these young men needed to reach their goals required setting high expectations for themselves early on and staying on task throughout high school. Reaching those aspirations required that they understood the link between working hard in school and gaining admission to college. And, it also required their high school to set high expectations and provide them with the challenging coursework they would need to be prepared for college.

Just as important, however, was how these two young men organized their college search and application process during their junior and senior years. Within a short time span, they had to make important decisions and meet a series of benchmarks for the college search and application process.[29] As Moises and Grady did so effectively, starting in junior year or even earlier, students must identify a list of colleges in which they might be interested. The summer after junior year should be a time of discovery and search. By fall of senior year, students should have gathered enough information to narrow their list of colleges to those where they intend to apply. In the fall of senior year, students should start working on college applications to have sufficient time to meet winter deadlines. By winter of their senior year, students who are effectively managing the college application process should have completed their applications and started working on their financial aid forms.

Moises and Grady–*A Case Study*
A supported and well-executed path to college

Securing admission to the right college and figuring out how to pay for it is a daunting and time-consuming process for even the most committed students, but the right road map and consistent support can make the difference between success and failure.

Two remarkable young men, Moises and Grady,[1] took this challenge on together, and their stories illustrate just how much effort is required for students to translate high aspirations into college attainment. They also illustrate that, in addition to academic qualifications and personal determination, students need strong parental support combined with structured support from high schools to undertake an extensive and effective college search. These best friends, the pitcher and the catcher on their varsity baseball team, were two of only five students in our longitudinal study of 105 students who left high school qualified to attend a very selective college, conducted a thorough college search, and then enrolled in the college of their choice.[2]

While these two young men were best friends, they were opposites in many ways. Moises, a first-generation Mexican-Puerto Rican, is easy-going with a confident smile that lights up a room. Grady is a driven and reserved African-American teen from a supportive family who rarely smiles and speaks with the precision of a network news anchor. Moises, despite his academic performance, says he is *"guilty of perhaps slacking off a little more than I should."*

Grady, on the other hand, was so intensely focused that his friends worried about the pressure he put on himself to succeed. Both young men shared a commitment to education and had dreamed of going to college for as long as they could remember. While neither student had parents who graduated from college, their families expected their sons to attend college. Both students also had parents who worked in professional settings and knew how to work their social networks for important information about college, and Grady had two brothers who had gone on to four-year colleges.

Their drive to attend college started with the decisions they made early in high school. They chose to attend Kahlo High School (see *What a Strong College Culture Looks Like*, p.62), a high school with a record of sending graduates to good colleges, and applied to the rigorous International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Both students graduated in the top 10 percent of their class. Moises achieved a 4.6 weighted GPA and a 25 on the ACT; Grady achieved a 4.0 weighted GPA and a 27 on the ACT. This hard work made them eligible to attend a very selective university. It also distinguished them nationally from other top students. They both knew their hard work made them attractive college applicants.[3] As Moises explains:

> "I know I can get into 95% of the colleges that I want to go to. But I want a full ride, or at least partial."

For Moises and Grady, the push for high qualifications was not only to get into good colleges, but to make sure that they could afford it. Grady said he wanted to attend a

> "really good school, because they have a lot of money to offer, because they have so many alumni that are making a lot of money."

Junior Year: Beginning their College Search
Like other successful students, Moises and Grady started making a college list in their junior year. They decided that they wanted to attend a first-rate college together where they could play baseball. They picked Stanford and Rice as their top choices, selected after watching the College World Series. They were impressed by the baseball teams and researched the schools' academic

reputations. Not surprisingly, each student's college list expanded considerably when they began receiving information from colleges attracted by their high ACT scores. Moises was contacted by recruiters at Dartmouth and invited for a free summer visit. Grady also started exploring the University of Michigan because he and his father were fans of the football team.

Summer Junior Year: Campus Visits

During the summer after junior year, successful students such as Moises and Grady start to hone their college preferences by visiting campuses. At the end of junior year, both young men hoped to take college trips to California and Texas. Neither student was able to visit any schools in California, but Moises and his family did visit Louisiana and Texas, taking a summer trip that included visits to Tulane, Rice and the University of Texas. Moises fell in love with Rice, because the tour made him feel at home. By contrast, he felt intimated by large campuses and found the University of Texas too chaotic. Grady wasn't able to go on any college tours over the summer, and instead he spent his time contacting college representatives. By the end of the summer, Stanford and Rice were still at the top of Grady's list. He also was seriously considering the University of Michigan, the University of California-Berkeley, the University of Texas, and the University of Illinois.

Senior Year: Applications, Prioritizing Colleges, and Financial Aid

Senior year is the time to kick the college search into high gear, so Moises and Grady started zeroing in on favorite choices and began working on their applications. For both young men, senior year was the time to sort out what they really wanted out of college. Moises wanted the best of both worlds: a great academic program and a top-ranked Division I baseball team. In the fall, Moises applied early to Rice. Recruiters from a few smaller colleges called offering him admission and special scholarships.

Grady decided early in his senior year he did not want to pursue baseball in college, and instead concentrated on schools with top-notch business programs. Grady's list—which he divided into sure-thing schools, good-match schools, and reach schools— included four California and two Texas schools.

Both young men relied on at least one adult at their school for one-on-one support as they made these critical decisions. Grady discussed his college list with the school counselor, whose office he visited every day during lunch so that he could get some work done in quiet. Moises looked to his baseball coach for guidance:

> "My coach is probably the biggest person who has made college an important part of my life.... he is trying to give [the baseball team access to] many programs to get us noticed by colleges."

Grady and Moises made college applications their highest priority, but it was a daunting task. They worked on applications during lunch and sometimes class. They wrote different essays for each application. They provided recommendations even when they were not requested. Moises proofread all of his recommendations, and when dissatisfied with the grammar of a math teacher's recommendation, promptly corrected the mistakes and returned it to her so that edits could be made before the recommendation reached his colleges. (See *Moises and Grady's Road to College*, p. 30.)

By February 1, Moises had mailed off applications to ten colleges nationwide. By this time, Grady had completed six applications, and the University of Michigan was his top choice. When asked why, Grady said Michigan offered one of the strongest business schools in the nation and a loyal, committed alumni base, which he saw as particularly important for his future:

> "If I have to take out loans or whatever, I'll pay it back. Because if I go to a good school like University of Michigan, it'll get me into doors where I can make money coming out of college."

Kahlo High School emphasized the necessary steps needed to finance college. While working on their applications, Moises and Grady also made sure they completed their FAFSA, scholarship, and institutional aid applications. They understood that a key step in the college application process is financial aid, and their high school emphasized this part of the process.

Finishing Senior Year: Making their Final Decisions

When Grady and Moises received their spring acceptance letters, there was mixed news about their top-choice schools. Grady was admitted to the University of Michigan, but Moises did not get into Rice. Grady was not accepted to Stanford or Rice, but with those few exceptions, both young men were accepted everywhere else they applied.

While Grady was committed to Michigan, the $40,000 price tag was a deterrent.[4] He and his parents had visited the campus, and everyone was excited for Grady to attend. He received federal financial aid but no other institutional aid. In the end, Grady and his parents decided that the significant burden of loans was a worthwhile trade-off for attending one of the best business schools in the country. Grady estimated he would be in debt at least $60,000 upon graduation from college, but he believes the university will offer him the tools and resources he needs to pay this debt in the future.

Moises had a difficult decision to make, weighing his options among colleges and the financial aid packages they offered. He was offered a full ride to Truman State University in Missouri. He visited the University of Illinois and the University of Michigan but decided that both campuses were too large. His visit to a small, in-state liberal arts school was definitive.[5] He immediately felt at home and got personal attention from the baseball and soccer coaches and the admissions staff. After a day visiting the campus, Moises felt completely comfortable, easily finding classes he wanted to visit and giving directions to other prospective students:

> "…there were two students from [a different CPS] high school and they were like, 'Do you know where the admissions office is?' and I was like 'Actually I'm just a prospective student touring but…yeah I do.' So I'm already getting the hang of it."

Moises decided to attend this school despite not receiving as much financial aid as he hoped:

> "They are giving me $40,000 all four years, but it's still going to cost me about $20,000 a year, so I am trying to get it down to at least $15,000. Truman was giving me the most, like $12,000 a year. Michigan is giving me $20,000 over four years…but that was pretty good because U of I only gave me $4,000 for four years."

Success with a Caveat: Thriving at College but Stretched Financially

Moises and Grady ultimately ended up achieving what would be for many CPS students an unattainable goal: they finished high school highly qualified for college and they enrolled in good colleges, an alarmingly rare outcome in CPS, especially among minority males. Their ACT scores placed them in the top 10 percent of national test-takers and they graduated at the top of their class. They had the family and school support needed to apply to a wide range of colleges and ultimately ended up in colleges that matched their qualifications and offered them the college experiences they desired. At the same time, their college decisions would stretch them and their families financially.

Despite having the qualifications and characteristics that should have made them among the most highly recruited students in the nation, neither received a strong aid package from their top-choice colleges. However, because Moises and Grady and their families placed a high value on education, they were willing to make the sacrifices needed to pay for college. Ultimately, they both wanted to take full advantage of the doors opened by their hard work and academic qualifications, and attain their aspirations of receiving a degree from an elite college. Both young men made a successful transition to college; they enrolled in the schools they had planned to attend, moved into dorms, found clubs and extracurricular activities that suited them, made new friends, and delved wholeheartedly into their new academic careers with the same ambition and eagerness that made them each such a success.

Endnotes for this case study can be found on page 65.

The complexity of that process will differ depending on the type of college. Students who apply to public or nonselective four-year colleges may simply have to fill out a form, send their transcripts, and pay a fee. For some colleges, the process has been simplified by the "common application," a single standardized form accepted by more than 300 institutions.[30] Highly qualified students who apply to top colleges, such as Moises and Grady, are required to complete complex, time-consuming applications that include essays on widely differing topics (see *Moises and Grady's Road to College*, p. 30). In addition, students who apply to special programs and for scholarships may also have to fill out additional applications in the fall.

Filing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a daunting task for many students. The final deadline for filing a FAFSA is not until June 30,[31] but this deadline is misleading. Most colleges have financial aid deadlines months before the FAFSA deadline, some as early as February 1, and some have earlier priority financial aid deadlines.[32] Most importantly, independent of institutional deadlines, students who apply for financial aid early are much more likely to access federal, state, and institutional financial aid than students who apply late.[33] This means that parents, in order to complete the FAFSA, must either have a copy of the previous year's tax returns or file new tax returns well in advance of the tax deadline of April 15. It also means that students must file their FAFSA as early as possible, as Moises and Grady did, if they are to be able to make their college choice while balancing the questions of which colleges best fit their needs and which colleges they can afford.

In spring, students who have effectively participated in the college application process should be making their final college choices. In the traditional process, students receive admission letters from most colleges by April and receive financial aid award letters by that time or shortly thereafter. In late spring, students should weigh their financial aid packages from various colleges, make final visits, have discussions to determine the best fit, and make a final decision with their families.

As we noted in Chapter 1, other research has found that many urban students, unlike Moises and Grady, do not understand what steps they need to take to effectively search for colleges, navigate the application process, and manage financial aid applications.[34] Jennie and Maribel, two students from different high schools, present contrasting cases that are, unfortunately, a far more common experience. Despite being successful and committed students, these two found the process confusing and overwhelming and the costs of college daunting. In this chapter, we examine the question: Why do so many seniors who aspire to complete a four-year college degree, such as Jennie and Maribel, get lost on the road to a four-year college?

Why would a student who loves learning and who aspires to complete a college degree decide not to attend college at all? Maribel illustrates many of the themes we observed in our interviews with students in our longitudinal study who decided not to attend college. *See Maribel's case study, p. 54.*

Why do some students take themselves out of the four-year college planning process? Does this only happen to students with low grades and test scores? Jennie, a student with strong qualifications for college, shows some common features of college aspirants who made an early decision to attend a two-year college. *See Jennie's case study, p. 56.*

Moises and Grady's Road to College: What It Really Takes to Apply to Top Colleges

In their college search, Moises and Grady created an impressive list of colleges. Ultimately, Grady applied to six schools and Moises applied to ten. What did it take to complete these applications? Colleges are increasingly using the Common Application, which is designed to streamline the application process. The Common Application collects personal data, academic history, academic honors, extracurricular and volunteer activities, and work experience. Students provide a short answer that describes in 150 words "one of your activities." And, students complete a 250 word personal essay. Students can either choose their own topic or choose from topics provided, such as: "Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you."

In addition to the Common Application, many schools require a supplemental form. When applying to Rice, for example, a student must fill out a Common Application supplement that asks additional background questions; questions on AP, honors, and IB coursework; and questions on summer activities. Rice also requires three additional essays. Whether using the college's own application or the Common Application and its supplements, students were typically asked to respond to two or three writing prompts, some short and some long. Therefore, even if applying mostly to schools that use the Common Application, students applying to as many schools as Moises and Grady did must complete many essays. Though students can count on at least some overlap, we estimate that, at a bare minimum, Moises wrote at least seven completely distinct, long essays, as well as eight additional short responses; Grady said he wrote at least ten essays.

In the end, Grady filled out the Common Application, four supplements, and two additional applications for those colleges that did not accept the Common Application, including Stanford's ten-page application with an additional 14 pages that must be submitted to teachers and counselors for recommendations and school reports. Moises filled out the Common Application, two supplements, and six additional applications to colleges that did not accept the Common Application, including the "Uncommon Application" at the University of Chicago.

Even schools that accept the Common Application may require quite extensive essays. The University of Chicago's is noteworthy. When applying to the University of Chicago, Moises first responded to two fairly predictable short essays:

Question 1: *How does the University of Chicago, as you know it now, satisfy your desire for a particular kind of learning, community, and future? Please address with some specificity your own wishes and how they relate to Chicago.*

Question 2: *Would you please tell us about a few of your favorite books, poems, authors, films, plays, pieces of music, musicians, performers, paintings, artists, magazine, or newspapers? Feel free to touch on one, some, or all of the categories listed, or add a category of your own.*

For the third essay, Moises had to respond to one of five questions, many suggested by students who had been admitted the prior year. Two examples follow of the optional essay questions that Moises faced the year he applied:

Final Essay Option: *Superstring theory has revolutionized speculation about the physical world by suggesting that strings play a pivotal role in the universe. Strings, however, always have explained or enriched our lives, from Theseus's escape route from the Labyrinth, to kittens playing with balls of yarn, to the single hair that held the sword above Damocles, to the basic awfulness of string cheese, to the Old Norse tradition that one's life is a thread woven into a tapestry of fate, to the beautiful sounds of*

the finely tuned string of a violin, to the children's game of cat's cradle, to the concept of stringing someone along. Use the power of string to explain the biggest or the smallest phenomenon.

Final Essay Option: とらわれない心
means "mind that does not stick."
Zen Master Shoitsu (1202–80)

It is not surprising that many middle- and upper-income parents now pay college tutors and writing coaches to help their children with the college application process, including writing these essays. Some programs like College Summit focus specifically on helping students craft their application essays.[iii] Moises and Grady didn't get such help. Their task was particularly onerous because they were also involved in the rigorous IB program, where they faced many course and program deadlines throughout the fall. While Moises and Grady's efforts were impressive, so too were those of their teachers, who had to fill out individual forms for each recommendation they wrote. Moises and Grady had to get a minimum of two recommendations for each college application.

Do CPS Students Take the Steps Necessary to Enroll?

To examine this question, we draw on the CPS post-secondary tracking system and CCSR senior surveys to follow students as they progress through the college search and application process (see Figure 10). In April of their senior year, CCSR administered surveys that asked students about their educational aspirations and whether they planned to attend a two-year or four-year college in the fall. Near the end of the school year, students completed CPS's Senior Exit Questionnaire that asked them whether they had applied to a four-year college and been accepted. In addition to these survey data, we examine college enrollment data from NSC to determine whether students ultimately enrolled in college and, if so, what types of colleges.

Because we combine datasets and limit our analysis to students for whom we could follow their steps on the road to college through these data, our sample is much smaller than the CPS's graduating class of 2005.[35] We also limit our analysis to students who aspired to attain at least a four-year degree. Our resulting sample, which we call our Potholes Sample, is significantly more qualified than the broader population of CPS graduates

(see Appendix B for details about the samples and data used in this report). Because our sample is higher performing, on average, than the larger graduating cohort, we expect we are overestimating the proportion of CPS students who meet specific benchmarks of participation in the college planning and application process.

Figure 11 shows the percentage of CPS graduates who aspired to complete a four-year degree that took specific steps to enroll in a four-year college by the next fall (see *Why We Focus on Four-Year Colleges Rather Than Two-Year Colleges,* p. 34). Each teal bubble represents a critical benchmark in this process. Specifically, the teal bubbles show the percentage of this group who: (1) planned to attend a four-year college immediately after high school, (2) applied to a four-year college, (3) were accepted at a four-year college, and (4) enrolled in a four-year college. Students are only included in a bubble if they reached the previous benchmark.

As seen in Figure 11, of the CPS graduates who aspired to complete a four-year degree, only 41 percent met each of these benchmarks and enrolled in a four-year college the following fall. An additional 9 percent of students managed to enroll in a four-year college without following all of these steps for a total of 50

FIGURE 10

Tracking CPS graduates' steps towards college enrollment

Suggested Timeline:	By the End of Junior Year	Winter of Senior Year	Spring of Senior Year	Fall After Graduation
Aspired to Complete a Four-Year or Graduate Degree	Planned to Continue Education in the Fall at a Four-Year College	Applied to a Four-Year College	Accepted into a Four-Year College	Enrolled in a Four-Year College

Completed FAFSA
January 1 to Early Spring

Data Sources:	CCSR Senior Survey *(April 2005)*	CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire *(June 2005)*	National Student Clearinghouse Data *(By November 1, 2005)*

Note: See Appendix B for more information on these data sources.

percent of all CPS students who aspired to a four-year degree. Almost half of these additional students ended up enrolling in nonselective four-year schools.

CPS students fail to enroll in four-year colleges by missing important benchmarks. We might expect, given CPS students' poor qualifications, that the biggest barrier to enrolling in a four-year college would be getting accepted. But our analysis reveals a much more complicated picture. First, fewer than three-quarters (72 percent) of students who aspired to attain a four-year degree stated in April of their senior year that they planned to attend a four-year college in the fall. Some students, like Maribel, simply decided to delay their enrollment. A larger group, like Jennie, decided to go to college but to start at a two-year college. Another

significant percentage planned to attend a four-year college in the fall but still had not applied to one by June. Acceptance is less of a barrier than might be expected; only 8 percent of students who planned to enroll applied to a four-year college and were not accepted. Rather, a larger issue is that many CPS students never face a college acceptance decision because they do not apply to four-year colleges. In the end, only 59 percent of CPS graduates who stated that they aspired to attain a four-year degree and planned to attend a four-year college ever applied to one.

To summarize, many CPS students make an early decision to attend a two-year college rather than a four-year college. Even among those who plan to attend a four-year college, many do not make it through

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:

Note: These figures are based on the Potholes Sample (see Appendix B for details).
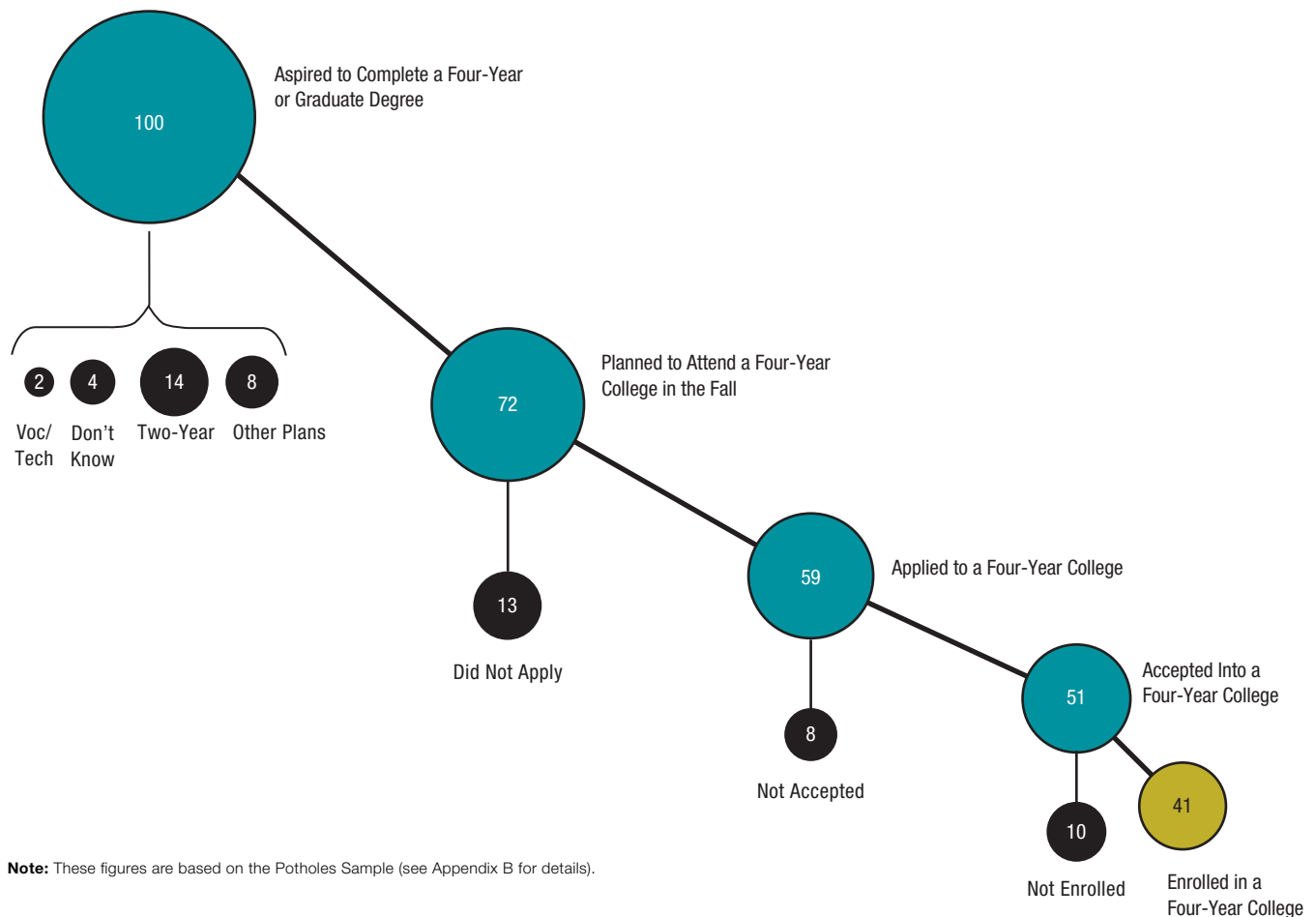
Why We Focus on Four-Year Colleges Rather Than Two-Year Colleges

In this report, we focus exclusively on CPS students who aspire to attain a bachelor's degree or higher. We do not examine students who aspire to attain a two-year degree because the small number of students (9 percent) limits our ability to do a thorough analysis of their pathway to college. As discussed in the introduction, aspiring to complete a four-year degree has become the norm among high school students nationwide. In addition, of the students who aspire to attain a four-year degree, we only include students who are qualified to attend a four-year college (having at least an 18 on the ACT or a 2.0 unweighted GPA) in our analysis. It may be more appropriate for students with marginal qualifications to begin their postsecondary education at a two-year college, and we do not include them in our analysis for this reason.

We also make a clear distinction between enrolling in a four-year versus a two-year college or vocational or technical school, and we do not treat these as equivalent postsecondary outcomes. Students usually enroll in a vocational or technical school with the intention of completing a program and beginning their career in that field. Clearly, there are many rewarding career paths that start from vocational and technical schools; however, this is not the focus of this report. In addition, very few of these schools participate in the NSC, and we are therefore unable to track students' enrollment into most of these institutions or evaluate whether enrolling in one of these schools gives a student a high probability of achieving their postsecondary goals. Because of these small numbers, we include students in vocational/technical schools in the two-year category in our analyses.

We also do not combine students who began in two-year colleges with students who began in four-year colleges, even though these students may intend to transfer and eventually complete a four-year degree. Our analysis of our qualitative data indicates that enrolling in a two-year college is often something students fall back on when they encounter obstacles in the college search and application process, rather than a clearly defined plan.

Transferring from a two-year to a four-year college is not a simple process. It requires careful planning to accrue the right number of transferable credits; complete any remedial, noncredit-bearing courses; and go through the college search and application process again. Furthermore, research indicates that this road to a four-year degree has a low probability of success. National studies have found that only about 10 percent of students who initially enroll in two-year colleges complete a bachelor's degree within six years. Even among students who hope to attain a four-year degree, the probability of reaching that goal is nearly three times higher if they initially enroll in a four-year college.[iv] The preliminary evidence for CPS graduates successfully using two-year colleges as a stepping-stone to four-year colleges is weak; of 2004 graduates who started in a two-year college, only 57 percent were still enrolled in any college as of fall 2005, compared to 81 percent of students who started in a four-year college.[v]

We recognize that two-year colleges play an important role in postsecondary education. In 2002, two-year colleges enrolled 40 percent of undergraduate students in the United States, and that percentage is even higher among minority students.[vi] Two-year colleges also provide college access to all students, regardless of their qualifications. Beginning at a two-year college and transferring to a four-year college is often seen as a viable option, particularly for low-income students who are likely to have difficulty paying high tuition. However, because this report seeks to understand how to provide students with the best roadmap to a four-year degree and research has shown that few students make the transition from two-year to four-year colleges, we do not regard starting in a two-year college as equivalent to starting in a four-year college.

the application process. Does this mean that students correctly judge their qualifications and decide that they do not have the content knowledge and skills to attend a four-year college? Or are there other reasons students do not enroll in a four-year college? Figure 12 tracks students through the application process by their levels of qualifications upon graduation. We characterized qualifications using our rubric (see *How We Define College Access for CPS Graduates*, p. 17) of the type of colleges CPS students would likely be able to attend, given their ACT scores, GPAs, and enrollment in advanced coursework.

Students who graduated with low GPAs and ACT scores, and thus have access to only two-year or nonselective colleges, were unlikely to plan, apply, or be accepted to four-year colleges. However, it is not just students with low qualifications who fail to meet benchmarks in the college application process; many students with access to somewhat selective or selective colleges did not plan to attend a four-year college, and even many students 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) planned 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. Those students who did apply were accepted at very high rates.

In sum, our look at CPS seniors' road from aspirations to enrollment identifies three critical benchmarks which even many well-qualified students failed to

FIGURE 12

Only 61 percent of students qualified to attend a somewhat selective college, the majority of Illinois public universities, applied to a four-year college

Tracking students who aspired to complete a four-year degree by access category through the steps to college enrollment:

Legend:
- Access to Very Selective Four-Year
- Access to Selective Four-Year
- Access to Somewhat Selective Four-Year
- Access to Nonselective Four-Year
- Access to Two-Year Only

X-axis categories: Aspired to Complete at Least a Four-Year Degree | Planned to Attend a Four-Year College in the Fall | Applied to a Four-Year College | Accepted into a Four-Year College | Enrolled in a Four-Year College

Y-axis: Percent of Students

Data values:
- Very Selective: 100, 96, 90, 89, 81
- Selective: 100, 86, 76, 72, 62
- Somewhat Selective: 100, 73, 61, 54, 43
- Nonselective: 100, 60, 45, 31, 20
- Two-Year Only: 100, 50, 30, 16, 8

Note: These figures are based on the Potholes Sample (see Appendix B for details). Thirteen percent of the Potholes Sample had access to a very selective college, 19 percent to a selective college, 32 percent to a somewhat selective college, 17 percent to a nonselective college, and 18 percent only had access to a two-year college. See *How We Define College Access* on p. 17 for a description of how these access categories were created.

make. First, many students like Jennie opt to attend a two-year or vocational or technical school instead of a four-year college. Second, many students like Maribel, who planned to attend a four-year college, do not apply. Third, even students who apply to and are accepted at a four-year college do not always enroll. Approximately 8 percent of the most highly qualified CPS students in our sample were accepted to a college but did not ultimately enroll. We observe this trend even after we have adjusted our college enrollment numbers to account for the fact that not all colleges participate in the NSC.[36] How could students who had been accepted to college not enroll? We will return to this important question later in this chapter.

Latino Students Have the Most Difficulty Managing College Enrollment

Research has consistently found that Latino students have the most difficulty managing the college application process and gaining access to guidance and support.[37] Figure 13 presents the proportion of students who took the steps to enroll in a four-year college by students' race/ethnicity. Not surprisingly, even among students qualified to attend a four-year college, 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

FIGURE 13

Of students who aspired to a bachelors degree, Latinos were the least likely to plan to attend and apply to a four-year college

Tracking students by race/ethnicity through the steps to college enrollment:
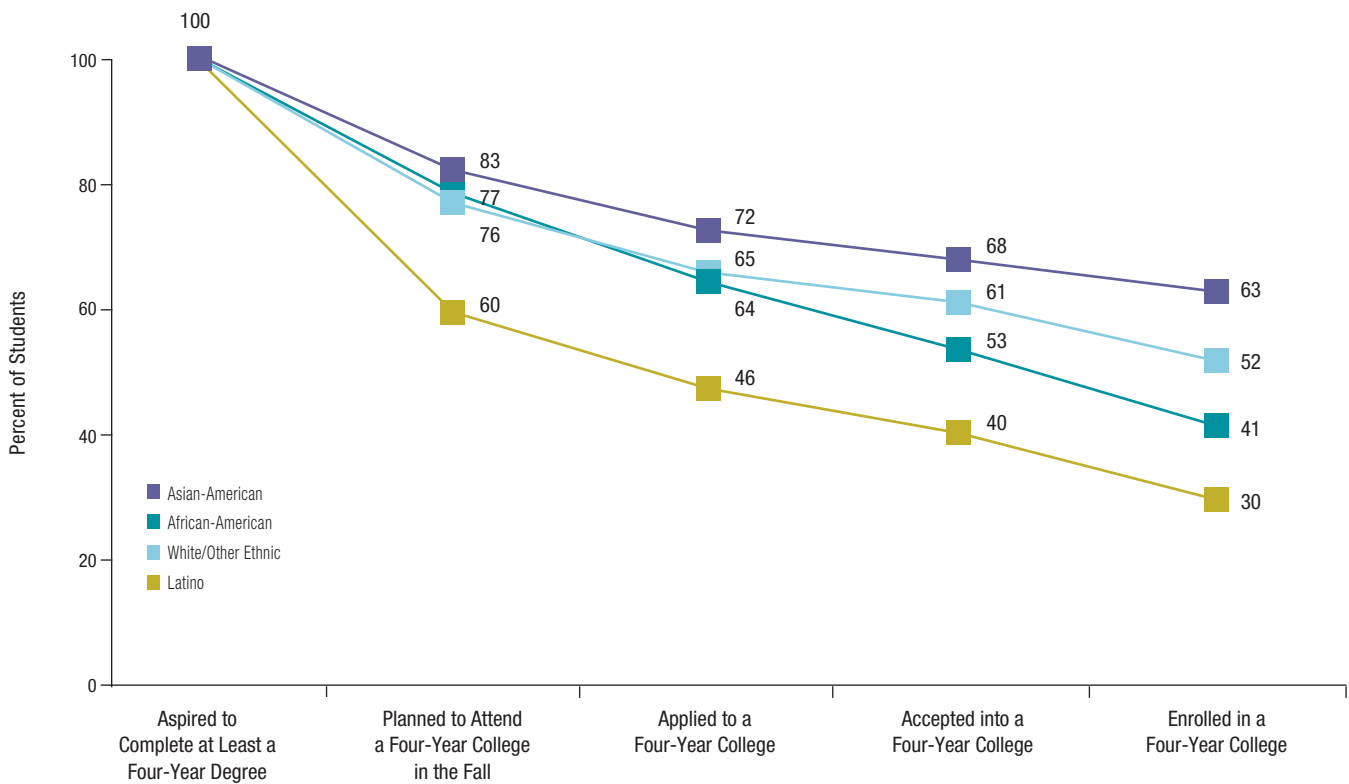
Note: These figures are based on the Potholes Sample (see Appendix B for details). The racial/ethnic composition of the Potholes Sample is: 8 percent Asian-American, 47 percent African-American, 13 percent White/Other Ethnic, and 31 percent Latino.

the fall, compared to 77 percent of African-American and 76 percent of White/Other Ethnic graduates. Fewer than half of Latino students who wanted a four-year degree applied to a four-year college, compared to about 65 percent of their African-American and White/Other Ethnic counterparts. Importantly, many Latino students (10 percent) were accepted at a four-year college but did not enroll. The loss of students between acceptance and enrollment (the last step) was quite similar for Latino, White/Other Ethnic students (9 percent), and African-American students (12 percent). However, this 10 percentage point drop represents 25 percent of all Latino students who had been accepted to a college. The proportional loss for Latino students was larger because so few actually reached the point of acceptance to a four-year college.

One common explanation for why Latino CPS students do not enroll in four-year colleges is that they are immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants. In our analysis, since we cannot determine if students are undocumented, we examine the role of immigrant status. Our analysis finds that Latino students were less likely than White/Other Ethnic and African-American graduates to both plan to attend and apply to four-year colleges, regardless of whether they were born in or immigrated to the United States. We conducted a multivariate analysis that estimated the probability of taking these steps (i.e., planning to attend a four-year college and applying to a four-year college) controlling for students' qualifications and background characteristics, including students' immigrant status (born in the United States, came to the United States before age ten, or after age ten).[38] We found that Latino students are less likely than other racial/ethnic groups both to plan to attend and to apply to four-year colleges regardless of whether they were born in or immigrated to the United States. Among all students, immigrants who came to the United States after age ten were much less likely than students born in the United States to take these two important steps. Although it is a factor, immigrant status alone cannot explain why so many more Latino students who aspire to attain four-year degrees are less likely to plan to enroll or apply than African-American students. Even among Latino students born in the United States, our analysis finds

that they are still 15 percentage points less likely to plan to enroll in a four-year college and 8 percentage points less likely to apply to a four-year college.

In short, Latino students who aspired to complete a four-year college degree, regardless of whether they were born in or outside of the United States, were significantly less likely to plan to attend and apply to a four-year college than other CPS graduates. In Chapter 1, we noted that Latino students were less likely to attend college than other students, and we found that differences in qualifications, family background, and immigrant status could not account for these lower rates of enrollment. This is also true for four-year college enrollment. For example, Latino students who aspired to attain a four-year degree were approximately 13 percentage points less likely to enroll in a four-year college than other students, controlling for students' high school qualifications, family background, and neighborhood characteristics. Much of this gap in four-year college enrollment can be explained by the fact that Latino students were less likely to take the steps to enroll in a four-year college. When we account for whether students planned to attend a four-year college, the gap falls significantly to 5 percent. If we account for whether students actually applied to a four-year college the gap falls to 3 percent—a difference that is no longer statistically significant.

To restate, Latino students who took the steps to enroll in a four-year college—who planned to attend a four-year college and applied to a four-year college—were only slightly less likely than their African-American and White/Other Ethnic counterparts to enroll, controlling for their high school qualifications and family background. That is, qualifications alone do not explain the lower enrollment of Latino students in four-year colleges. Rather, their lower rates of enrollment may be attributed to the fact that so few Latino students who aspire to complete a four-year degree plan to attend and apply to a four-year college. Thus, if we can explain why Latino students are less likely to take these two steps—planning to attend a four-year college and applying to a four-year college—we can better understand their lower four-year college enrollment rates.

How Many Undocumented CPS Latino Graduates Are There?

This chapter closely examines the college-going patterns of Latino CPS graduates and the reasons why Latino students are less likely to enroll in four-year colleges than their classmates. There is a common belief in schools and among the public that this gap in enrollment is caused by a large number of undocumented Latino students. For the approximately 13 percent of Latino graduates who are Puerto Rican, U.S. citizenship clearly is not an issue.[vii] Analysis in this chapter has shown that immigrants, particularly students who had immigrated after age ten, are less likely to enroll in four-year colleges. 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. Therefore immigrant status, which includes both undocumented and documented students, is not a sufficient explanation for the gap.

Still, being an undocumented immigrant clearly poses a barrier to four-year college enrollment beyond barriers faced by other CPS students.[viii] Students who are undocumented immigrants are not eligible for federal or state financial aid and cannot file a FAFSA, which may make them ineligible for institutional aid. They may also have greater difficulty navigating the already complicated college search and application process. College applications often ask for immigration status, which may deter students from applying.

Given the obstacles that undocumented students face, we sought to estimate the percentage of CPS graduates who are undocumented immigrants so that we could better understand the magnitude of this issue. Because CPS does not maintain records on students' citizenship or immigration status, we used a couple of different methods to estimate the number of undocumented graduates. First, CPS has students' Social Security numbers (SSNs), and these went through a validation process. We can use the percentage of students who have valid SSNs to roughly calculate the undocumented population. This estimate will likely be high; we expect this number includes some students who are citizens and declined to report their SSNs to CPS or incorrectly reported their SSNs. Using this method for the class of 2006, we find that 14.5 percent of Latino graduates do not have valid SSNs. However, Latino graduates are not the only racial/ethnic group that has a high percentage of students without SSNs; 11.4 percent of White/Other Ethnic graduates and 6.1 percent of Asian-American graduates also lack SSNs.

	Valid SSN	No SSN
Asian-American	93.9%	6.1%
African-American	96.9%	3.1%
Latino	85.5%	14.5%
White/Other Ethnic	88.6%	11.4%

Second, we can use CPS records to determine the percentage of students who were born outside the United States and then calculate the percentage of these non-native students who had valid employment records (with SSNs) within a year of graduation according to the Illinois Department of Employment Security. Because there are numerous reasons why graduates may not work in Illinois, this also will be an overestimate. Among Latino graduates, 28.6 percent were born outside the United States. Of these students, 60.2 percent did not have valid employment records. This represents 17.2 percent of all Latino graduates, a figure somewhat higher than our first estimate. Using this method, 22 percent of Asian-American students and 11.2 percent of White/Other Ethnic graduates were born outside the United States and do not have employment records.

Having undocumented students clearly poses

a challenge to high schools that are working on increasing the number of their graduates who make the transition to postsecondary education. However, our estimates of the percentage of students who may be undocumented indicate that having large proportions of undocumented students is not an adequate explanation for the gap in college enrollment. Moreover, both of these estimates of the percentage of undocumented Latino graduates, 14.5 percent and 17.2 percent, are almost certainly high. While the barriers to college enrollment for undocumented students are very real, the perception that these barriers are faced by large proportions of students appears to be exaggerated. Finally, as has been consistently documented throughout this report, immigrant status does not explain the gap in the college-going rates of Latino students and their similarly prepared peers of other racial/ethnic groups. This point cannot be overstated: Latino students are not going to college at expected rates, not even when controlling for immigrant status.

A Qualitative Look at Students who Became "Early Two-Year" College-Goers

The pattern of nonapplication in Figure 12 suggests that CPS students who aspire to enroll in four-year colleges may face barriers in addition to qualifications in the search and application process. Among students who aspired to attain a four-year degree and left high school with high qualifications (eligible for selective or very selective college), a surprising number never even applied to a four-year college, while others such as Jennie made an early decision to attend a two-year school. This pattern describes nearly one-quarter of students with access to selective and 10 percent of students with access to very selective colleges. As we described in the previous section, it describes fully 40 percent of Latino students. For most of this chapter, we look quantitatively at what school-level and student-level characteristics may shape the likelihood of students taking each of the steps for college enrollment. Data from our qualitative study, however, is particularly useful in investigating the process by which CPS students, many of whom are qualified to attend a four-year college, decide to enroll in a two-year college. In our qualitative study, 16 of the 105 students we interviewed followed the pattern we observe in Figure 11, making an "early" decision to attend a two-year school.[39] In this section, we present results of our qualitative analysis that closely examined the themes that seem to lead students to make the decision to choose two-year over four-year schools early in their senior year.[40]

Why do students who aspire to complete a four-year degree make an early decision to go to a two-year college?[41] One hypothesis is that students are expressing a strong preference for two-year versus four-year colleges as a path to a four-year degree because of costs and consideration of what educational settings may best meet their and their families' needs. Thus, one reading of our results is that students may be expressing a clear intention to plan to attend a two-year school and then transfer to a four-year school. A second hypothesis is that students are "defaulting" to two-year colleges because they have difficulty managing the process of searching for, applying to, and financing college.

Drawing on student interviews, we conducted an analysis of these 16 students in our qualitative study who had ambitions to attend a four-year college but made an early decision not to enroll in a four-year school, often before ever applying. Our analysis sought to identify the common themes in how these students thought about their college search and to describe the processes that led to their college choices.[42] These students had four common characteristics. First, all of these students experienced strong positive press for college from teachers and parents, but lacked structured support and concrete guidance to help them organize their information and manage the process. Second, many of these students were worried about college costs and lacked information on how financial aid worked and what the real cost of a four-year college would be, net of financial aid. Third, these students were confused about how to pick a college and became risk averse because of concerns about making the wrong college decision. Fourth, their concerns and confusion led them to "opt out," or to make a decision they felt was safe and would get them to a college campus without a clear plan for how that decision might lead to a four-year degree. These themes were not unique to students in this group, but they were pervasive among these students and came together in such a way that students, often in frustration, expressed that they "gave up." Thus, as we look at the following common themes, our analysis suggests that the choice of a two-year over a four-year college was, for these students, primarily driven by confusion over how to manage the college application process rather than an informed choice that a two-year college was preferable.

Theme 1: Positive Messages about College but a Lack of Structured Support

Contrary to popular belief, hardly any students in this group stated in their junior year or at the beginning of their senior year that their plan was to attend a two-year school and transfer to a four-year school. In the earliest interviews, virtually none of the students in our qualitative study who made an early decision to attend a two-year school looked as though they were headed in that direction. The majority, like Jennie, were academically qualified to attend a four-year school, and all of these students hoped to attend a four-year college.[43] These students also reported receiving many positive messages about the value of a college education from their parents and school. They reported strong push from their parents about the importance of attending college, mostly in the form of general exhortation on the benefits of education. As one typical student explained, *"Well, my parents came from Mexico and they really didn't go to college . . . (but) they do know the importance of college and they enforce that."*

At the same time, a consistent theme among these students was that they lacked structured support or guidance from adults at their schools or from other role models who could shepherd them through the postsecondary process. Many reported getting general information about college but lacked one-on-one guidance from a knowledgeable adult. Many did not have a college-educated adult in their families, leaving them to rely on their schools for individual guidance. Yet not a single student in this group reported meeting individually with a counselor to discuss future plans.

Thus, most of the students in this group reported getting information about college in the most general ways—assemblies, visits from college representatives, or class presentations by counselors—but received little concrete and personalized attention. As one student described:

> ". . . every Friday, we come to the auditorium, all the seniors, and there is always a counselor . . . throwing out flyers, dates, schedule times and all that . . . I don't take [the hand-outs] because they give out information about other colleges, and I'm only interested in two colleges."

And another responded this way to the question: "Do your counselors talk to you at all about college?"

> "They give us our test scores back and they'll tell us, 'You need this and this to go to college. That's why you should pass [your classes] and stuff like that. Or, they [ask] us, 'What are you going to do?' [There are] . . . some open houses, and sometimes they have field trips. For the students who want to apply, they put their name on the list and they get to go on a field trip to a college."

Theme 2: Sticker Shock and Lack of Information on Financial Aid

A second important theme among early two-year college students was the experience of "sticker shock" as they began looking at the costs of four-year college, combined with a lack of understanding of how to obtain financial aid and information on real costs of four-year versus two-year colleges. These students, like many, were anxious about costs and debt and had little understanding of financial aid. This anxiety and lack of information often led students to rule out four-year colleges before even applying for financial aid. Most of these students never filled out a FAFSA. One student describes her fear of financially burdening her family:

> "I talked to my parents about that . . . because my brother goes to college. It's a lot of money, and I know they say that there's a lot of money out there [for college] . . . but it seems like [it takes] forever to look for it. I tried to [look for money], on the Internet but it seems so confusing . . . I don't understand anything. I told [my parents] I don't know if I want to go to college anymore, because it's so much money, they're paying so much for my brother. I don't want to be another load of money that they have to pay for. My parents say that it's up to me, but they would be proud of me going to college."

As this student illustrates, the dearth of solid information and not knowing how to organize the information available into a workable plan became overwhelming. Many students also worried greatly about loans. The same young woman explained:

> "I have some family members who got student loans and they're like 26 right now and they're still paying those, and I don't want to be like, 'Oh, I have to pay my loan' like all the time."

Theme 3: Fear of Making the Wrong College Choice

Economists view college choice as a decision where students balance the payoffs of different colleges against the costs of a college education.[44] A third consistent theme in this group of early two-year college students

was that they did not have the information to engage in this decision, because they misunderstood the real costs and were confused about how to evaluate the benefits. There is a pervasive belief among first-generation college-goers in our study that the best way to pick a college is to first decide what career they want to have, then determine which schools in the area are best suited to prepare students for that career, and then pick among those colleges. Uncertainty about their majors or chosen careers became significant barriers to these students that derailed their plans. Many expressed anxiety about picking the wrong college. One student, for example, describes the best advice he could give to a future college applicant:

> "Pick one [college/career] and make sure that is the one that you want to go for. Don't pick one and once you're in it be like, 'Damn, I don't like this, I don't want to do this.'"

Students' confusion about what kind of major and what kind of career they should aim for led to a palpable sense of confusion, as Jennie described when asked about the state of her postsecondary plans:

> "I have no idea [what I want to do next year]. I want to go to college, but I don't know what I want to be. I was just talking to my friend today . . . she went to Columbia over the weekend . . . she was saying how great it was there, but she doesn't feel like she wants to go there. I feel like if I were to go into theater or something like that, what are the chances of finding a job? I know it's horrible, but I'm so confused at the moment."

Theme 4: Risk Aversion and Defaulting to a Two-Year Option

The final theme we identified was that many early two-year college students acted on seemingly random pieces of information to make what appeared to them to be a safer choice. Based on the conflicting ideas described above, students were left in a vulnerable position to negotiate their college plans. They received consistently positive messages about the importance of going to college, but they were confused about the

process. They were fearful of debt, financial burden, and making the wrong choice, and they had no individual guidance to help alleviate those fears. This led to a state of risk aversion. By winter of senior year, early two-year college students started looking for safe routes that would get them to college, but also alleviate their fears. Many began to view two-year schools and technical/trade programs as lower risk options, citing the low price tag (in the case of two-year program), or the clear path to a career (in the case of technical schools). Students began responding to what seemed like random, uninvestigated, or even incorrect pieces of information, but their decisions made them feel safe.

Early two-year college students responded to random information in three related ways. First, students began repeating advice, often from sources they could not clearly remember or identify, that the first two years of college are exactly the same at any institution, two-year or four-year. The first two years of college often were referred to as "the basics," as the following students' accounts of their college choices illustrate:

> "I [asked my teacher] . . . if I should just go to Daley (City College) instead of to IIT (a very selective college). He told me . . . just go to Daley—you save more money going to Daley and get your basic classes done, then transfer them out to . . . to whatever college you want to go to."

> "I'm gonna go to Moraine (Valley Community College) to do my basics, because I didn't know that you needed basics no matter what you're looking into. I might as well just go to community college, get that over with, and then apply to [four-year schools]. I'm still applying to the other universities, just to give it a shot, but most likely I'm gonna end up going to Moraine Valley."

The second type of safe decision-making came from students hearing that two-year colleges or trade school programs were a better bargain, either because the tuition cost was lower or because it would be a faster route to a job. One student, who always wanted to study architecture at a college, said he became interested in a carpentry trade school because it was a quick route to a job:

> "I don't think it's really college or something. It's just they train you, and then they give you a job right away. And they start paying you."

The third way students made safe decisions was to pick a two-year college as a low-risk option when they weren't sure what else to do. One student describes her uncertainty:

> "I was thinking about just going to community college instead, because they've been telling me so many things like, 'Oh, right now you want something, then later on you're just going to change it, and then you're just gonna go waste your money, and then you're going to want to change to something else.' So they—my teachers, my friends, my family, my parents, you know, everybody—got me thinking, 'Well, are you sure that's what you really want?' I thought I was sure, but now I'm not anymore."

There are many reasons why a student might choose to attend a two-year college or technical training program after high school, rather than a four-year school, including having low qualifications, having aspirations to complete such a program and not a four-year degree, or not having citizenship status to submit a FAFSA, but these were not the reasons that most students in our study made the early decision to attend a two-year college. Rather, our analysis suggests that students chose a two-year college, not because of the lure of two-year colleges or a clear plan for how to use a two-year college as a first step on the path to attaining a four-year degree, but rather as a default option after they have struggled with confusion and fear about how to capitalize on their ambition to attend a four-year college.

What Matters in Shaping Whether Students Take the Steps to Enroll in a Four-Year College?

The central question raised by our analysis so far is: Can teachers and counselors make a difference in whether students take the steps necessary to enroll in a four-year college? A key difference between Moises and Grady (see case study p. 26) and Maribel and

Jennie (see case studies p. 54 and p. 56) was the extent to which these students had an important adult at their school supporting and guiding them through this process and the extent to which their families were involved in guiding their college search. Previous research largely confirms this observation. First-generation college students and low-income students are especially dependent on nonfamilial adults, such as teachers, to assist them with the college application process.[45] Schools may have strong influence on students' decisions and behaviors; schools can set strong norms for college enrollment and provide the information and guidance students need to effectively manage the search and application process.

When examining what matters for students to take the necessary steps to translate their aspirations into enrollment, it is particularly important to look at school-level rather than individual-level characteristics. We asked students on the senior survey, for example, to report how many times they talked to a counselor. Students who talk to counselors may be more likely to go to college because of their counselors' help, but it may also be that, like Moises and Grady, students who are actively involved in the college application process are the ones talking to counselors. Thus, we focus on school-level rather than student-level factors because we want to distinguish between the impact that a school-level factor, such as counselors, has and the effect of being a particularly motivated student. That is, if students who attend schools where students report strong levels of contact with counselors are more likely to take the steps to college, then we know that having a strong counseling department has an overall impact on students, not just on those who are motivated enough to talk to a counselor.

To look at the effect of school influences on students' behavior, we conducted a series of analyses that estimated students' likelihood of taking each of the steps we identified in the road to a four-year college: (1) planning to attend a four-year school in the fall among students who aspired to complete a four-year degree, (2) applying among students who planned to attend a four-year college, (3) being accepted among students who applied, and (4) enrolling among

students who had been accepted. In these analyses, we started with the same set of control variables that we used in our previous analyses (demographics, qualifications, family background, students' immigrant status, and neighborhood characteristics). We also controlled for whether students were involved in school activities and sports teams, worked outside of school, participated in college search activities (attended college fairs and used college guide books), and how they responded on surveys to questions about support from their peers, parents, teachers, and counselors (see Appendix D for descriptions of the variables). We were particularly interested in how students' probability of enrolling was shaped by their and their teachers' reports of the college-going culture in their school and teacher and counselor support for college. Our estimates of the effect of high school characteristics represent the difference in the probability of a student taking each step if he or she attended a high school with high levels of each school characteristic (e.g., strong college-going culture) compared to if that student attended a school with low levels of each school characteristic (e.g., a weak college-going culture).

In the multivariate analyses in this chapter, we used the Potholes Analytic Sample, a subset of students in our Potholes Sample. In the Potholes Analytic Sample, we further limited our sample to students with the qualifications to attend at least a nonselective four-year college and students who did not attend selective enrollment high schools. Selective enrollment high schools are, by definition, schools that select their students on the basis of their ability to do college-preparatory work and their greater orientation toward college. Thus, when we compare selective enrollment high school students' college outcomes to those of students in neighborhood high schools, it is difficult to disentangle whether the school environment has an effect or if the more motivated and qualified student population is driving the results. However, our pattern of results is very similar whether or not we include these high schools. We first conducted each analysis for all students and then conducted analyses separately by race/ethnicity and by students' qualifications.

The College-Going Culture of a School Strongly Shaped Students' Plans

Research on college choice often finds that one of the most important predictors of whether students go to college is whether they attend a high school where the majority of students tend to go to college.[46] College-going rates in the school may have a strong effect on an individual student's behavior because they capture the overall college-going culture of the school, as well as whether the school provides critical guidance and support. College-going rates may also represent the importance of feeder patterns—that is, once students from a high school start going to a particular college, more students are likely to follow suit. We measured the college-going culture of a school using two variables: (1) the percentage of students from the prior graduating class who attended a four-year school and (2) the school average of teacher survey responses on the college climate in their school (teachers' assessments of college climate; for details, see *How We Measure High School College-Going Culture,* p. 45). This second variable is based on responses to questions asked of all high school teachers about the extent to which students in their school go to college, whether their school's curriculum is geared toward preparing students for college, and whether teachers in their school helped students plan for college outside of class time. Both of these measures of college-going culture were important predictors of whether students with aspirations to complete four-year degrees planned to attend four-year colleges (see Figure 14). Attending a school with a strong college-going culture was particularly important for Latino students, the group least likely to plan to attend a four-year college after graduation.

Some school-level factors were particularly important for whether Latino students planned to attend a four-year college (see Figure 15). Latino students' plans seemed to be particularly influenced by their connections with teachers. The school average of student reports of their connection with teachers was not related to college plans among all CPS students, but it was a significant predictor of whether Latino students planned to attend a four-year college in the fall. For Latino students, participating in a school activity, another way of providing students an opportunity to develop relationships with teachers and

FIGURE 14

Students in schools with strong college-going cultures were more likely to plan to attend a four-year college

*Difference in the likelihood of **planning to attend** a four-year college between students in **schools** that have strong versus weak college-going cultures:*

Note: A strong school is defined as being 1 standard deviation above the mean and a weak school is 1 standard deviation below the mean. The analysis uses the Potholes Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, and academic characteristics. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

FIGURE 15

Latino students were more likely to plan to attend a four-year college if they had strong connections to their schools and strong peer support

*Difference in the likelihood of **planning to attend** a four-year college between:*

Note: For participation, the difference is between an average student not participating in an activity weekly versus an average student participating in a school activity weekly. A student/school strong on the two measures is defined as being 1 standard deviation above the mean and a weak student/school is 1 standard deviation below the mean. This analysis uses the Potholes Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, and academic characteristics. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

peers, was a particularly important predictor. This suggests that Latino students may be much more reliant on teachers and their school for guidance and information, and that their college plans are more dependent on their connections to school. Students' reports of whether their peer group had a strong academic orientation were associated with Latino students' likelihood of planning to attend a four-year college, but not for other students. Previous research has found that Latino students rely heavily on their friendship networks in making educational plans and decisions.[47] Thus, it appears that Latino students' plans are strongly influenced by their access to adults and peers who support them in their college aspirations.

Strong Counselor and Teacher Support Matters for Whether Latino Students Apply

Having strong support at school was also important in shaping whether Latino students who planned to go to a four-year college followed through and applied (see Figure 16). Controlling for student characteristics, Latino students were much more likely to apply to a four-year school if they reported that they had strong levels of support from teachers and counselors in completing tasks such as filling out applications and making decisions about what school to attend. Latino students who attended schools where students often reported that their counselors were active in helping them make post-graduation plans were also more likely to follow through on their plans and apply to a four-year college. While strong counselor and teacher support had a large impact on Latino students, their effect on other students' likelihood of applying was modest.

What is clear from these patterns is that the college plans and behaviors of Latino students in CPS are strongly shaped by the expectations of their teachers and counselors and whether adults in the building prioritize college preparation and the college application process. For Latino students such as Jennie and Maribel, establishing strong connections to the adults in their schools and receiving concrete support in making educational plans and applying to college were particularly important. These themes were consistent among all the students in our qualitative study who aspired to but did not end up planning to attend or applying to a four-year college.

FIGURE 16

Latino students were much more likely to apply to a four-year college if they reported strong teacher and counselor support

*Difference in the likelihood of **applying** to a four-year college between:*
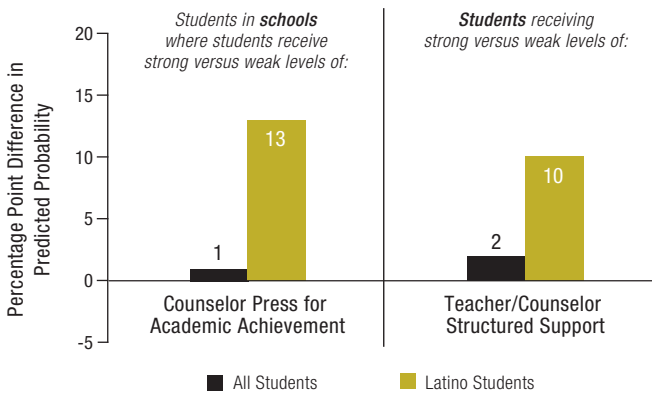
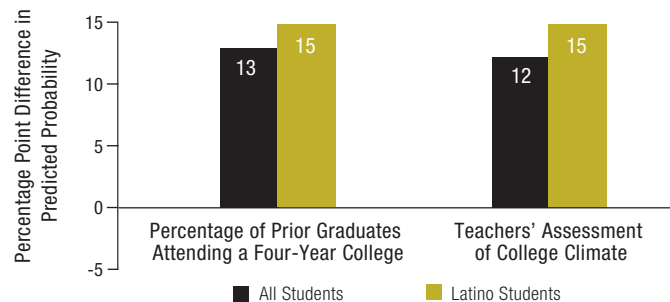**Note:** A strong student/school is defined as being 1 standard deviation above the mean and a weak student/school is 1 standard deviation below the mean. The analysis uses the Potholes Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, and academic characteristics. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

Whether Students Are Active in the Application Process Matters for Acceptance

Getting students to apply is important but, as Grady and Moises illustrate so vividly, getting accepted at college requires that students apply not to just one or two colleges but to multiple colleges. CPS has set the goal that students should apply to at least five colleges to maximize their options. Our analysis supports this approach. We looked at whether students who stated that they applied to four-year colleges were accepted at four-year colleges (see Figure 17). Controlling for students' characteristics and their reports of the individual support they received from teachers, counselors, and parents, students were more likely to be accepted if they applied to three or more, and particularly to six or more, colleges.

Again students' chances of gaining admission to college were much higher in schools with strong college-going cultures (see Figure 18). Even controlling for an individual student's number of applications, students were more likely to be accepted at a college if they attended schools where many graduates in the previous cohort enrolled in four-year colleges and reported applying to multiple colleges, and if they attended schools where teachers report that the school has a strong college climate. These results suggest that students' chances of being accepted were shaped by

FIGURE 17

Students were more likely to be accepted into a four-year college if they applied to multiple schools

*Difference compared to **students** who applied to fewer than three schools:*
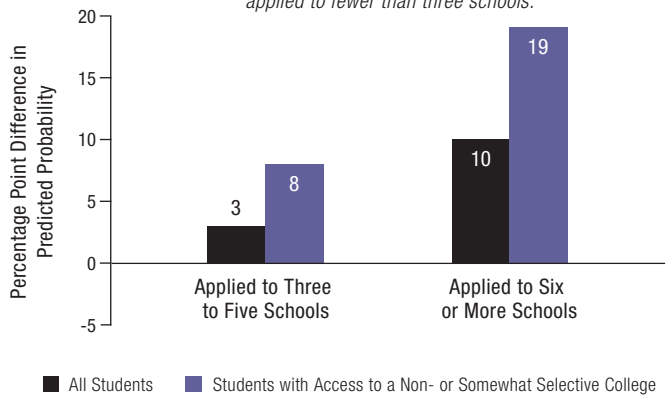
Note: This analysis uses students in the Potholes Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, and academic characteristics. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

FIGURE 18

Students were more likely to be accepted into a four-year college if they attended schools with strong college-going cultures

*Difference in likelihood of being **accepted** between students in **schools** that have strong versus weak college-going cultures:*
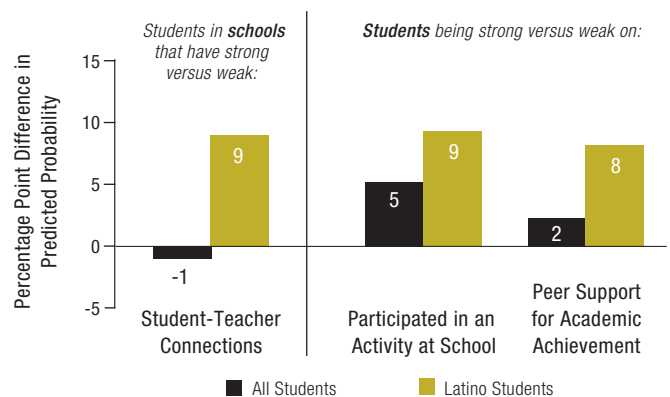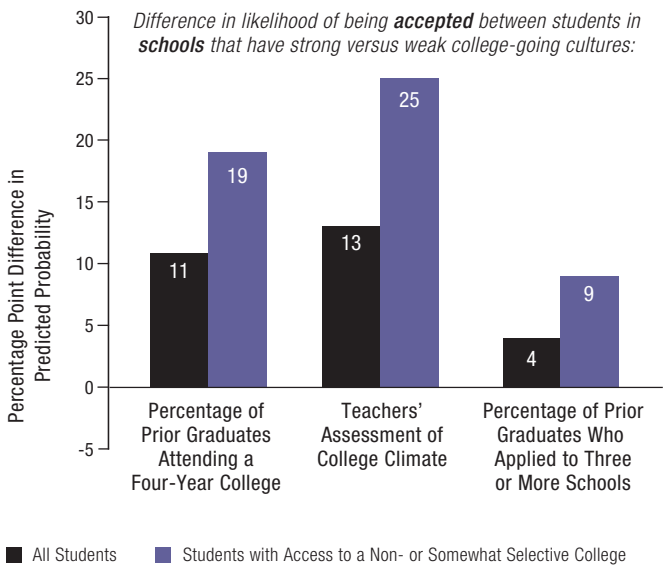

Note: A strong school is defined as being 1 standard deviation above the mean and a weak school is 1 standard deviation below the mean. The analysis uses the Potholes Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, and academic characteristics. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

whether the school environment was organized to assist students through the application process. Attending a school with a strong college-going culture is particularly important for students who have marginal levels of qualifications. It is these students who may have the most difficulty getting accepted at a four-year college and whose likelihood of acceptance is most affected by whether they are active in the application process and attend schools with a strong college-going culture and where the norm is applying to multiple colleges.

Why Do Students Who Are Accepted Not Enroll?

One of the most puzzling places that CPS students leave the road to college is the final step of enrolling in college once they are accepted. On average, while 51 percent of CPS students are accepted, only 41 percent enroll; thus 20 percent of the students who are accepted to a four-year college do not enroll in a four-year college in the fall.[48] As discussed earlier, these results should not be affected by whether students attend colleges that are in the NSC data because we have adjusted the college-going rates for students who reported that they planned to attend a school that is not in the NSC.[49]

Sabrina and Marco present two cases of students from our longitudinal study that fit this pattern of behavior. These cases illustrate the interplay among guidance, access to high expectations, effective participation in the college application process, and potential financial barriers that undermine college access, even among those students who are admitted to college and seem initially engaged in the college search. Sabrina ultimately made the mistake of losing steam during the college search and application process, grabbing a lifeline to one college that gave her an easy option,

but unfortunately made her vulnerable to that option falling through. Marco's case study suggests that even students who look like they have successfully navigated the college search process may run into barriers if they do not take the necessary steps to apply for financial aid and make concrete plans for the transition to college, particularly those students without strong concrete supports at home.

Not Filing a FAFSA Seems to Be a Significant Barrier to College Enrollment for CPS Students

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 many CPS students stumble at that point. Our analysis finds, moreover, that many CPS students may end up facing higher costs for college because they do not take the steps necessary to maximize federal, state, and institutional support.

There is a growing recognition that the complexity of the federal financial aid application creates barriers for students.[50] The American Council on Education (ACE) estimates that approximately one in five low-income students who are enrolled in college and would likely be eligible for Pell grants never filed a FAFSA.[51] In addition, the report points out that many students, when they do apply, apply late (after April), which makes it less likely they would receive federal, state, and institutional aid. Middle-income and upper-income students, moreover, were more likely than low-income students to file their FAFSA before April 1. Even among students who fill out their FAFSA, the ACE report

What happens to students who leave high school with a clear plan for attending college but never enroll in the fall? Sabrina, a highly qualified student, shows how becoming too focused on one college option can pose a problem over the summer. *See Sabrina's case study, p. 58.*

Marco demonstrates that even students with stellar college qualifications and a strong drive to complete a thorough college planning process are at risk of their plans falling through over the summer. *See Marco's case study, p. 60.*

showed that filing a FAFSA later than other students is a significant barrier to students' ability to leverage financial resources. This is because colleges and states often award their aid on a first-come/first-served basis, and there may not be sufficient aid for students who apply late. Among college-goers who filed a FAFSA before April 1, 34 percent of financial aid applicants received state aid; only 30 percent of those who filed in April or May and 20 percent of those who filed in June or later received state aid. Similarly, 41 percent of pre-April financial aid applicants received institutional aid; only 27 percent of students who filed in April or May and only 18 percent of those who filed during or after the month of June received institutional aid.

Not submitting a FAFSA is a significant barrier for CPS students. Among students who had been accepted to a four-year college, some 84 percent of students who completed a FAFSA by the end of the school year attended a four-year college in the fall, compared to only 55 percent of students who did not file a FAFSA (see Figure 19). This strong association holds even after we control for differences in student characteristics and support from teachers, counselors, and parents.[52]

Students who completed a FAFSA and had been accepted to a four-year college were over 50 percent

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:

Percent Enrolled in a Four-Year College

■ No College　■ Enrolled in a Two-Year College　■ Enrolled in 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).

more likely to enroll than students who had not completed a FAFSA by spring. Many students who had been accepted to a four-year college but did not complete a FAFSA (approximately one-third) enrolled in a two-year college. Indeed, the ACE report found that low-income community college students were significantly less likely to have completed a FAFSA.[53] This means that students who did not complete a FAFSA, as it appears Marco failed to do, may not have the money to go to a four-year school and instead enroll in a two-year college. It may also mean that students, like Jennie, decide that two-year colleges are more affordable but do not realize that they are still eligible for financial aid at a two-year college. Only 59 percent of students who ended up enrolling in a two-year college stated that they had filed a FAFSA in spring, compared to 84 percent of our sample who attended a four-year college. Only 38 percent of those who ended up not attending college like Maribel stated that they had filed a FAFSA, even though they had aspirations to attain a four-year degree. These FAFSA application rates are most likely overestimates because they are self-reports on the Senior Exit Questionnaire. Nevertheless, it suggests that students who make early decisions to go to a two-year college and who do not effectively participate in the application process do not make college decisions on the basis of comparing "real" college options. Not surprisingly, Latino students who aspire to attend a four-year degree were the least likely to complete a FAFSA, perhaps in part because so many Latino students made early decisions to attend two-year schools and like many students who enroll in two-year colleges, do not to complete a FAFSA (see Figure 20).

Completing a FAFSA late and not understanding the potential sources of student aid, moreover, makes it less likely that students such as Jennie will understand how much aid they are actually eligible to receive, which may create further barriers to four-year college enrollment. Indeed, the ACE estimates of nonparticipation in FAFSA probably underestimate the proportion of students who aspire to college but who did not complete their FAFSA because some students, such as Maribel, simply decide not to go because of cost.[54] More recent data from CPS confirms
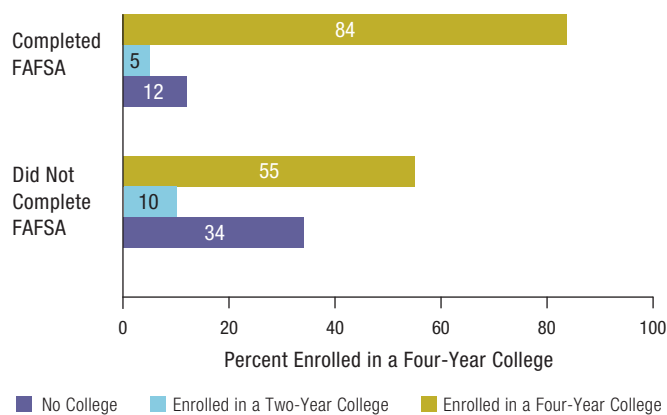
that FAFSA completion, particularly late completion, is a significant problem for CPS students. In 2007, the CPS Department of Postsecondary Education and Student Development began tracking FAFSA completion among its seniors based on data provided by the Illinois Student Assistance Commission. As of late March 2007, after the financial aid deadlines of many institutions had passed, only 30 percent of CPS seniors had completed a FAFSA. However, the students who did complete a FAFSA would have likely qualified for substantial financial aid if they had submitted their FAFSA early. Indeed, more than 50 percent of CPS students who completed their FAFSA had zero

Latino students were much less likely to report applying to multiple colleges and applying for financial aid

Percent of students completing multiple applications, submitting the FAFSA, and applying for scholarships by race/ethnicity:

Applied to Six or More Schools	White/Other Ethnic: 15, African-American: 16, Asian-American: 14, Latino: 8
Applied to Three or More Schools	White/Other Ethnic: 54, African-American: 60, Asian-American: 55, Latino: 47
Applied for a Scholarship	White/Other Ethnic: 64, African-American: 72, Asian-American: 55, Latino: 61
Completed FAFSA	White/Other Ethnic: 64, African-American: 71, Asian-American: 73, Latino: 52

Percent of Students

■ Latino   ■ Asian-American   ■ African-American   ■ White/Other Ethnic

Note: Number of colleges applied to, scholarship application rates, and FAFSA 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).

expected family contributions and almost 80 percent were eligible for a Pell Grant.[55] While FAFSA completion does not guarantee that students will receive sufficient financial aid, it is a necessary first step that many CPS students do not take.

For Moises and Grady, filing their FAFSA was not something that they did without support. They attended a school that provided assistance in FAFSA completion as part of their support for seniors' college planning. The school organizes students to apply for a FAFSA PIN, deadlines were announced regularly, and students and parents were given structured support in applying for scholarships and financial aid (see *What a Strong College Culture Looks Like*, p. 62).

We found that students who were accepted to a four-year college were much more likely to enroll if they attended a high school with a strong college climate, using our two measures: the percentage of graduates from the prior year who enrolled in four-year colleges and teacher reports of college climate (see Figure 21). We also examined an additional measure, the proportion of the prior year's graduates who had filed their FAFSA, which was also strongly related to enrollment for students who had been accepted to a four-year college. These three variables suggest that high school norms, concrete support, and information are critical to college enrollment.

School Climate Matters More Than Parental Press

Most educators strongly believe that support and press from parents are central to determining whether students aspire to and attend college. But we have not highlighted the role of parents in this chapter, which to some may seem like an important omission that misses the most important determinant of students' outcomes. We did not highlight the role of parental involvement in this chapter because we did not find that students' reports of their parents' involvement and press for college were an important predictor of whether they were able to successfully negotiate the road to college. Figure 22 compares the difference in the estimated probability of taking each step by whether students reported high versus low levels of parental press—a measure that

FIGURE 21

Students who were accepted into a four-year college, particularly those with lower levels of qualifications, were much more likely to enroll if they attended schools with strong college-going cultures

*Difference in likelihood of **enrolling** between students in **schools** that have strong versus weak college-going cultures:*

■ All Students
■ Students with Access to a Non- or Somewhat Selective College
■ Students with Access to a Selective or Very Selective College
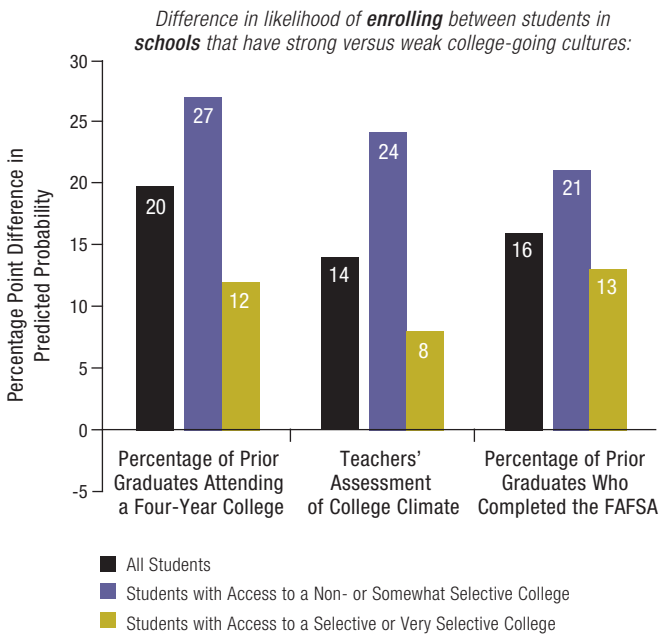
Note: A school with a strong college-going culture is defined as being 1 standard deviation above the mean and a weak school is 1 standard deviation below the mean. The analysis uses the Potholes Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, and academic characteristics. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

FIGURE 22

After controlling for students' qualifications, parental press for academic achievement made little difference in whether students took the steps to enroll in college

*Likelihood of taking each step for **students** with strong versus weak parental press for academic achievement:*

■ Weak Parental Press   ■ Strong Parental Press

Note: A student with strong levels of parental press is defined as being 1 standard deviation above the mean and a student with weak levels is 1 standard deviation below the mean. This analysis uses the Potholes Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic and academic characteristics. Students are only included in the analysis for a given step if they completed the previous step. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

asked students to report whether their parents talked to them about college, pushed them to do well in school, and encouraged them to take steps to make their plans happen. In this analysis, we controlled for student characteristics, including mother's education.

We find that the only step where parental press did matter was whether students planned to attend a four-year college after graduation. However, we find no association between students' reports of parental press and whether students applied to, were accepted to, or enrolled in college. Thus, in a system where so many children in neighborhood high schools are first-generation college-goers or have parents educated outside of the United States, parents may have limited ability—beyond imploring their children to value their education and strive for a college degree—to support their children in managing the complex college search and financial aid processes and in making critical college decisions. This makes them particularly reliant

on high schools to fill in the gaps.

Not surprisingly then, 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, the teachers 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 (see Figure 23). Indeed, students who attended high schools in which teachers reported that their school had a strong college climate were significantly more likely to plan to attend a four-year school, apply, be accepted and, when accepted, enroll. Importantly, teachers' expectations and involvement seemed to make the biggest difference for students who have marginal levels of qualifications for four-year colleges and who need much more support from adults in managing the college search and application process.

FIGURE 23

The most consistent school predictor of taking steps towards college enrollment—especially for students with lower academic qualifications—was whether their teachers reported that their school had a strong college climate

*Difference between students in **schools** that have strong versus weak college climate:*

Percentage Point Difference in Predicted Probability

	Planned *(Of Students Who Aspired)*	Applied *(Of Students Who Planned)*	Accepted *(Of Students Who Applied)*	Enrolled *(Of Students Who Were Accepted)*
All Students	12	12	13	14
Students with Access to a Non- or Somewhat Selective College	12	16	25	24
Students with Access to a Selective or Very Selective College	13	4	4	8

■ All Students
■ Students with Access to a Non- or Somewhat Selective College
■ Students with Access to a Selective or Very Selective College

Note: A school with a strong college climate is defined as being 1 standard deviation above the mean and a weak school is 1 standard deviation below the mean. The analysis uses the Potholes Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, and academic characteristics. Students are only included in the analysis for a given step if they completed the previous step. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

In our last report, we documented that high college enrollment rates in selective enrollment high schools were largely responsible for pushing up the system average to above 50 percent. More than 70 percent of high schools had college enrollment rates below the system average. It is easy to understand why certain high schools have the highest college attendance rates. Selective enrollment high schools are specifically designed to encourage students to attend college, and we would expect them to have strong college-going cultures. These schools can create college-oriented environments, in large part, because students are selected based on their academic qualifications and their willingness to work har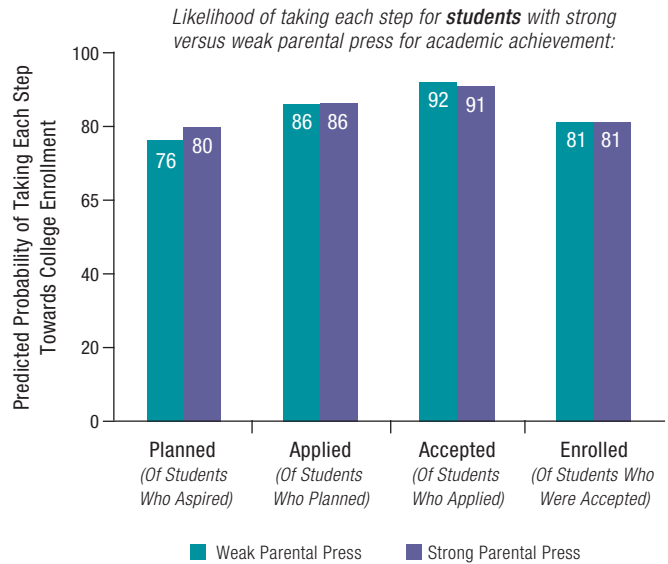d in challenging courses. They and their families already have resources that allowed them to enroll in selective enrollment schools—the same resources that would likely help them fulfill their college ambitions. As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, the analyses conducted in this chapter

only looked at students who did not attend selective enrollment high schools in the city. These results are not, then, being driven by the college-oriented community of selective enrollment schools. The role of selective enrollment schools and specialized programs, such as the International Baccalaureate program, is also a critical part of the overall performance of CPS as a system. This will be the topic of our forthcoming research brief.

The challenge for CPS is to create these environments in neighborhood high schools. The high aspirations of students and their parents mean that more students aspire to attend college than can get into selective enrollment high schools. What is clear from this analysis is that these students and their parents heavily depend on their high schools to meet their postsecondary goals. Students' opportunities will be shaped by the extent to which teachers, counselors, and schools are organized around and dedicated to the goal of creating environments with high expectations and structured support. In fact, these school influences appear to have the biggest impact on students with more moderate qualifications—those who would be unlikely to have had the opportunity to attend a selective enrollment high school.

Forthcoming Research Brief:
Selective Enrollment Schools and International Baccalaureate Program

This report raises important questions about the potholes faced by the school system's best-prepared students on the road to college. The role of selective enrollment schools and specialized programs, such as the International Baccalaureate program, is also a critical part of the overall performance of CPS as a system and will be the topic of our forthcoming research brief.

Case Studies

Here, we present case studies from our qualitative study, each of which high-lights 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 are based on five student interviews conducted between spring of these students' junior year of high school (March 2005) and their graduation the following year (June 2006) and represent common themes that emerged from our qualitative work. For more information on how the qualitative study was conducted, see Appendix B: Data Used in this Report. For more detailed information on the high schools highlighted in these case studies, see *What a Strong College Culture Looks Like: An Analysis of the Three High Schools in our Qualitative Longitudinal Study*, p. 62.

In reading these case studies, there are a few important points to keep in mind. First, in order to preserve the anonymity of students and schools that participated in the qualitative study, all names of students and high schools in this report are pseudonyms. Second, though we usually include specific names of colleges that students in our study chose to attend or considered attending, in some cases, revealing a student's college choice would compromise his or her anonymity; college names are kept confidential in these cases. Finally, since financial aid clearly plays an important role in these students' college choices, we have provided students' descriptions of how they attempted to leverage financial aid, even when they seemed very confused about the process. It is important to remember that all this information is solely based on student reports and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college.

Maribel–*A Case Study*

Working hard to what end?

Why would a student who loves learning and who aspires to complete a college degree decide not to attend college at all? Maribel illustrates many of the themes we observed in our interviews with students in our longitudinal study who decided not to attend college.

Maribel,[1] a hardworking Mexican-American student, immigrated to America in grammar school. She loved learning and cared deeply about her performance in her classes. During her academic career at Ellison High School, Maribel learned how to ask for help, manage a busy schedule, advocate for herself, and prioritize school above all else—all qualities that would make her a successful college student. Despite working at a fast-food restaurant 30 hours a week, Maribel typically spent more than three hours every night finishing her homework and earned the qualifications to attend a somewhat selective college. In her junior year, Maribel's English teacher commented:

> "She is an EXTREMELY hardworking student. She struggles with her language skills both verbally and in her writing—but she is resilient. Though she is behind academically, I believe she could be capable of making the jump from going to a two-year college to a four-year college. A brief story about her: An [Illinois political figure] was [at an event] not too long ago. She went up to him, introduced herself, and told him she needed a job. He took her phone number and someone in his office contacted her. This story exemplifies the kind of determination she has!"

Maribel's goal was to be the first in her family to graduate from college. Her brothers had struggled in school. Although her parents supported the idea of college, they were not actively engaged in the college search and application process. She said she talked to her family about her plans: *They say that if I go I will stay [in college]. Not like my brother. He went and after one semester left."*

Junior Year: Thinking About College, Worrying About the ACT

Like many students, Maribel struggled to understand the process by which students search for, apply to, and enroll in college. Yet, unlike many students, she was keenly aware of the importance of performing well in high school. She observed: *"It's important to learn more in high school, so that you can prepare more for college."* Her academic preparation for college went beyond her coursework; she participated in a program that allowed her to earn college credit by taking a class in business administration at Northwestern Business College.

Maribel was very worried about the ACT. She borrowed an ACT prep book from the library and took an ACT prep class on Saturdays.

> "We took a pretest and I got a 13. Oh my God, I was feeling horrible, but I know I can try and get at least an 18 or 19. I'm praying and studying more."

Unfortunately, Maribel's prayers weren't answered; she scored 15 on the ACT. She received a higher score of 18 on the science subtest, but she was still devastated by her overall performance. She was intent on improving and, attributing her higher science score to intensive test preparation, she planned to study the ACT book all summer:

> "I was expecting more but when I got the results . . . I feel like crying. The reading was hard. Oh my God, the reading was hard and boring. [For science] . . . that book said, 'Read the table first, then go to the question, then read the passage.' So I did that and science was my highest."

Maribel stated that her main goal for senior year was to get good grades *"so I can go to a good college . . . and get an 18 on my ACT."*

Summer: Working and Exploring the City
By the end of the summer, Maribel looked ready to return to school and accomplish her goals. She had a productive summer, working full time at O'Hare Airport. She also spent two weeks visiting Chicago museums as part of a cultural program at her school. This program gave her the downtown experience and cultural exposure she craved.

Senior Year: Releasing Her Dream
Suddenly, when Maribel returned to school in the fall, she stopped talking about her college dream, though she remained committed to her schoolwork. She performed well in her classes, and she brought up her weighted GPA from a 2.96 to a 3.18. Despite this investment in school, she announced that she didn't want to go straight to college: *"I'm going to wait one year to have my money, 'cause I don't want to work and go to college at the same time 'cause it's too hard."* She decided to work in a downtown office to make money for college.

It's hard to understand why Maribel decided to give up on the idea of college, but her decision may have been shaped by several factors—including some of the same factors that we found influenced many of her peers to attend a two-year school. First, her performance on the ACT made her doubt her ability to gain access to college at all. She felt that her ACT scores made her ineligible for college, and she didn't realize that, given her high grades, colleges might overlook her low ACT score.

Also, several of her teachers seemed to support her decision to delay college. While she never talked to a counselor, she did talk to her shop and French teachers:

> "I talked to my teachers and they told me just wait a little bit 'cause after high school . . . the colleges are getting crowds of all the students. So you just wait some to gain more money."

Finally, Maribel simply didn't know how to pay for college. She knew she could get a job, given her work experience in high school, but she felt that working full time and going to school would be too much. She never talked to anyone about financial aid options, and she couldn't answer any questions about applying for aid or filling out a FAFSA. While the whole postsecondary process—how to apply, knowing her college options, and applying for financial aid—overwhelmed Maribel, it was her wariness about the cost of college that sealed her decision. She explained:

> "I went to this field trip at Wright College . . . a college fair. So I met one of the teachers from Wright College and he gave me a sample like how much it cost, the application and all this stuff. Then [my parents say], 'Well, we're not having enough money for your college.'"

At least one teacher tried to persuade her to go to college, but to no avail:

> "They tell me, 'Do not work, just go to college,' like get a lot of student loans. But I don't want student loans. I will pay them my whole life . . . [it costs] $3,000 a semester for Wright College."

Despite this decision, Maribel worked hard all year in her classes. She loved her history class, for which she wrote papers on immigration issues and completed a PowerPoint presentation on Latin American gangs in the United States. She took another course at Northwestern Business College for college credit and completed her senior research paper for her English class, all while working nearly 30 hours a week. Maribel's English teacher described her as:

> "The quintessential sweetheart . . . who tries really hard to be perfect and correct. She wants very much to succeed."

Maribel left high school not yet having a downtown job but with plans to save up her money, eventually enroll in Wright College, and hopefully transfer to a four-year college.

Jennie–*A Case Study*

Paralyzed by the fear of choosing the wrong college

Why do some students take themselves out of the four-year college planning process? Does this only happen to students with low grades and test scores? Jennie, a student with strong qualifications for college, shows some common features of college aspirants who made an early decision to attend a two-year college.

Making the right choices about college can seem like a terribly risky venture, even for very smart young people. Jennie,[1] a Chicago-born Latina, is an extremely bright, hardworking student who completed a rigorous IB program at Silverstein High School. She was a candidate for 12-year perfect attendance, maintained a cumulative weighted GPA of 3.84, and scored 21 on the ACT. Jennie was also involved in cheerleading, drama, science club, debate team, and the National Honor Society. She was thinking about majoring in theater in college, but she also considered law. She seemed a little embarrassed by her career preference, saying, *"This may sound stupid, but I want to go into acting."*

Jennie lived with her mother, father, and older brother. Although her parents never attended college, her older brother attended a local community college, and several members of her extended family had some college experience. Her parents supported her college goals and consistently pushed her to attend a four-year college.

Junior Year: Searching for the Right Path

Managing the college search process left Jennie feeling overwhelmed and confused. The whole process seemed risky and stressful. She worried incessantly about college costs and feared she would waste her family's money if she ended up in the wrong college. Like many students, she was also convinced she needed to decide on a career before she could make a college list. These two ideas contributed greatly to her stress in searching for the right college:

> "That's pretty much how you're spending the rest of your life . . . so I find it's a pretty big decision."

Jennie experienced "sticker shock" when she considered the costs of four-year colleges. Her father was paying for her brother to attend a community college, and Jennie knew that those costs would pale in comparison to the costs of the four-year schools she considered attending. She feared further burdening her family financially:

> "They are only paying because it's a good community college. It's only $6,000 a year . . . compared to some of the other colleges, that's nothing."

Jennie also seemed to lack any broad understanding of the kinds of colleges to which she could apply. The only college she mentioned was Columbia College (in Chicago, a nonselective four-year school), because she had seen a presentation by college representatives at her high school and learned that Columbia had a fine arts program. Jennie wasn't talking to anyone at her school about the search process, although she said her counselors stressed the importance of the ACT. The science club visited the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, but Jennie said she didn't like the campus.

Fall Senior Year: Overwhelming Confusion and Anxiety

In her senior year, Jennie's college search never really got off the ground. Her college application activities were unfocused and disorganized, which left her feeling incredibly anxious. Jennie gathered some college information on her own. She attended her school's mandatory college fair and received some emails from colleges, but she lacked any guidance on how to structure an organized search for four-year colleges. She talked often with family members about the strengths

and weaknesses of various community colleges in the area, even as they were discouraging her from attending a two-year school. She relied largely on the Internet for information, and she became interested in DePaul University after learning about its theater program on a website. She thought DePaul was a good fit because she could fall back on other majors if drama didn't work out. Jennie seemed paralyzed in searching for schools, and by fall of senior year she reported that she had not talked to a single teacher or counselor about her plans.

> "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. I don't know what I want to do."

Winter Senior Year: Finding a Low-Risk Solution

Jennie did apply to DePaul, but she decided early in the winter of her senior year that it would be best to start off at Moraine Valley Community College. The sudden decision to go to a two-year school was a fairly common phenomenon, especially for students at Silverstein, even for students with strong college qualifications like Jennie's (see *A Qualitative Look at Students Who Became "Early Two-Year" College-Goers*, p. 39). Jennie just didn't know what to do with her life:

> "Figuring out what I want to do, that's my problem . . . I might as well just go to a community college . . . Everyone kept telling me, 'You don't have to worry the first two years about what you want to do, because it's all the same [classes].' I just have to make sure the credits will transfer."

Jennie's family was unhappy with her decision to attend a two-year college:

> "[My mom and brother] say that I worked too hard these four years with IB, and I can do better than that. But I don't know. I say, I'm saving them money."

Spring Senior Year: Sticking with Her Plan

Jennie's father was paying for his older son to go to community college, and Jennie was insistent that she not take out any student loans. She ultimately was accepted to DePaul, but she completely ruled out that idea when she saw her financial aid package included $10,000 in loans.[6] Her father finally relented: *"My dad didn't want to do any of the loans."* It is unclear whether Jennie ever filled out her FAFSA. Her acceptance letter from Moraine Valley asked her to complete a financial aid application, but she still couldn't answer questions about financial aid. She couldn't say for sure whether or not she had filled out a FAFSA, and she couldn't describe what the process entailed.

At the end of senior year, Jennie admitted that her college application process could have been better guided and executed. She said part of the problem was that she was pushed by her teachers to complete her highly challenging culminating projects for her IB coursework, but nobody at school pushed her to complete her college applications. In fact, Jennie never spoke one-on-one with a teacher or counselor about her college plans:

> "I needed to be pushed more. In the IB program, with all the homework and everything else, I was more focused on that than trying to apply for college. [Applying to colleges] would be on my weekends if I had time."

By the end of her senior year, Jennie wasn't sure she had made the right choice to attend Moraine Valley, but at least it was a choice that didn't seem risky. By the fall after graduation, Jennie was enrolled at Moraine Valley, though she was worried she might have to transfer to one of the City Colleges of Chicago due to cost. Even though she said that college was easier than high school, Jennie said she was enjoying her classes, professors, and college experience at Moraine Valley.

Sabrina–*A Case Study*

The easy road doesn't always lead where you want it to

What happens to students who leave high school with a clear plan for attending college but never enroll in the fall? Sabrina, a highly qualified student, shows how becoming too focused on one college option can pose a problem over the summer.

When faced with the daunting task of applying to very selective colleges, even the most highly qualified students can stumble. Sabrina,[1] an African-American student with a kind and easygoing nature, had her pick of colleges across the country. She graduated from Kahlo High School with a 25 on the ACT and a weighted GPA of 3.77. Sabrina always chose the most challenging courses, while also working 30 hours a week. She planned to attend college and pushed herself academically.

Junior Year: Schoolwork and Grand Plans
In her junior year, Sabrina was thinking strategically about how to impress colleges. She focused on her ACT scores and her classes, and she planned a rigorous course schedule for senior year. She was disappointed with her ACT score of 25 because she was shooting for a 27 or 28. She considered retaking the test but worried about a lower score. Although she described several courses as easy, Sabrina was engaged in her classes, particularly algebra/trigonometry and honors British literature. She loved learning how to improve her writing:

> "[The teacher] gives us essays, maybe one or two a week, so you keep writing essays, and she keeps correcting them. By the end of the year, I really think I'll be prepared for college."

Despite earning such high grades, Sabrina always felt she needed to work harder. She admitted she worked harder in more challenging classes and craved the rigor of AP courses. She knew that AP courses would give her an advantage in the college admissions process and help her earn college credit: *"I feel that it's steering me towards college. When I go into college next year with all those AP classes, I think I'll start off a semester ahead."*

Sabrina lived with her mom and sisters, who fully supported her college plans. Her older sister helped her select colleges and pushed her to complete applications on time. Her mother was equally involved in the process. Sabrina knew she was qualified to attend almost any college in the country and never limited her search. She described her ideal college as one with a large campus, and she preferred to attend college with a friend. However, Sabrina wanted to keep her options open. Sabrina's older sister had graduated from the University of Illinois, and Sabrina expressed some interest in that school. But because Sabrina wanted to expand her horizons, she did not rule out leaving the Midwest. Both she and her mother felt it was an important part of the college experience to leave home for a new and independent experience. By the end of junior year, Sabrina planned to apply to three Illinois schools, along with New York University, Duke, the University of California–Berkeley, and Yale, *"just to see if I can get in."*

Fall Senior Year: New Direction for an Exciting Search
Sabrina's college search changed in a significant way when her school nominated her for a prestigious four-year, full-tuition scholarship for urban students. The scholarship, which sends students to some of the nation's most esteemed colleges, also provides an extensive pre-college preparation and leadership training program. For Sabrina, this meant a new direction for her college search—a new list of prestigious schools to consider and the possibility of a free education.

As she moved on to the second round of interviews for the scholarship, Sabrina focused on the schools she could attend with the scholarship. Her favorite

was Pomona College in California. Over the summer, she visited a friend who was attending Pomona on the same scholarship and fell in love with the campus. Still, she had not ruled out applying to Duke and Yale.

Sabrina's life changed in another significant way when she got a new job that required her to work six days per week and commute up to two hours each way, leaving little time for her schoolwork. Her intense workload may have stemmed from needing to feel financially independent from her family. A teacher commented that Sabrina may have felt obligated to assume "emotional and physical responsibilities at home," causing Sabrina to choose to work long hours at her job and thereby escape those responsibilities. Sabrina embraced the challenge of her rigorous coursework, but faced incredible pressure balancing work and school demands. Sabrina's college applications seemed to suffer the most:

> "When I get home, it's like 12 or 1 in the morning and I'm not thinking about my college applications. I'm thinking, 'Oh, I got to go to school tomorrow, let me do some homework.' And then do it all over again the next day."

By early November, Sabrina had gathered applications. She was thinking about her essays, but she hadn't started working on them. It is unclear how much she utilized her counselor; Sabrina's opinion about her helpfulness changed across interviews. Moreover, it seemed she had no adult ally to assist her in navigating the college search process. She worried about finding time to get all the essays done, and she wondered how she would respond to some of the less traditional essay prompts: *"One essay is like, 'If you were a color, what color would you be?' What if I said the wrong color? What if I chose gray, and [the college] thought, 'Oh, that's bad.'"*

Sabrina pinned all her hopes on the scholarship, which would mean no more agonizing about applications and college costs. She would only have to complete one application, to Pomona, where she would have automatic admission and full financial aid to a school she knew she'd like. Sabrina put off working on other applications and waited for news of the scholarship, which she expected in mid-December.

Winter Senior Year: Crushing News, Grabbing a Lifeline

Sabrina didn't receive the scholarship, leaving her no fallback options for college. While trying to work nearly full time and succeed in rigorous courses, Sabrina's long list of schools disappeared. She then scrambled to find time to complete a few applications to state schools. Ultimately, Sabrina was unable to balance her class assignments, college applications, and work schedule:

> "I'm being lazy. I just keep seeing those essays. I'm like, OK, I'm gonna get back to that! And then . . . I just feel like I don't have enough time in the day."

By February, Sabrina had stumbled into a new plan. A liberal arts school in Florida sent her a letter of acceptance and offered her a full-tuition scholarship, and Sabrina jumped at the opportunity.[5] The university was an attractive option, since it did not require an application fee, essay, or recommendations. Sabrina used the Internet to "tour" the campus and "watch" a class, but she never visited the school. She talked about completing other applications, but never followed through. Sabrina had a new college lifeline, and so she focused exclusively on this plan.

Spring Senior Year: All Her Eggs in One Basket

Sabrina had been accepted with a full scholarship to the Florida school without applying.[7] She finally filled out her FAFSA in the spring because it was required for her scholarship. She also applied for several scholarships late in the year, but she was counting on the university's scholarship.

Unfortunately, in the months after graduation, the school rescinded her scholarship, ostensibly because she received a D in her journalism elective her final semester. Sabrina had applied to no other colleges and never seriously pursued other financial aid. She was out of options. In the fall after graduation, Sabrina began a new retail job downtown and it appeared she had no further plans to attend college the next year.

Marco–*A Case Study*

How students get lost over the summer

What happens to students who leave high school with a clear plan for attending college but never enroll in the fall? Marco demonstrates that even students with stellar college qualifications and a strong drive to complete a thorough college planning process are at risk of their plans falling through over the summer.

Marco[1] is an intelligent young man who completed the IB program at Ellison High School. A first-generation Mexican-American student, he was among the top five students in his class with a weighted GPA of 4.05 and a 25 on the ACT. Marco participated in a prestigious citywide fellowship that allowed students to travel to different states to develop new ideas for leadership programs in the Chicago Public Schools. Marco easily earned the respect of his teachers. His English teacher described him as:

> ". . . an exceptional young man. I am confident he is motivated enough to be successful in all his endeavors. While working with him for two years, I have found him to be one of the most considerate and genuinely kind people I have met."

Junior Year: Great Ambition

Marco's ambition to attend college never flagged, from the first interview to the last. He wanted to study engineering, and he planned to apply to Purdue University, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Marco was so committed to getting a college degree that he was willing to attend college in Mexico if he couldn't get enough financial aid to attend college in the United States.

Marco was a highly engaged student who always felt challenged and supported by his IB teachers. He also felt they gave him good guidance about his future. He made his college list by asking his teachers about the best area schools for engineering, and he then confirmed their advice with his own Internet research.

Marco set high expectations for his senior year: He wanted to achieve a 27 on the ACT, finish his college applications by fall, and receive an IB diploma—the equivalent of one year's worth of coursework at most colleges and a rare feat for students at Ellison. Though Marco's ACT score was the highest in his school, he was dissatisfied and planned to take the test again. Like many IB students, Marco was worried about the volume of work he faced in the fall. The IB program requires students to complete a body of work throughout senior year, including written projects, oral presentations, and culminating exams. For this reason, Marco planned to complete his college applications over the summer and submit them as soon as colleges started taking applications, which he expected was in early fall. He detailed this strategy: *"I should get all my acceptance letters or rejection letters by October or November, so I can spend the rest of the year just looking for scholarships and financial aid."*

Fall Senior Year: Executing the Plan

At the start of senior year, Marco was working diligently on his college applications and nearly done with several that he planned to submit to meet a November 1 priority admission deadline. Though he was less certain about his plans to study engineering than he had been the year before, his first choice was now Georgia Tech, which he had heard about from a coworker. Marco thoroughly researched each college with visits or calls to admissions staff. He knew what he liked about each school, as well as the qualifications for admission.

Marco's mother was very proud of her high-achieving son and excited about his plans to become an engineer. Marco said his mom would worry if he went to college

out-of-state, but she would support him: *"She knows I'm going to do fine at school."* When asked about support at school, Marco again said that he frequently talked about college with his teachers: *"They guide me toward the school that's going to be best for me."* However, Marco hadn't spoken to a counselor; in fact, he didn't know who his counselor was.

Winter Senior Year: Losing Steam

In winter of senior year, Marco was on track with his college applications but uncertain about his major and career. He became interested in medicine because a few friends at work were in medical school. He thought he would like that kind of major and career. Marco submitted applications to five Midwestern schools, ultimately deciding that Georgia Tech and Texas A&M were too far away.

Marco encountered two barriers to his college plans during winter of his senior year. First, he felt he had to focus almost exclusively on his IB coursework and exams. Second, he had a very hard time figuring out what to do about financial aid. He had looked at the FAFSA but had yet to fill it out as of February, explaining that he felt very confused about how to organize both his and his parents' taxes. Marco was diligently saving money from his part-time job and seeking independent scholarships. He said his college selection would be determined by cost, but he still was not sure about his top choice.

Spring Senior Year: A School Out of Nowhere

By the end of senior year, Marco had decided to attend the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), one of the best-rated engineering schools in the state. This was the first time he had mentioned the school, which *"popped out of nowhere and gave me a full ride."* He planned to study either computer or aeronautical engineering. Marco also was accepted to Loyola, DePaul, UIC, and the University of Illinois. Northwestern's initial acceptance was rescinded based on his first-semester grades, which Marco said was not a big deal because Northwestern was out of his price range. Marco said IIT offered him the best aid package of all his schools: *"IIT was giving me $32,000. I just needed*

8 or 12 more, so I'm getting that from FAFSA or [a] student loan." [8] However, he also mentioned that he was "still working" on his FAFSA. Marco hadn't ruled out attending Wright City College for two years and then transferring to a four-year college.

After Senior Year: Not Taking the Risk

Marco never enrolled in IIT. Instead, he decided to attend Wright and hoped to transfer to Northwestern after two years. Marco explained that he did not want to attend an engineering-focused school because he was uncertain about studying engineering.[9] When contacted in the fall, Marco had stopped attending classes at Wright because it *"didn't feel like college."* He decided to take a year off and reevaluate his plans for college, hoping to enroll in a four-year college the following fall.

It's hard to understand why such a bright and enterprising young man would decline a full-tuition scholarship at a competitive four-year college to attend a community college. Yet, in retrospect, a few things stand out from his interviews. First, like many first-generation college-goers in the study, his college choice was intractably linked to his career interests. When he became uncertain about his career interests, he became convinced his college choice no longer made sense. Second, while he was offered scholarship money from IIT, he did not appear to have adequately completed his FAFSA and other financial aid paperwork, which might have jeopardized his scholarship or left him in a position of not being able to cover all of the expenses of a college education.

Finally, while he counted on his teachers for support and information, Marco appeared never to have had an extended conversation with any adult about his college plans. He never discussed with a supportive, knowledgeable adult his confusion about certain aspects of postsecondary education—how college majors relate to career choices, how to fill out a FAFSA, and possible classroom differences between four-year and two-year colleges. For many students, having to choose one college out of a field of thousands feels too risky. For Marco, facing these three obstacles in combination left him unable to make any choice at all.

What a Strong College Culture Looks Like: An Analysis of the Three High Schools in our Qualitative Longitudinal Study

Throughout this report, we refer to various measures of college-going culture. But what does it mean for high schools to have a strong college-going culture? What does it look like to be high or low on these measures? The three high schools attended by students in the qualitative study provide examples of the elements of college-going culture found throughout this report to be important in shaping students' postsecondary decisions.[1] First, we examine these characteristics quantitatively by looking at survey measures for each school, and then we pair the results with qualitative data from student interviews to achieve a more detailed picture of students' experiences in schools considered "high" or "low" on these measures.

Three high schools participated in our longitudinal study. The schools were selected because they had college-going rates that were slightly higher than the system average. The schools differed by location, size, and the racial/ethnic make-up of their student bodies, but they were similar in that each served a predominantly minority student body and each had recently established an International Baccalaureate (IB) program. These schools were not the worst-performing schools in the city; nor did they include any of Chicago's high-performing selective enroll-ment schools.[10] Rather, they could be described as being "at the margin" of high school reform, serving students with slightly better-than-average incoming achievement, providing access to AP and IB courses, and producing graduates who make a diverse set of postsecondary choices.

This report identifies different points at which stu-dents encounter "potholes" on the road to college and then examines various student-level and school-level characteristics that help students avoid those potholes and stay on the road to college. Two groups of school-level characteristics stand out as consistently important: (1) the extent to which schools have a strong college-going culture (as measured by the percent of prior graduates attending college and teachers' impressions of college climate[11]), and (2) the extent to which schools are organized around postsecondary planning (as

measured by percent of prior graduates who completed a FAFSA and applied to three or more schools). Here, we consider how each school scored on these measures, as well as students' qualitative reports of the supports they received for postsecondary planning.

Frida Kahlo High School: Individual, Intentional Support

Figures throughout this report compare students' out-comes at schools considered "high" on various measures to those of students at schools considered "low" on various measures. Kahlo is one school that is higher than average on measures of college-going culture and organization around postsecondary planning. That is, Kahlo had a higher than average percentage of prior graduates who went on to four-year colleges, applied to three or more schools, and completed a FAFSA. In addition, teachers' impressions of college climate were more positive than average. Overall, Kahlo performed very strongly on indicators found to be predictive of students taking the steps necessary to enroll in a four-year college.

Based on our qualitative interviews, students at Kahlo were far more likely than students at other schools to receive one-on-one guidance from a knowledgeable adult, primarily one of the counselors. Though not a universal experience, most students at Kahlo reported at least briefly discussing their future plans with a counselor. Many students reported more involved support from their counselors, repeatedly visiting their offices to discuss college options, seek information, and receive help on applications. Counselors also nominated several students for pres-tigious scholarships. In addition to receiving such supports at school, Kahlo students seemed to have greater access to community resources for college plan-ning; several students were involved in community-based or church-based college planning programs.

Kahlo had a clear focus on college-preparatory programming. In addition to an after-school ACT prep class, the school organized multiple college trips, both to local and out-of-state colleges, as well as an evening college fair, all of which were well attended by students and parents. Additionally, Kahlo utilized

peer-to-peer networking to organize a team of students who would learn about college planning resources and systematically disseminate information to their classmates. As a result of personal counseling, college-prep programming, and peer-to-peer networking, students at Kahlo were far more likely than students at other schools to be aware of application deadlines, apply for a financial aid PIN, visit colleges, and be nominated by school personnel for scholarships.

Ralph Ellison High School: Caring, but Not about College

Ellison High looked about average on measures of college-going culture and organization around postsecondary planning. Interviews revealed that Ellison students had strong relationships with their teachers; students were very likely to say that their teachers respected them, had their best interests at heart, and genuinely cared about them as individuals. Students also reported that there was at least one teacher in the school to whom they could turn for help with a personal problem. Ellison teachers also talked about college, often reminding students that the skills they were learning in class would be important in college. Other times, the discussions were more concrete; teachers looked up average ACT scores at colleges students were interested in attending or made specific suggestions to students about colleges to which they might apply. Some teachers arranged college visits for their whole classes.

Given the strong student-teacher relationships at Ellison and the willingness of teachers to talk to their students about college, there was a surprising lack of individual support for students in pursuing their college plans. Although they were likely to receive positive messages and in many cases information from their teachers, they found very little guidance in the form of one-on-one conversations. Some students reported talking to a counselor about academic issues, but very few students ever spoke to a guidance counselor about college plans. Some reported visiting the counselors' office and not finding any assistance, and many others reported not knowing who their counselor was. There

was also a surprising lack of postsecondary programming. Students did not know of any school-organized college tours or participate in any college-oriented after-school activities. Though colleges would occasionally visit the school, Ellison did not have its own college fair. Some students reported that they were encouraged to attend a citywide college fair, while others reported being told that attending this fair would result in an unexcused absence from school. Despite their teachers' dedication to their students' future, students at Ellison were largely on their own when it came to making college plans.

Shel Silverstein High School: Cafeteria-Style Information

Silverstein looked like an average CPS high school on most college culture measures, with one exception: Silverstein was far below average on the percentage of prior graduates who had applied to three or more colleges. In interviews, students at Silverstein had generally positive feelings about their teachers, but—with a few exceptions—did not have teachers who talked much about college. Students had positive feelings about their school experience and the education and support they received at Silverstein, but very few students reported having strong relationships with teachers or counselors. Even fewer students reported having a one-on-one conversation with an adult at their school about planning for life after high school.

Silverstein relied on a structured but impersonal system for relaying information about postsecondary planning. Silverstein hosted a college fair during the school day, attendance at which was mandatory for all seniors. The school also had mandatory assemblies for seniors throughout the school year, and many colleges, especially proprietary and trade schools, visited the school or students' classes. Finally, counselors would often visit classes to hand out written information on scholarships, make announcements about upcoming events, or make presentations about graduation requirements. Unfortunately for students at Silverstein, this information almost never came with any one-on-one guidance, and students did not seem to have a sense of

what information was important to prioritize or what resources were important to utilize. As a result, students knew they could go to their counselors with questions, but they very rarely did; students knew there were trips scheduled to visit colleges, but very few went; students attended assemblies, but they typically could not remember what was discussed; students received lists of potential scholarships, but they hardly ever discussed financial aid with a knowledgeable adult. Students at Silverstein, understandably, were often confused by the college planning process.

Changing the Culture

Given these findings, it is not surprising that students at Kahlo were more likely to successfully transition to a four-year college than students at Ellison or Silverstein. The qualitative differences between these schools focus attention on what changes would have to happen for schools to move from "low" to "high" on measures of college-going culture and organization around post-secondary planning. It is also important to note that both Ellison and Silverstein had significant strengths in their school environments, including strong teacher-student relationships at Ellison and an organized system of information dissemination at Silverstein. However, these schools demonstrate clearly that those attributes are not sufficient for a thriving college-going culture. What distinguishes Kahlo from the other schools is that it is organized to provide individual guidance to its students—essentially, to combine the supportive relationships found at Ellison with the information dissemination found at Silverstein, in the form of individual, intentional college counseling. Without this necessary condition, students were vulnerable to potholes on the road to college because they were left to filter and analyze information on their own.

College culture in three fieldwork schools

Difference from the Average CPS High School *(in standard deviations)*

Percentage of Prior Graduates Attending a Four-year College: Kahlo 1.51, Ellison 0.52, Silverstein -0.01

Teachers' Assessment of College Climate: Kahlo 0.54, Ellison 0.05, Silverstein 0.11

Percentage of Prior Graduates Who Completed the FAFSA: Kahlo 0.93, Ellison 0.24, Silverstein -0.11

Percentage of Prior Graduates Who Applied to Three or More Schools: Kahlo 0.51, Ellison -0.07, Silverstein -1.07

Legend: Kahlo, Ellison, Silverstein

Note: These numbers are based on Potholes Samples and do not include students in special education. These variables were standardized to have the mean of 0 and the standard deviation of 1. See Appendix D for details about these variables.

Chapter 2: Case Study Endnotes

1   All names of students and high schools in the case studies in this report are pseudonyms.

2   For more information on how the qualitative study was conducted, see Appendix B.

3   Both students' ACT scores placed them above their minority counterparts who graduated with high class ranks. The ACT average score is 19.2 and 20.9 for African-American and Latino students, respectively, who graduated in the top quarter of their class in 2005. See ACT 2005 National Score Report, data tables, available online at act.org.

4   Although Moises and Grady appear to have an excellent understanding of financial aid and the aid packages offered to them by different schools, it is important to note that all reports of financial aid packages in the case studies in this report are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college.

5   In some cases, such as those of Moises and Sabrina, revealing a student's college choice would compromise his or her anonymity. College choice is kept confidential in these cases.

6   All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college. Jennie, for example, might not have actually properly filed her FAFSA, making it unclear what that $10,000 in loans actually refers to.

7   All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college.

8   All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college. It's possible, for example, that Marco reported an offer of a large institutional scholarship, but hadn't actually received his Financial Aid Award Letter yet.

9   What Marco might not have known is that IIT offers a variety of majors outside of engineering, including biology (as well as many other sciences that could've prepared him for medical school), English, liberal arts, and business.

10   Though none of these schools are selective enrollment schools, one did have a long-standing legacy of sending many students to college.

11   For more information on these measures, see *How We Measure High School College-Going Culture*, p. 45.

Chapter 3

The Problem of College Match: What Kinds of Colleges Do CPS Students Enroll in, Given their Qualifications?

The process of searching for a college can be daunting. There are more than 2,500 four-year colleges in the United States, including more than 100 in the state of Illinois.[56] Our analysis in Chapter 2 largely confirms research findings that urban students often do not take the necessary steps to apply to and enroll in four-year colleges. As we laid out in Chapter 1, urban students often have limited access to the social capital (i.e., norms, information, and supports) that provides the guidance they need to effectively participate in the college search process.[57] In addition, research on college access has shown that lack of information, access to guidance, and strong relationships with knowledgeable adults often results in urban students limiting their college search and enrolling in traditional "enclaves," predominantly large public universities with lower levels of selectivity.[58] Our previous report highlighted this trend of constrained enrollment in Chicago. Among CPS graduates who enroll in a four-year college, nearly two-thirds attend just seven institutions.[59] In this chapter, we look specifically at how CPS students, such as Clara (see p. 68), engaged in the college search process and the extent to which CPS students enroll in the types of colleges to which they have access, given their qualifications.

Clara–*A Case Study*

Making her hard work pay off all by herself

Can it be assumed that smart, motivated students can manage the postsecondary planning process just fine on their own? Clara shows that, when it comes to college planning, even the best students in a school can go almost unnoticed by adults.

From the first semester of her freshman year until the day she walked across the stage at graduation, Clara[1] was the one of the top students in her class at Ellison High School. She graduated from the IB program with a weighted GPA of 4.7 and an ACT score of 24. Her stellar high school performance afforded her the opportunity to attend not only a very selective school but almost any college or university in the country. Clara's teachers confirmed her academic ability. Her English teacher described her as: "A rare individual. The only problem or weakness I see in this student is the pressure she places on herself." Her math teacher said: "She has extremely high expectations of herself and has a strong work ethic that allows her to meet her high standards. At the same time, she always helps her peers." Clara was a prolific writer of fiction and poetry, for which she won numerous awards, including some scholarships. In the minds of her teachers, peers, and family, there were few doors not open to this remarkable young woman.

Clara lived with both her parents and younger sister. Although Clara's parents, who are of Puerto Rican descent, had virtually no experience with college, Clara made it clear her mother was her greatest ally in college planning. Clara's mother insisted that Clara attend a "good school," but neither Clara nor her mother was sure what schools are considered "good."

Junior Year: An Active but Uninformed College Search

During the spring of her junior year, Clara was clear about her intent to go to a four-year college but had a hard time describing her ideal college. She did, however, know that she wanted to stay in Chicago so she could continue to live at home and that she preferred a small college. And while Clara had never taken an art class in high school, she wanted to study art and design. When asked why she said:

> "I'm not really sure what [graphic design] consists of. I just know it's like you're designing. There's this website and you make your own pages with all these codes, and I did it and I liked the results. And that's why I really want to go into graphic design."

By the end of junior year, Clara's plan was to study art or design at a school where she could take a variety of courses. A teacher had encouraged her to attend a more comprehensive college than an art and design school. Clara liked this idea because it would allow her to experiment with different kinds of courses. In the end, though, her list of colleges was the same as many of her less-qualified peers, including schools like Northeastern Illinois University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Loyola University. Clara wasn't excited about attending any of them.

Summer: Doing Her Research Campus by Campus

Clara's mother was as active as Clara in the process of college search and selection. Every time Clara mentioned a college that she was interested in attending, her mother insisted on driving to the campus for a tour and even sitting in on classes. Clara and her mother visited several colleges over the summer, and Clara completed a week of classes at the Illinois Institute of Art.

Fall Senior Year: Making Up Her Mind

In the fall of her senior year, Clara continued a college search that was extensive, but not well directed. Clara spoke casually with her teachers about her college plans, but she had not spoken with a counselor or had a

serious conversation about her college choices with any educator at her school. Clara reported an incident in the counseling office when she was trying to figure out the difference between official and unofficial transcripts:

> "Everyone's so grouchy . . . in the [counseling] office. I guess I can understand, because they wouldn't remember one single application, but I don't know . . . they could be more approachable."

Clara invested significant time and energy in completing applications to about eight schools. Many of Clara's peers in the IB program struggled to balance the demands of rigorous IB culminating projects and the college application process. Clara got everything done on time—even submitting applications for Loyola and Columbia College in Chicago (a nonselective four-year college) by the priority deadlines—without her school work suffering. In the fall, Clara said she planned to attend Columbia *"for sure."* She toured the school, enjoyed the atmosphere and downtown location, and knew she could study graphic design.

Winter Senior Year: Changing Her Mind

During her winter interview, Clara said she changed her mind and decided to *"definitely"* attend Loyola, again based largely on having toured the campus and sat in on a class there, which she enjoyed. She was accepted to Loyola and Columbia, and Loyola offered her a merit-based scholarship to cover some of her tuition. Though Clara had no problem completing her college applications, she was overwhelmed by the process of applying for financial aid. She was familiar with tax documents because she helped her parents complete their forms, but she was confused by certain questions on the FAFSA. Clara was confident she'd figure it out and complete her financial aid applications by April or May. She never met with a counselor.

Spring Senior Year: Changing Her Mind Again

Clara changed her mind about which college to attend one more time before graduation, and finally planned to attend a small, in-state liberal arts school ranked as somewhat selective.[2] Spring of her senior year was the first time she ever mentioned this school:

> Interviewer: [That school] is not on this list. Last time you said Loyola, UIC, and Columbia . . . [laughing] What happened?

> Clara: [Laughing] [My mom and I] passed by the school, and I'm like, 'This is a nice school. What is that?' So my mom started looking up stuff. She [told me], 'I think you'd like this school.' And so we looked at it, the web page and then we signed up for the tour. I really love this school.

Clara was one of the top five students in her graduating class, but she never considered applying to a very selective college. Apparently, no one steered her to one either. Her teachers recognized that she was a remarkable young woman, but she never spoke to a counselor and never seriously discussed her plans for the future with any adult at her school.

Not surprisingly, Clara was accepted at all the institutions to which she applied. Though her confusion over financial aid looked like it might have been a serious stumbling block when she discussed it in February, Clara ended up figuring out financial aid, presumably with the help of her new college, and she did end up receiving enough federal, institutional, and private scholarship money to make her college education affordable for her and her family.[3] Clara's IB coursework and test scores helped place her into advanced freshmen courses at her college. In the fall, she was thoroughly engaged as an English major and very happy with her college choice.

With the help of an exceptionally involved parent, Clara managed to find her way to a school that made her feel at home, took care of her as a first-generation college student, and promised to support her academic ambitions throughout college. It is also apparent that this choice was arrived at through no small amount of luck, with Clara and her mother accidentally happening upon a college that proved a good fit for Clara. With such limited guidance from her school, it is easy to imagine how Clara's story might not have had such a positive ending.

Endnotes for this case study can be found on page 96.

To many, a pattern of constrained enrollment is not necessarily surprising or troubling. Students make choices about college enrollment for a wide variety of reasons. The preference for a small number of local institutions may simply reflect the desire to live at home or attend college with friends. There is a common belief that students who live at home and attend local colleges may ultimately be more successful in college because they have lower living expenses and greater access to an existing network of support. In addition, students with poor academic preparation may only be qualified to enroll in less selective institutions, and thus their choices simply may reflect their reduced college options. Decisions about college also reflect whether students have families with the financial resources to meet the costs of college and the willingness to take out loans. All of these explanations suggest that students conduct broad college searches and then make informed decisions that are bounded by factors such as qualifications or family finances. A critical question is whether these college enrollment patterns reflect informed choices or whether they are driven by the opposite: a lack of information and guidance that leads students to follow the most readily available road to college.

Research suggests, moreover, that there are negative consequences to students' constrained college choices. Poor academic qualifications, lack of financial resources, and lack of information and guidance have implications beyond constrained college searches and lower enrollment rates; students who face these barriers are also more likely to enroll in institutions where they do not have a high probability of attaining a college degree. There is a common belief that institutional differences in college graduation rates are driven by differences in the academic and socioeconomic characteristics of their student bodies, and not by differences in the quality of the institutions themselves. Yet, there is evidence, including our previous report, that low-income and urban minority students often enroll in colleges that provide significantly lower probabilities of completing a four-year degree (e.g., two-year and less selective four-year colleges), and

that these lower probabilities of degree completion cannot be solely attributed to the characteristics of students who enroll.[60] An institution's selectivity is related to its students' likelihood of college graduation, though selectivity is clearly not the only characteristic that matters.[61] Even colleges of similar selectivity foster vastly different environments and supports for students. A recent Pell Institute report looked at what institutional characteristics might explain wide variation in graduation rates among colleges that serve high proportions of low-income students. This report concluded that, even among colleges of similar selectivity, certain institutional characteristics— small class size, intentional academic planning, and an explicit retention policy—may improve the graduation rates for low-income students.[62]

College guidebooks often suggest a simple rule of thumb for the college application process: after conducting a thorough college search and developing a list of schools, be sure to apply to schools in each of three categories: "reach schools," "safety schools," and "match schools." Reach schools are colleges that are a stretch for a student to gain acceptance, given his or her qualifications; safety schools are colleges to which the student is almost certain to gain acceptance; and match schools are colleges where, on average, students who are admitted have comparable qualifications to the student. Thus, the concept of "match" we examine in this chapter describes whether a student enrolls in a college with a selectivity level that matches the kind of colleges to which a student would likely have been accepted given his or her high school qualifications. The previous chapter focused on the road that students follow to a four-year college. In this chapter, we focus on the issue of college match. We begin by examining the extent to which CPS students enroll in colleges that match their qualifications. We then use data from our Longitudinal Qualitative Sample to examine the reasons why students chose mismatch colleges.[63] Finally, we use survey data to examine whether students' likelihood of matching differs by their high schools' college climate and by students' access to guidance.

What is the difference between college match and college fit? Sakaarah provides an important example of how thoughtful, qualified, and well-supported students think about finding a college, considering match to be one, but not the only, component of college fit. *See Sakaarah's case study, p. 88.*

Match is Just One Component of Finding the Right College Fit

This chapter focuses specifically on the concept of match, which is an easily quantifiable outcome. 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 and that will best support his or her intellectual and social development. Finding a good fit requires students to gain an understanding of what their needs and preferences are, and then to seek colleges that meet that description. Fit may also include whether colleges offer higher graduation rates and/or better financial aid. 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.

Clara and Sakaarah are two examples from our longitudinal study of how two very talented and committed students managed the process of searching for and applying to colleges. Sakaarah followed the recommended strategy—applying to safety, match, and reach schools—and also paid particular attention in her search to the academic and social climate that would best meet her needs. Clara, on the other hand, had a hard time engaging in such a process and did not, even with tremendous parental support, have enough information and guidance to consider a range of schools, particularly the very selective schools she was qualified to attend. For her, college search was more of a scramble to try to find a college. In the end, both students chose colleges they found satisfactory, even though they could have enrolled in more selective colleges. The process by which they made those choices, however, was very different.

Sakaarah tapped into a wide variety of sources of support and information that allowed her to make a thoughtful, well-researched college choice based on many factors, while Clara, in short, relied on luck to find a fit. Clara did not have guidance about how to complete a college search or determine the advantages and disadvantages of different college options. Most importantly, Clara never knew the full range of colleges she was eligible to attend. In this chapter, we focus on students matching on qualifications, but it is clear from cases such as Sakaarah that selectivity is but one of many factors students use in college choice. As Sakaarah illustrates, thinking about match is often a good starting point for organizing a college search. Thus, the selectivity of colleges students look at, apply to, and ultimately enroll in provides us with a window into whether CPS graduates are capitalizing on their high school qualifications in a way that would best lead them to attain a four-year degree. In the end, understanding why students choose a match or mismatch school is important in understanding whether students are getting the kinds of support they need to best maximize their college options and make a well-informed choice.

We begin by looking at the basic patterns of matching in CPS—how many CPS graduates enroll in match colleges? We then use data from our qualitative study to explore various points in the search, application, and enrollment process at which students are most vulnerable to "mismatch," enrolling in a college that has a selectivity level below their qualifications. In essence, we attempt to discern how many students who mismatch look like Clara, who never considered a match college, and how many students look like Sakaarah, who was accepted to match schools but ultimately made a different college choice. Finally, we examine the role of adults in creating a college climate that encourages students to enroll in a match college and whether this role is always effective.

College Match for CPS Students

A first step in examining match is to compare students' qualifications with their college enrollment. We compared the selectivity of the colleges students would be eligible to attend, given their ACT scores, GPAs, and coursework (see *How We Define College Access for CPS Graduates*, p. 17), to the selectivity level of the college in which they enrolled, if any. Once again, we considered a student as enrolled in college based on data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), as well as data from the Senior Exit Questionnaire if students reported planning to attend a college that did not participate in the NSC (see Appendix C). We identified the selectivity of colleges by their Barron's ratings (see Appendix A for details on Barron's categories).

Table 2 compares students' access to their enrollment for students in our Match Sample. The Match Sample draws on the core sample we use in the previous chapter, students with all data sources who stated during their senior year that they aspired to complete at least a four-year degree.[64] Like the Potholes Sample, the Match Sample includes students who attended selective enrollment high schools. The Match Sample is further limited to students who planned to continue their education in the fall after graduation, so that we only consider match for students who stated an intention to go to college.[65]

As seen in Table 2, 15 percent of our sample graduated, like Clara, with qualifications for a very selective four-year college. At the end of senior year, only 38

Only 38 percent of the most qualified students in CPS enroll in very selective colleges

Match Categories: College Access versus College Choice

		Enrolled in							
		Very Selective	Selective	Somewhat Selective	Nonselective	Two-Year	No College	Total (by access)	Percent Match or Above
Access to	Very Selective	38%	25%	20%	4%	3%	10%	644 (15%)	38%
	Selective	11%	16%	35%	9%	11%	18%	870 (20%)	27%
	Somewhat Selective	3%	6%	34%	13%	19%	26%	1,409 (33%)	43%
	Nonselective	0%	1%	20%	11%	29%	38%	722 (17%)	32%
	Two-Year	0%	0%	8%	8%	34%	51%	672 (16%)	50%
	Total (by enrolled)	391 (9%)	384 (9%)	1,111 (26%)	414 (10%)	814 (19%)	1,203 (28%)	4,317 (100%)	

■ Above Match ■ Match ■ Slightly Below Match ■ Far Below Match

Note: These figures are based on the Match Sample (see Appendix B for details). Students who are labeled as "Above Match" enroll in schools with selectivity ratings that exceed what they have access to attend. Students labeled as "Match" enroll in schools with ratings that match what they have access to attend. Students labeled as "Slightly Below Match" attend schools that are one selectivity category below their access level. In the case of students with only access to a two-year school, those who do not enroll in any college are considered "Slightly Below Match." Students labeled as "Far Below Match" attend schools that are two or more selectivity levels below what they have access to attend, in some cases these students do not attend college at all.

percent of these students with the highest qualifications enrolled in a very selective college. One-quarter attended a college with a slightly lower level of selectivity (a selective college). About 20 percent, like Clara, enrolled in a somewhat selective college—a college with a selectivity rating far below her 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 just as 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).
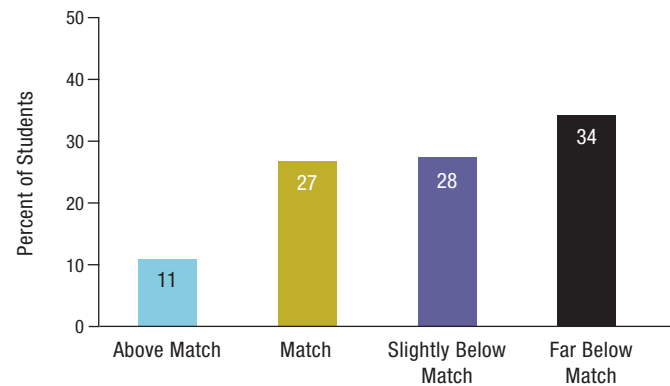
We might expect that matching would be hardest for students with access to very selective colleges. Students with the highest qualifications must enroll in a very selective college to be considered a match, and there are few of these institutions in the Chicago area. Also, as Moises and Grady (see *Moises and Grady's Road to College*, p. 30) illustrate, the process of applying to a very selective college is typically far more complicated, and these colleges deny admission to the highest proportions of students. However, Table 2 shows that mismatch is an issue among CPS students of all levels of qualifications. Students with access to selective colleges (such as 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 of higher than their match category, what we term "above match." Thus, only 27 percent of CPS graduates 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). Fewer than half of students with access to somewhat selective colleges attended a college that matched or exceeded their qualifications.

Indeed, what this table makes clear is that 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

Most CPS graduates enroll in colleges that have selectivity levels far below the kinds of colleges where they would likely be accepted

Percentage of students who have outcomes that match their qualifications:

Note: These figures are based on the Match Sample (see Appendix B for details). Students who are labeled as "Above Match" enroll in schools with selectivity ratings that exceed what they have access to attend. Students labeled as "Match" enroll in schools with ratings that match what they have access to attend. Students labeled as "Slightly Below Match" attend schools that are one selectivity category below their access level. In the case of students with only access to a two-year school, those who do not enroll in any college are considered "Slightly Below Match." Students labeled as "Far Below Match" attend schools that are two or more selectivity levels below what they have access to attend, in some cases these students do not attend college at all.

mismatch by enrolling in two-year colleges or not enrolling in college at all. Across all students (see Figure 24), 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.

So far we have looked at patterns of matching among students who attended both neighborhood and selective enrollment high schools. This picture gets even more alarming when we account for the fact that students who attend selective enrollment high schools are much more likely to attend match colleges, regardless of their levels of qualifications.[66] Figure 25 compares whether students with different levels of qualifications enrolled in a match school by whether they attended one of CPS's six selective enrollment high schools. Among students with access to a very selective college, fully 43 percent of graduates from selective enrollment high schools enrolled in colleges that matched their qualifications, compared to only 32 percent of their similarly qualified counterparts in neighborhood high schools. Among students with access to selective colleges, only 57 percent of graduates from neighborhood high

schools enrolled in colleges that matched, exceeded, or were slightly below their levels of qualifications compared to fully 75 percent of students enrolled in selective enrollment schools. However, even in selective enrollment schools, a substantial portion of students enroll in colleges with selectivity ratings that are far below their qualifications.

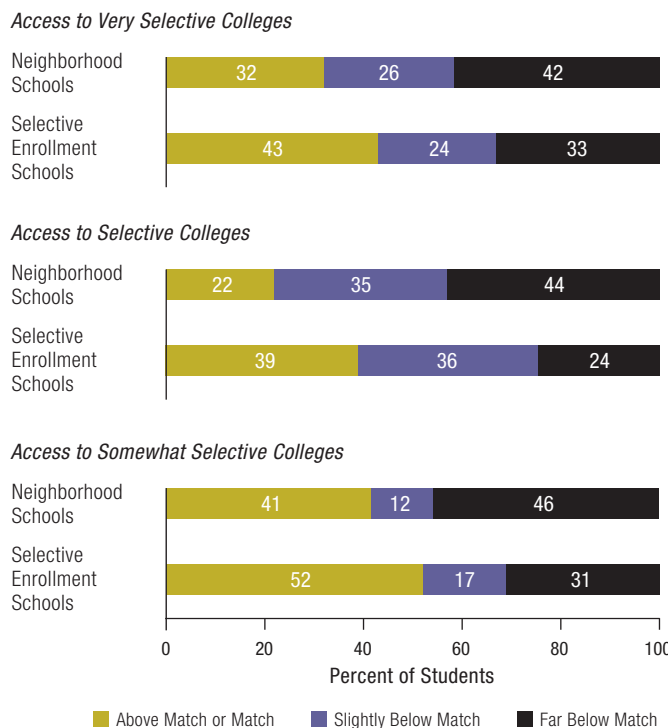## Latino Students Are the Most Likely to "Mismatch"

Not surprisingly, given our findings from the previous chapter, Latino students were significantly less likely than any other racial/ethnic group to enroll in a college with selectivity levels that matched or exceeded their levels of qualifications (see Figure 26). Almost half of Latino students (44 percent) enrolled in colleges with

selectivity levels far below the kinds of colleges they would likely have access to given their qualifications. In comparison, only 28 percent of African-American graduates enrolled in a college that was far below a match.

Latino students were less likely than their counterparts of other races/ethnicities to enroll in a college that matched their levels of qualifications, regardless of their high school qualifications (see Figure 27). Even among students who had worked hard throughout high school and earned the GPAs and ACT scores that give them access to very selective colleges, fewer than 30 percent of Latino graduates enrolled in a very selective college compared to 40 percent of African-American and White/Other Ethnic graduates with similarly high

FIGURE 25

Students in selective enrollment schools were more likely to enroll in colleges that match their qualifications

Percentage of students who have outcomes that match their qualifications by access group and whether the student is in a selective enrollment high school:

Access to Very Selective Colleges

Neighborhood Schools	32	26	42
Selective Enrollment Schools	43	24	33

Access to Selective Colleges

Neighborhood Schools	22	35	44
Selective Enrollment Schools	39	36	24

Access to Somewhat Selective Colleges

Neighborhood Schools	41	12	46
Selective Enrollment Schools	52	17	31

Percent of Students

■ Above Match or Match ■ Slightly Below Match ■ Far Below Match

Note: These figures are based on the Match Sample (see Appendix B for details). Students who are labeled as "Above Match or Match" enroll in schools with selectivity ratings that exceed or match what they have access to attend. Students labeled as "Slightly Below Match" attend schools that are one selectivity category below their access level. In the case of students with only access to a two-year school, those who do not enroll in any college are considered "Slightly Below Match." Students labeled as "Far Below Match" attend schools that are two or more selectivity levels below what they have access to attend, in some cases these students do not attend college at all.

FIGURE 26

Latino students were the least likely to enroll in colleges that match their levels of qualifications

Percentage of students who have outcomes that match their qualifications by race/ethnicity:

White/ Other Ethnic	6	30	28	36
African-American	15	30	27	28
Asian-American	10	30	29	31
Latino	7	21	28	44

Percent of Students

■ Above Match ■ Match ■ Slightly Below Match ■ Far Below Match

Note: These figures are based on the Match Sample (see Appendix B for details). Students who are labeled as "Above Match or Match" enroll in schools with selectivity ratings that exceed or match what they have access to attend. Students labeled as "Slightly Below Match" attend schools that are one selectivity category below their access level. In the case of students with only access to a two-year school, those who do not enroll in any college are considered "Slightly Below Match." Students labeled as "Far Below Match" attend schools that are two or more selectivity levels below what they have access to attend, in some cases these students do not attend college at all.

FIGURE 27

Latino students and students with access to selective colleges were the least likely to enroll in colleges that match their levels of qualifications

Percentage of students who have outcomes that match their qualifications by access group and race/ethnicity:

Access to Very Selective Colleges

	Above Match or Match	Slightly Below Match	Far Below Match
White/Other Ethnic	40	30	30
African-American	41	18	41
Asian-American	43	24	32
Latino	29	24	46

Access to Selective Colleges

	Above Match or Match	Slightly Below Match	Far Below Match
White/Other Ethnic	27	32	42
African-American	29	41	30
Asian-American	25	46	29
Latino	26	25	49

Access to Somewhat Selective Colleges

	Above Match or Match	Slightly Below Match	Far Below Match
White/Other Ethnic	33	16	51
African-American	53	9	38
Asian-American	46	17	37
Latino	29	16	55

0   20   40   60   80   100
Percent of Students

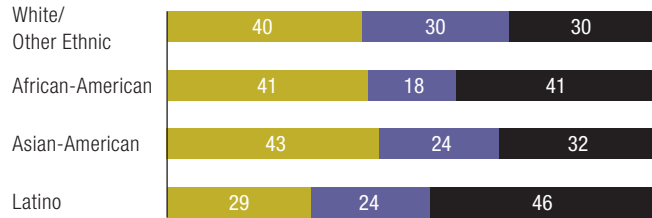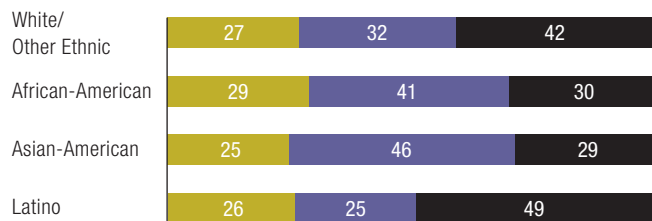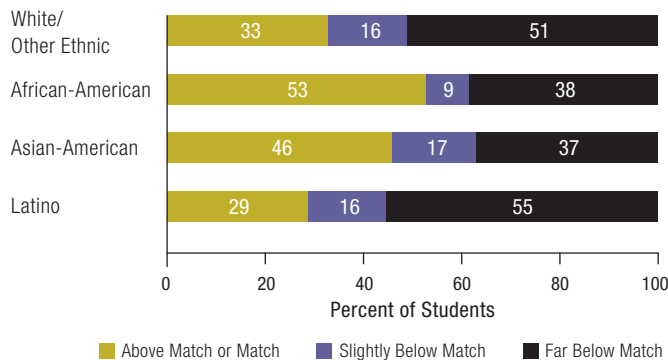■ Above Match or Match   ■ Slightly Below Match   ■ Far Below Match

Note: These figures are based on the Match Sample (see Appendix B for details). Students who are labeled as "Above Match or Match" enroll in schools with selectivity ratings that exceed or match what they have access to attend. Students labeled as "Slightly Below Match" attend schools that are one selectivity category below their access level. In the case of students with only access to a two-year school, those who do not enroll in any college are considered "Slightly Below Match." Students labeled as "Far Below Match" attend schools that are two or more selectivity levels below what they have access to attend, in some cases these students do not attend college at all.

qualifications. This does not mean that the problem of mismatch is isolated to Latinos. Among CPS students with access to very selective colleges, nearly half (46 percent) of Latino graduates and fully 41 percent of African-American graduates ended up enrolling in colleges far below their qualifications.

Why Do Students Mismatch? A Look at Application, Acceptance, and Enrollment Decisions in our Qualitative Longitudinal Study

Why would CPS students enroll in colleges that are less selective than they are qualified to attend? One hypothesis described earlier in this chapter is that students make informed choices to save money by living at home and attending local colleges or choose less selective colleges that are a better fit. Another hypothesis is that students are accepted to colleges that are matches but then cannot afford to attend those schools. Both of these explanations suggest that the problem of mismatch happens in students' final college choices, not during the college search and application process. Previous research on college choice, however, suggests that the problem of mismatch occurs well before the final decision because many urban and particularly first-generation college students conduct limited college searches.[67]

Our analysis suggests that all of these explanations are important pieces of a complicated story. Many of the case studies in this and the previous chapter point to the multiple ways in which students ultimately enroll in colleges with lower levels of selectivity or end up not enrolling in college at all. Some students, such as Clara, never considered a match college, because they lacked information and guidance as to what kinds of colleges they could apply to, how to find a college fit, and what different colleges are like. Others may have initially considered colleges that matched their qualifications but did not apply. Some may have been accepted to a match school, but did not enroll for many possible reasons, like Sakaarah, who decided to enroll in a college of lower selectivity because she thought it would be a better fit.

While we do not have the information in our quantitative tracking system to examine this process among all CPS students, we do have information on students in our qualitative study about whether they considered, applied to, were accepted to, and ultimately enrolled in match schools. Figure 28 shows the proportion of students in our Qualitative Sample who: (1) planned to attend a four-year college, (2) considered applying to a college that matched or exceeded their qualifications, (3) applied to at least one match school, (4) were accepted to at least one match school, and (5) enrolled in a match school. The proportion of students in our qualitative study who ultimately enrolled in a match is lower than in our quantitative sample (see Figure 24) because our qualitative study over-sampled Latino students who, as indicated in this and the previous chapter, are less likely to enroll in a four-year college and in a match college. The results of our analysis of the college search and application process for students

in our Qualitative Longitudinal Sample suggest that many of the most qualified CPS students (those with access to selective or very selective colleges) face significant barriers at every stage.

Among students in our Qualitative Sample with access to a very selective four-year college, only 65 percent applied to at least one match school. Most of these students were accepted to a match school. But of those who were accepted, only two-thirds enrolled in a match college. Thus, for many highly qualified students like Clara and Javier, lacking information about what kind of colleges they could consider given their qualifications became a significant barrier. Even within a limited scope, Clara's visiting campuses and getting a "feel" for what kind of environment might be a fit was critical to overcoming her confusion about college. It moved her college search beyond a focus on her major to a broader understanding that different colleges offer different experiences. However, other

Of the students with access to at least a somewhat selective college, only 60 percent of students in the Qualitative Longitudinal Sample applied to four-year colleges with selectivity levels at or above their levels of qualifications

Whether students in the qualitative study considered, applied to and decided to enroll in a college that matched their levels of qualifications:
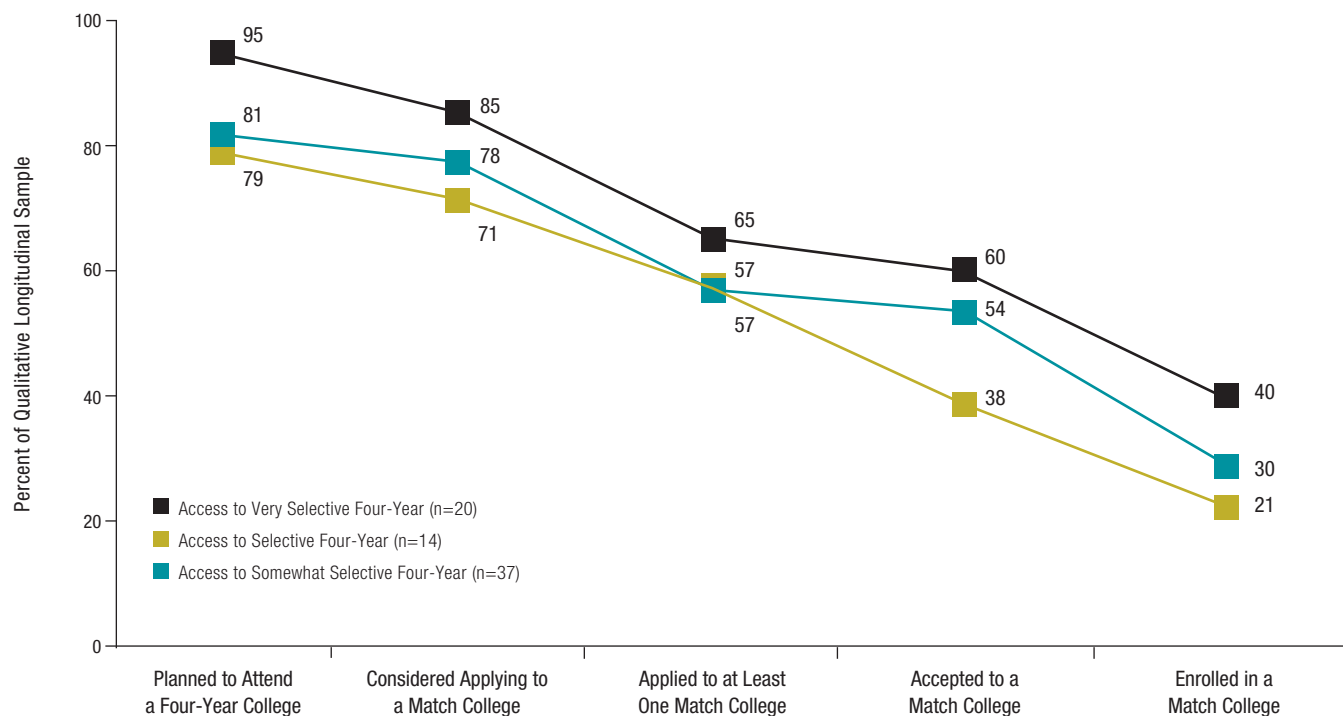
Note: This analysis uses the Qualitative Longitudinal Sample (see Appendix B for details). Ninety-seven students had sufficient data for this analysis, and 26 of the students only had access to nonselective or two-year colleges.

How closely do students listen to the messages schools convey about postsecondary education? Javier, a quiet teen with a strong drive to attend college and excellent academic qualifications, illustrates how first-generation college-goers depend on their schools to provide postsecondary guidance. *See Javier's case study, p. 90.*

Does a student have to be highly qualified to thoroughly engage in the college search and application process? Franklin demonstrates that with the right information, strong supports at home, and a drive to attend college, a student with modest qualifications can make a college match—and a successful transition. *See Franklin's case study, p. 92.*

students, such as Javier, lacked not only information on the kind of colleges available to them, but also an understanding of how they might engage in making a decision about the college that would best fit their needs. In both cases, a lack of structured support and guidance made students vulnerable to grabbing a lifeline of the first college option that sounded reasonable. For Clara, that option was a good four-year college that met her needs. For Javier, however, that option was a last-minute decision to attend a trade school.

Does Submitting More College Applications Increase the Likelihood of Students Matching?

The case of Franklin, a student with comparatively modest qualifications, suggests that getting students to actively engage in college search and to apply to multiple colleges may be critical in helping students find their match. Indeed, as seen in Figure 28, one of the steps where students are most vulnerable to mismatch is at the "apply" stage of the process. Only 57 percent of students in our Qualitative Sample with access to somewhat selective or selective colleges applied to a match school and only 65 percent of students with access to very selective colleges did so. The students with access to selective colleges had surprisingly low rates of acceptance to a match school; however, all of the students who were not accepted only applied to one match school. In the previous chapter, we found that students who applied to multiple colleges, particularly students with more marginal college qualifications, were much more likely to

be accepted to a four-year college. Figure 29 presents the results of a multivariate analysis where we examined the impact of the number of applications students submitted on their chances of enrolling in a college that matched or exceeded their qualifications.

FIGURE 29

Students with more marginal qualifications were much more likely to enroll in a match school if they applied to multiple colleges, in part because they were more likely to be accepted into a college

Adjusted effect on probability of match by number of college applications reported:
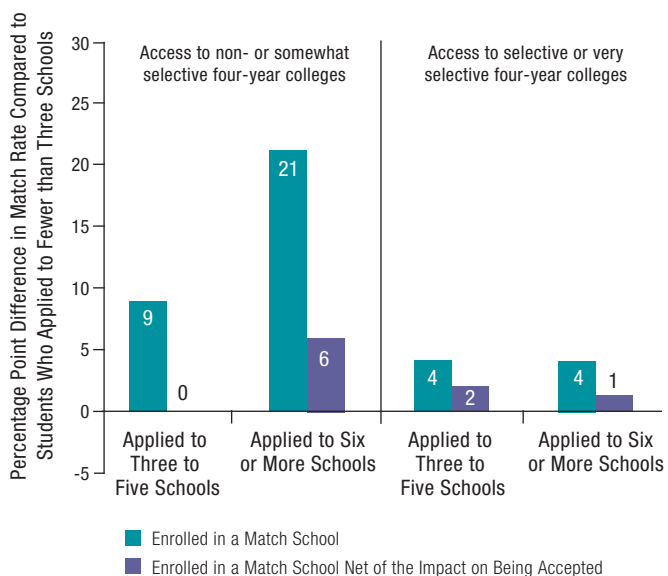
Note: The difference is between an average student who applied to fewer than three schools versus an average student who applied to three to five schools or six or more schools. This analysis uses the Match Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, academic characteristics, and college-related supports and activities. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

This analysis controls for differences across students in their high school qualifications, demographics, mother's education and nativity, and neighborhood characteristics. It also controls for student survey reports of parental and school support for postsecondary education, participation in college search activities, whether the student worked, participated in school activities, and whether the student submitted a FAFSA (see Appendix D for descriptions of the variables and Appendix E for details on the analytic models). In our multivariate analysis we use the Match Analytic Sample, which further narrows the Match Sample by excluding students in selective enrollment high schools and students who only had the lowest level of qualifications that provided access to two-year colleges.

These findings suggest that for students with more modest qualifications, like Franklin, applying to multiple colleges is an important predictor of match. Students who apply to multiple colleges may be more likely to match because they have a broader array of choices, and these choices may be more likely to include a match school. Another possible reason, building on our findings in the previous chapter, is that students who apply to multiple colleges are more likely to be accepted to at least one four-year college, and acceptance may be a barrier to match.

Our analysis seems to confirm this; it suggests that most of this effect on the likelihood of matching can be attributed to the fact that more modestly qualified students who applied to multiple colleges were much more likely to be accepted into a four-year college than those who only applied to few. The first bar in Figure 29 shows the effect of applying to multiple colleges on the likelihood of a student matching, not taking into account whether that student was accepted into at least one four-year college. The second bar shows the effect of applying to multiple colleges on the chances of a

student matching once we have controlled for whether that student was accepted into any four-year school. Students with access to a nonselective or somewhat selective college who applied to six or more four-year colleges were 21 percentage points more likely to match than similar students who only applied to two or fewer schools. Once we control for whether students were accepted at a four-year college, students who applied to six or more four-year colleges were still more likely (6 percent) to enroll in a match school than those with similar qualifications and family background who only applied to two or fewer colleges. But this effect is relatively small compared to the effect of multiple applications on acceptance.

Thus, for students with more marginal qualifications, much of the effect that applying to multiple schools has on their probability of matching occurs because it increases their likelihood of being accepted to a four-year college. In contrast, for students with access to selective or very selective colleges, the number of applications they submit seems to have only a small effect on whether or not they match. This may in part reflect that students with higher qualifications are not having problems getting into four-year colleges. As Clara's case illustrates so vividly, if students with high levels of qualifications are not looking beyond the most popular "enclave" colleges, applying to more of the same type of college will not have an impact on their chances of matching.

FAFSA Completion May Be a Significant Barrier to Enrollment in a Match School

In the previous chapter, one of our main findings was that, among students who reported in May that they had been accepted to a four-year college, students who had filled out a FAFSA were 50 percent more likely to

Can students complete successful college searches and go on to colleges that match their qualifications through personal motivation and hard work alone? Amelia worked as hard as can be expected in pursuit of higher education but still encountered tremendous difficulty on the road to college match. *See Amelia's case study, p. 94.*

enroll in a four-year college than those who did not. Submitting a FAFSA—especially applying early to maximize the chances of getting federal, state, and institutional aid—may shape the likelihood of enrolling in a four-year college as well as the likelihood of matching. Indeed, a consistent theme in our qualitative study was a lack of FAFSA completion and concerns about college costs. Some students who do not complete their FAFSA, like Amelia, decide to attend a mismatch college, in this case a two-year rather than a four-year college.

Figure 30 compares the percentage of graduates who enrolled in colleges with selectivity levels that matched or exceeded their qualifications by whether students reported in June on the Senior Exit Questionnaire that they had completed a FAFSA. Of students with access to a selective or very selective four-year college, 35 percent of graduates who reported completing a FAFSA enrolled in a college that matched their qualifications versus only 15 percent who had not completed a FAFSA. One explanation for these trends, given our analysis in the previous chapter, is that students who do not complete the FAFSA may not apply to a four-year college either. However, FAFSA completion is associated with the likelihood of matching after controlling for whether students applied and were accepted to a four-year college.

Figure 31 presents our results on the impact of FAFSA completion on students' chances of enrolling in a match college.[68] The first bar shows the effect of filing a FAFSA, controlling for the same set of student characteristics used in our analysis of the impact of multiple applications, but does not control for whether students were accepted at a four-year college. The second bar shows the effect of FAFSA completion controlling further for whether students were accepted to any four-year college. These results suggest that for students, such as Amelia, failure to file a FAFSA may present a significant barrier to enrolling in a school that matches their qualifications. These effects hold true regardless of students' qualifications.

In summation, the impact of completing multiple college applications and filing a FAFSA suggests that effective participation in the college search and application process shapes students' likelihood of matching

FIGURE 30

Students who completed their FAFSA were much more likely to choose a match school

Impact of completing a FAFSA on match rate:

Percent Who Have Qualifications that at Least Match their Outcome

■ Completed FAFSA   ■ Did Not Complete FAFSA
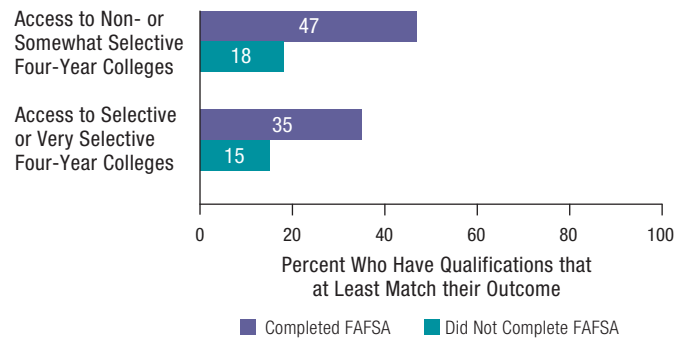
Note: Using the Match Sample (see Appendix B for details), 73 percent of students with access to non- or somewhat selective college reported completing the FAFSA. Eighty-five percent of students with access to selective or very selective four-year college reported completing the FAFSA.

FIGURE 31

Students who completed their FAFSA were much more likely to choose a match school even among those who had been accepted to a four-year college

■ Enrolled in a Match School
■ Enrolled in a Match School Net of the Impact of Being Accepted into a Four-Year College
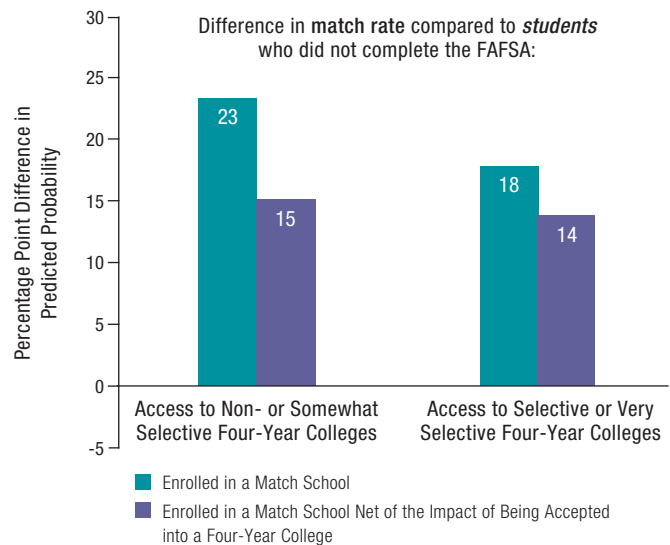
Note: The difference is between an average student who did not complete the FAFSA versus an average student who did. This analysis uses the Match Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, academic characteristics and college-related supports and activities. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

in two ways. First, particularly for more marginally qualified students, filing a FAFSA and submitting multiple college applications to four-year colleges significantly increases the chances that students will be accepted to and enroll in a four-year institution, and thus they will be more likely to match. For more qualified seniors, applying to multiple colleges will not be effective if these students are not looking at colleges that are selective or very selective. This makes sense. The risk factor for the most highly qualified students does not appear to be planning to enroll in four-year colleges. The risk for highly qualified students is that, if they do not effectively participate in a wide college search, they become particularly vulnerable to applying solely to schools below their levels of qualifications and ultimately enrolling in a college below the caliber to which their credentials would give them access.

Students Are More Likely to Match When They Attend High Schools with a Strong College-Going Culture

It is easy when reading the experience of students such as Franklin to conclude that much of students' college choice depends upon whether their parents are strongly involved in their college searches. However, for students such as Clara and Amelia, who are the first in their family to attend college, particularly if, like Clara, they have access to very selective colleges, the college search, application, and selection process can be much more complex and confusing. For these students, matching requires that they and their parents have access to information on a wide range of colleges. Parents who have not been to college will likely have greater difficulty helping their children make well-considered and well-informed choices, making students especially dependent upon their schools and teachers for guidance.

Figure 32 shows the predicted differences in the likelihood of students enrolling in a match college by students' survey reports of the extent to which they had strong connections to teachers and had discussions at school about the college planning process. These estimates show the results from a multivariate analysis that uses the same set of variables included in

Students with more marginal qualifications were much more likely to make a match if they had college planning discussions at school
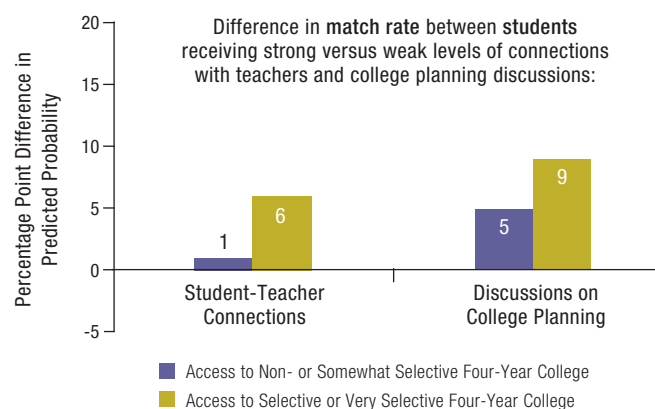
Note: A student receiving strong levels is defined as being 1 standard deviation above the mean and student receiving weak levels is 1 standard deviation below the mean. This analysis uses the Match Analytic Sample and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, academic characteristics and college related supports. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

the previous analysis, except that we do not include the variables for participation in college planning activities, FAFSA submission, or the number of applications.[69] Students with access to nonselective or somewhat selective colleges were more likely to match if they reported having discussions that would inform their college search. Thus, similar to our findings that applying to multiple colleges increased the chance of matching for students with more marginal qualifications, the degree to which these same students were getting guidance about what kinds of colleges they could get into and how to prepare for college increased their chances of enrolling in a match school.

Having discussions on college planning and connections to teachers were particularly important in shaping the likelihood of enrolling in a match school among the most highly qualified students. Among students with access to selective or very selective colleges, those who reported having more discussions at school on college planning were much more likely to enroll in a match school. In addition, unlike students with more marginal qualifications, students with high qualifications who reported having a strong connection with at least one teacher had a higher likelihood of enrolling in a match school than students who had weaker connections. Thus, one interpretation of these findings is that

the chances that more highly qualified students will look at, apply to, and choose more selective institutions is strongly influenced by whether they have someone at school who guides them through that process.

Not surprisingly, the college orientation of students' high school environment is an important predictor of whether students will ultimately enroll in colleges that match their levels of qualifications. Figure 33 presents the results of a multivariate analysis using the same set of control variables where we estimate differences in the predicted probability of matching for students who attend schools with strong versus weak measures on our two indicators of college-going culture. As in the previous chapter, we measured the college-going culture of a school using two variables: (1) the percentage of students from the prior graduating class who attended a four-year college and (2) the school average of teacher survey reports of their assessment of the college climate in their school. This survey measure includes questions about the extent to which their colleagues expect students to go to college, focus their curriculum on preparing students for college, and were involved

FIGURE 33

Students were much more likely to enroll in a college that matched their qualifications if they attended a high school with a strong college-going culture

Difference in **match rate** between students in **schools** with strong versus weak college-going cultures:

Y-axis: Percentage Point Difference in Predicted Probability (−5 to 30)

Teachers' Assessment of College Climate: 24, 17
Percentage of Prior Graduates Attending a Four-Year College: 21, 19

- Enrolled in a Match School
- Enrolled in a Match School Net of the Impact of Doing College-Related Activities and Being Accepted

Note: A strong school is defined as being 1 standard deviation above the average school and a weak school is 1 standard deviation below the mean. This analysis uses the Match Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, academic characteristics and college-related supports. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.
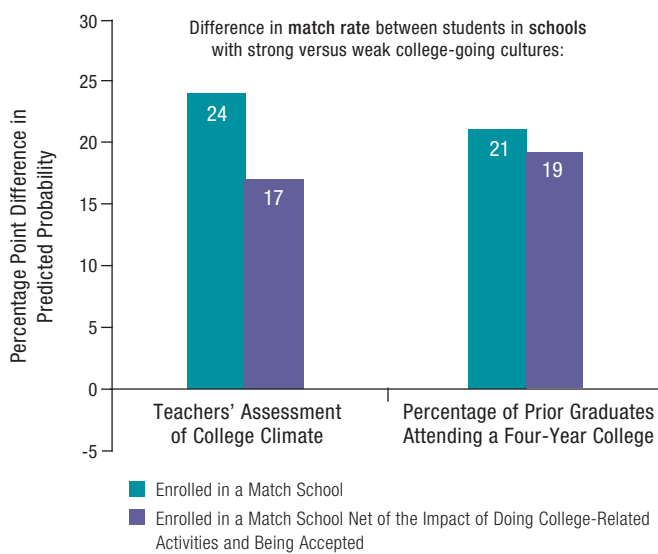
How We Measure High School College-Going Culture

High School College-Going Culture

Percentage of Prior Graduates Attending a Four-Year College: The percentage of 2004 graduates, the prior cohort, who enrolled in a four-year college after high school based on NSC data.

Teachers' Assessment of the College Climate in their School: Teachers were asked the extent to which they would agree (strongly disagree to strongly agree) that:

- Teachers (in this high school) expect most students to go college.
- Teachers help students plan for college outside of class time.
- The curriculum is focused on helping students get ready for college.
- Teachers feel that it is a part of their job to prepare to succeed in college.
- Many of our students are planning to go to college.

Indicators Whether the School is Organized Around Postsecondary Planning

Percentage of Prior Graduates Who Applied to Three or More Schools: The percentage of 2004 graduates, the prior cohort, in the school who reported on the CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire that they had applied to three or more schools.

Percentage of Prior Graduates Who Completed the FAFSA: The percentage of 2004 graduates, the prior cohort, in the school who reported on the CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire that they had completed the FAFSA.

For a complete listing of school-level variables, see Appendix D.

in helping students plan and apply to college. Thus, our estimates of the effect of schools represent differences in the probability of matching in a school with a strong level of each college climate variable compared to a similar student who attended a school with a weak level of each college-climate variable.
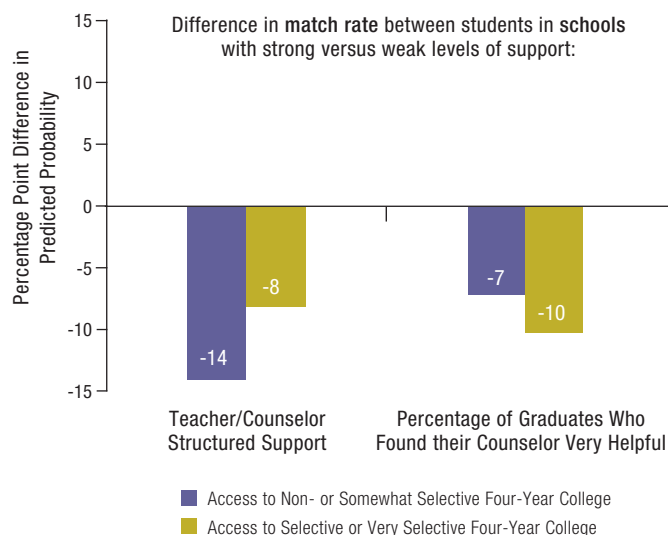
Even after accounting for these differences, students who attended schools in which teachers reported that their colleagues foster a strong college climate were much more likely to enroll in a college that matched their qualifications. We see the same pattern for our second indicator of the college-orientation of the students' high schools—the proportion of graduates from the prior year who attended a four-year college. Importantly, we found in the previous chapter that the college-going culture of a school had the greatest impact on whether students with more marginal qualifications took the necessary steps to apply to and enroll in a four-year college. We do not see the same pattern for match. Rather, teachers' assessments of their colleagues' efforts to build a strong college climate were strongly associated with the likelihood of matching, regardless of students' high school performance. The association between our two measures of the college climate of the school and the likelihood of students' matching remains when we control for whether students were accepted at a four-year school.[70] Thus, attending a high school where teachers are oriented to prepare and support students in their postsecondary aspirations and where there is a strong precedent for four-year college attendance makes it much more likely students will look at, apply to, and enroll in match schools.

Counselor Guidance: Help or Hindrance?

Throughout this report, we have emphasized the importance of adults at the school in building a college climate that encourages students to take the steps necessary to enroll in college, particularly in a four-year college. Attending a high school with a strong college climate predicts both whether students effectively participate in the college application process and the type of colleges students ultimately attend. Discussions about providing students with greater levels of structured support and guidance for college typically point to counselors as being a core component of a

Surprisingly, students were less likely to enroll in a match school in high schools where the average student reported strong levels of counselor involvement

Difference in **match rate** between students in **schools** with strong versus weak levels of support:

■ Access to Non- or Somewhat Selective Four-Year College
■ Access to Selective or Very Selective Four-Year College

Note: A strong school is defined as being 1 standard deviation above the mean and a weak school is 1 standard deviation below the mean. This analysis uses the Match Analytic Sample (see Appendix B for details) and adjusts for student demographic, socioeconomic, academic characteristics and college-related supports. See Appendix E for a description of the model used in this analysis.

school-based strategy. Indeed, in Chapter 2, we found that high levels of counselor support were associated with an increase in the likelihood of Latino students applying to a four-year college, which we have shown is a particularly important step.

Our qualitative work, however, suggests that counselors often play a minimal role in helping students identify colleges, navigate the application process, and make college decisions. Reading the case studies, one is struck by the extent to which a lack of adult involvement and guidance makes students vulnerable to giving up on the process or making hasty decisions. On the other hand, for Grady (see p. 26), a counselor seemed to play an important role in helping him manage the daunting challenge of applying to a wide range of colleges. However, for many other students, counselors seemed to have only a paper processing role. In our analysis of students who made an early decision to attend a two-year college, there was an obvious lack of guidance, especially from counselors, and it seems that guidance from a counselor could have greatly altered students' college choices. This is not an unusual

finding. In a study in Illinois, Michael Kirst and Andrea Venezia found that students tended to report very limited contact with counselors to plan for college.[71]

The analysis we conducted for Chapter 2 largely confirmed that counselors play a minimal role in whether students take the necessary steps to enroll in a four-year college. We found that student reports of the frequency and helpfulness of their contact with counselors in college search and application was not a significant predictor of taking these steps. Even more surprising, in the analyses in this chapter, we find that the extent to which students attend a school where students reported strong levels of counselor and teacher structured support in the college planning process, as well as the degree to which students in their school found the counselors very helpful in postsecondary planning was negatively related to the likelihood that they would enroll in a match school (see Figure 34).

This finding seems to greatly contradict our previous assertions that adults play a pivotal role in building a strong college climate. Throughout this report, the most consistent predictor of students taking the steps to enroll in a four-year college and enrolling in a match college has been the extent to which teachers report that they and their colleagues work to build a strong college climate. It would be easy to dismiss these findings, given how counterintuitive they are. Indeed, there are several possible explanations some may give as to why this finding could be spurious.

For example, these two measures are based on survey responses, and some may claim that students are unreliable informants. However, we have depended on student survey responses throughout this report, and they have proven to be a reliable predictor of important outcomes. A second possibility that others may give is that these findings might reflect selection bias. In essence, students who struggle and have a low probability of enrolling in a match college may be the most likely to seek help from counselors and the most likely to report that their counselors are very helpful. This would explain negative effects for students who get help from counselors and teachers, but would not explain why the school average of students' reports of structured support from teachers and counselors and having very helpful counselors are negatively

associated with match. Finally, it is possible that students might have interpreted the questions asked on the survey in a different way from what was intended. Yet in Chapter 2, we found that student reports of teacher and counselor structured support had a positive impact for Latino students. These are all possible but not compelling explanations for such a contradictory finding.

There is a plausible explanation for this seemingly counterintuitive finding that counselors and teachers have a negative impact on students' likelihood of enrolling in a match school. The task of guiding students to enroll in a match college requires that teachers and counselors understand their students' qualifications, as well as the types of colleges that would be a match. Just like their students, teachers and counselors may rely on limited information and may direct students to popular colleges, regardless of students' qualifications. Javier (see case study on p. 90), for example, only applied to colleges to which he was exposed at his school, which were almost all less selective institutions and often not four-year colleges. In effect, this meant that Javier's teachers and counselors encouraged a mismatch in his college choice by not providing alternatives that were more suitable for his higher qualifications. Thus, while we find that it is critical for students who are first-generation college-goers to have access to information, in the absence of high expectations, teachers and counselors may unwittingly provide students with information that leads them to limit their college searches to two-year and less selective four-year colleges. Guiding students to a match college places a greater burden on teachers and counselors to individualize the messages sent to students within a school according to qualifications and needs. They must also build their own professional knowledge of college options and the college admissions process. As we saw earlier in this chapter, highly qualified students are particularly at risk of not enrolling in match schools if they do not attend a selective enrollment school, and this may be particularly true if they attend schools where teachers and counselors do not have high expectations and do not individualize their college support.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on whether CPS students apply to and enroll in four-year colleges that matched their high school qualifications. To some, the findings in this chapter might seem surprising. At a time when affirmative action has come under attack, there is a common perception that minority students, particularly highly qualified minority students, are heavily recruited by top colleges and gain easy entry to the nation's top universities. Rather, consistent with prior research, we find that many CPS students constrain their college searches significantly and face multiple barriers in conducting a college search that maximizes their opportunities to enroll in competitive colleges with environments that might best meet their needs. This is particularly problematic for students who do not attend CPS' selective enrollment schools.

While problems of mismatch occur among all students, it is worth returning to our last report to point out how important college choice is, particularly for the most qualified students. Research, including our own, has consistently found wide variation in college graduation rates, even among colleges that serve similar students.[72] Figure 35 summarizes some of the most important findings from our last report. This figure shows how college choice, in combination with unweighted high school GPA, is associated with the likelihood of college graduation within six years for students who graduated from high school in 1998 and 1999. Each of the lines in the chart represents a different college in Illinois, showing the six-year college graduation rates of the CPS students who went to that college by their high school GPA. Figure 35 clearly shows the impact of poor high school performance on CPS students' likelihood of college graduation. Students with very low

College graduation rates by unweighted high school GPA for popular Illinois colleges
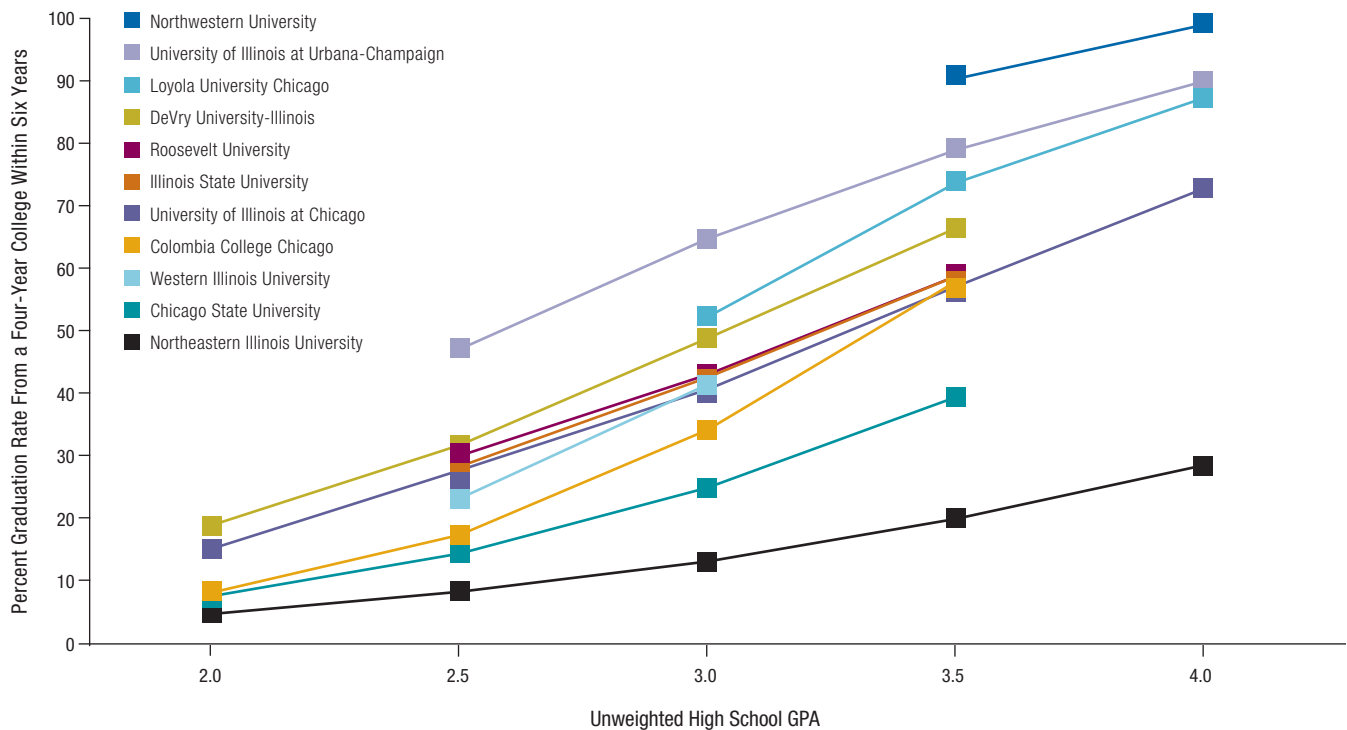
Note: These lines come from logistic regression models performed for each college, predicting graduation with GPA. The regression lines are based on data from all students at each college based on their actual (not rounded) GPA. However, points are included on the graph for a college only if at least 20 students at that college had a rounded high school GPA at that point. Colleges that enrolled fewer than 40 CPS alumni, such as the University of Chicago, are not shown to protect student confidentiality. This figure is reproduced from Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth (2006) and shows college graduation rates from the CPS graduating classes of 1998 and 1999.

GPAs were unlikely to graduate, regardless of which college they attended, and within colleges we see wide differences in graduation rates by students' high school performance.

Of relevance to this discussion, this figure illustrates how college choice matters substantially for graduation, especially among high-achieving students. For example, CPS graduates who had an unweighted GPA of 4.0 had an 87 percent likelihood of graduating if they enrolled in Loyola University versus only a 29 percent probability if they enrolled in Northeastern Illinois University. It may seem counterintuitive that college selection would be most critical for high-achieving students. One might think that high-achieving students would attain a four-year degree regardless of where they went to college. However, these students also have the widest range of college options and while some attend very selective colleges, others enroll in nonselective schools. This chart is largely descriptive and does not account for unmeasured characteristics underlying college choice that also affect graduation; students who choose Northeastern Illinois University when they could have enrolled at Loyola, for example, might have qualities that also make them unlikely to graduate. At the same time, the general patterns of results are quite consistent with other more rigorous research that finds wide differences in graduation rates across colleges among students with high qualifications.[73] Thus, these large differences suggest that we need to pay close attention to students' college choices. Working to improve students' high school grades is clearly important, but it is not enough to help them graduate from college, if highly qualified students make poor college choices.

As we emphasized throughout this chapter, making an effective college choice and engaging in an effective college search should be more nuanced than simply choosing to attend the most competitive colleges to which students can gain access. College match is one element of college search, and in this chapter we examined this more easily quantifiable outcome to gauge more generally whether CPS students were engaged in a thorough college search. It provides a window into whether students are getting the support they need to effectively think about what kinds of colleges they have available to them, how to manage that decision-making process, and how to decide what a high quality college is. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, a recent report from the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education looked closely at the practices that distinguish schools with high versus low graduation rates among modestly selective colleges that serve high proportions of low-income students.[74] The report concluded that colleges in this group with higher than expected graduation rates were characterized by environments and policies that promote achievement—they had intentional academic planning around freshman year, special programs, and small classes intended to increase retention. Successful institutions also tended to have higher proportions of full-time faculty, more students living on campus, and many were geographically isolated, making campus life a center of students' experiences. Few students in our study were explicitly guided to think about college search and selection in a way that encouraged them to consider these kinds of important factors—whether they would get attention from professors, whether classes would be challenging, whether they would have access to support, and whether they would attend a college that would integrate them into campus life. Some students, such as Clara and Sakaarah (see case studies on p. 68 and p. 88), manage to find their way to these institutions with higher than expected graduation rates.

The central question is: How do we improve students' likelihood of finding their way to these kinds of high-quality colleges? In this chapter, we have identified several barriers that lead students to enroll in four-year colleges with lower selectivity levels than what they are qualified to attend. First, many students simply lack the information and guidance on what kinds of colleges to which they may be eligible to gain admission and how to determine what college would be a good fit. Second, many students do not apply to multiple colleges or look at a broad range of institutions. Third, even the most motivated students constrain their college options, because they do not understand financial aid, lack guidance on how to manage college finances, and do not apply for financial aid in a timely manner that maximizes their awards. Addressing each

of these barriers requires that high schools have strong cultures that engage students in college planning, push students to set high expectations for themselves, support students in understanding how to think about qualities of colleges that may make the greatest difference in their lives, and provide concrete support at each stage of the process, so that students effectively manage the college search, application, selection, and finance processes.

What is clear in this and the previous chapter is that students appear to be more successful when they attend high schools where teachers set high expectations and support students in preparing for and applying to college, students receive good information to guide their search, and there are strong norms for college attendance. For students with more marginal qualifications, one of the consistent themes in this chapter is that working on college match and enrollment in a four-year college can be accomplished with the same steps—get students to plan to attend a four-year college, apply to multiple colleges, and submit a FAFSA in a timely fashion. This is not true for highly qualified students. For these students, the problem of college match is much more challenging than simply getting students to apply to a four-year college and making sure that they take the steps to enroll in a four-year college (e.g., file their FAFSA). Instead, it requires making sure that highly qualified students are encouraged to think about what kinds of colleges to which they should apply. It requires that teachers and counselors know what colleges best serve highly qualified CPS students, what options these students have, and how to best conduct a college search. It requires that students and educators understand the financial options and true costs of various schools that differ in their financial aid awards, levels of tuition, and loan versus aid ratios. And, it will ultimately require that colleges recruit and support CPS students in the college search and application process. In essence, it requires that high schools increase their capacity and build the expectations that "college" does not mean just any college.

Case Studies	
	Here, we 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 are based on five student interviews conducted between spring of these students' junior year of high school (March 2005) and their graduation the following year (June 2006) and represent common themes that emerged from our qualitative work. For more information on how the qualitative study was conducted, see Appendix B: Data Used in this Report. For more detailed information on the high schools highlighted in these case studies, see *What a Strong College Culture Looks Like: An Analysis of the Three High Schools in our Qualitative Longitudinal Study*, p. 62.

In reading these case studies, there are a few important points to keep in mind. First, in order to preserve the anonymity of students and schools that participated in the qualitative study, all names of students and high schools in this report are pseudonyms. Second, though we usually include specific names of colleges that students in our study chose to attend or considered attending, in some cases, revealing a student's college choice would compromise his or her anonymity; college names are kept confidential in these cases. Finally, since financial aid clearly plays an important role in these students' college choices, we have provided students' descriptions of how they attempted to leverage financial aid, even when they seemed very confused about the process. It is important to remember that all this information is solely based on student reports and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college.

Sakaarah–*A Case Study*
The path to finding the best "fit"

What is the difference between college match and college fit? Sakaarah provides an important example of how thoughtful, qualified, and well-supported students think about finding a college, considering match to be one, but not the only, component of college fit.

Sakaarah[1] knew exactly what she wanted from a college: a full-tuition scholarship and a strong premedical program. A future physician, Sakaarah is a bright African-American teenager who completed Kahlo High School's rigorous IB program. She maintained a weighted GPA of 3.5, earned an ACT score in the mid-20s, and stayed active after school playing softball, launching a dance group in her community, and volunteering at a local nursing home. As a well-rounded, academically strong candidate, Sakaarah had access to attend at least a selective college. She stressed that she always strived for the best grades, starting when she was a preschooler, and she put the same effort into her college planning.

Junior Year: Already on Target
Sakaarah's list of colleges was more extensive than those of her peers, including Northwestern University, Iowa State, the University of Michigan, Washington University in St. Louis, and the University of Chicago, all colleges known for producing students ready for medical school. Adults at Sakaarah's school expected her to succeed. When asked if her teachers knew about her future plans, she responded, *"Everybody knows I plan to be a [doctor], especially my biology teacher; that's why she pushes me so hard."*

Sakaarah understood that the road to such a strenuous career was long and challenging, but she also knew she had the ambition and support needed to get there. Sakaarah's family invested a great deal of hope in her success after graduation and was very supportive of her plans to study medicine. In addition to tremendous support from her parents, she received guidance from an aunt and other family members who had attended college. Her aunt steered her toward Northwestern, her alma mater.

Sakaarah herself had an eloquent answer to the question of why she wanted to go to college:

> "Without knowledge, you have no power. I know it sounds cliché, but that is the truth. No one can ever take knowledge away from you . . . [without] that, you will never prosper. I will still be stuck in the same mental [place as] high school, and that's not good for the future . . . once you get older, you need to open your mind and broaden your horizons . . ."

Sakaarah thought carefully about finding a college that was a good fit for her, and she considered any college a realistic option, given her qualifications. This meant, however, that she would have to do a lot of investigating on her own. Sakaarah was very clear about her desire to attend medical school and achieve a specialty in obstetrics. She wanted to attend a college known for its strong premedical program and conducted extensive research using a college guidebook. She describes her research process:

> "I have a huge brochure of all the colleges in the United States. The majority of the colleges that are in the brochure send me letters, and the ones that don't send me letters I call the number in the book and talk to people that actually go there and then they email me and I email them back. Then they give me brochures and DVDs with information on it about their school, like a virtual tour."

Summer: Careful Research and Attention to Detail
Though Sakaarah worked full time over the summer, she still made time for her college search. She toured Northwestern and the University of Illinois at

Urbana-Champaign, and at each institution, she strategically chose options that allowed her to experience the school's premedical programs. She didn't have time to visit out-of-state schools; instead she completed "virtual tours" of the out-of-state colleges she was interested in attending. She also retook the ACT.[4]

Fall Senior Year: Executing the Plan

By fall of senior year, Sakaarah had completed applications to the University of Michigan, the University of Illinois, and Washington University (her top choice). She also planned to apply to at least three more schools, including Northwestern and Iowa State. She carefully completed her applications and knew which schools required essays, personal statements, or writing samples. She secured recommendations for most of her applications. Because she felt it would reflect well on her as a premedical applicant to have a recommendation from a chemistry teacher, she reconnected with her former chemistry teacher who no longer taught at Kahlo.

Winter Senior Year: Already Accepted, Working on Money

By February, not only had Sakaarah finished all her applications but she already had been offered several acceptances. She'd also already been offered full-tuition scholarships from several historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), including a small HBCU in the South, which she described as her "Number Two" school.[2] She was accepted to her top choice, Washington, and was waiting to hear from Northwestern and Michigan. Sakaarah recognized that some students instinctively jump at the first scholarship offered, but she wanted to make an intentional college choice based on more than just money. She knew she had given herself the best access to aid possible; she had filed her FAFSA by February and was well informed about the different kinds of federal, institutional, and scholarship aid she could expect to receive. She also knew that it was important to wait to hear from all of her schools before making a decision. She hoped to find a school that would support her financially, but also fit her personal, academic, and social needs. Because Washington did not offer Sakaarah a lot of scholarship money, she was increasingly leaning toward the small HBCU:

"[The HBCU] has a small campus, but [there's] still so much to do. They have just about every sorority, fraternity, and club. And my cousin, she's a graduate [of that school], and she really, really liked it. I visited her a couple of years ago, and I liked it then . . ."

This school grabbed Sakaarah's attention because she could excel academically and get the personal attention she needed to realize her dreams. Sakaarah said, "I like the atmosphere and the people and the class structure. I work better when I get one-on-one from teachers, so that's what I was going for."

Spring Senior Year: Reinforcing Her Decision

After visiting the HBCU with her mother over spring break, Sakaarah was completely sold. She loved the campus, and in the end, she received a full-tuition scholarship.[5] While visiting the campus, she also sat for a personal interview, a requirement for a specific institutional scholarship she was eventually awarded. After staying in the dorms, talking to students, and visiting classes, she became convinced this was the place for her. The school also fell in line with her professional goals, because of its track record of sending black college students on to medical school:

"They graduated the most black doctors, so that's a plus. And the teachers are pretty much like our teachers here—they're crazy. I was in one class and the girl didn't come to that class, so the teacher took the whole class to her dorm room and woke her up."

As of her freshman year, Sakaarah couldn't have been happier with her choice. She was taking as many classes as possible, earning nearly all As, holding down a part-time job at her school's library, and participating in a hospital internship. She has met several nurses, doctors, and other practitioners in the hospital's obstetrics unit, and she is using their expertise to consider many different routes towards a career in that field.

When it came to her college search, Sakaarah did not limit her options to colleges in the area or those she heard about, nor did she become consumed with attending the most prestigious university. Instead, Sakaarah found a home in the college that fit her best.

Javier–*A Case Study*

When schools talk about college, students listen

How closely do students listen to the messages schools convey about postsecondary education? Javier, a quiet teen with a strong drive to attend college and excellent academic qualifications, illustrates how first-generation college-goers depend on their schools to provide postsecondary guidance.

A Mexican-American student born and raised in Chicago, Javier[1] graduated from Silverstein High School with a 3.95 weighted GPA and a 21 on the ACT, earning him access to a selective college. Javier—with an easygoing nature and genuine desire to learn—thrived in the classroom. His teacher described him as "very gifted . . . his reading, writing, and composition skills are superior. He is focused, motivated and a true pleasure to have in class." Like many other well-qualified students, Javier managed to apply to multiple colleges, but without guidance, this wasn't enough to ensure he would consider colleges that matched his qualifications.

Junior Year: Seeking the Right Information

Javier and his entire family expected that he would attend a four-year college. He believed college would make life easier. Javier's drafting teacher, a former architect, often talked to the class about college requirements and deadlines. Javier was very invested in this class and spoke at length with his teacher, who provided him with career guidance, including information about internship opportunities. From that point on, Javier was set on becoming an architect.

Javier chose a rigorous senior year course schedule to prepare to attend a four-year college. He enrolled in AP English and honors college algebra.

> "I chose math because I just couldn't see next year without math, I would be all confused the first year of college. I think colleges are looking for the students that take challenges."

Javier also participated in a program in his junior and senior years that allowed him to earn college credit by taking a computer information technology class at Northwestern Business College every Saturday morning. At the end of junior year, Javier started researching colleges on the Internet, but his college search was limited to schools he heard about on television or who sent him information.

Fall Senior Year: Confused Search, Diligent Applications

Javier returned to school from summer vacation and continued to struggle to understand how the college search process worked. Applying to college was new territory for him and his family, so he needed all the help he could get: *"I don't know anything about college, so information is information."* He listened intently to his teachers as they shared scholarship information and important deadlines, but they never talked to him one-on-one about college. As advised, he retook the ACT and improved his score from a 19 to a 21. He never spoke with a counselor about his postsecondary plans. He explained:

> "She doesn't talk to us individually. We could go talk to her, but . . . she's always busy."

Even without personalized help, Javier eagerly participated in the college search process with what limited information he had. He now planned to study computer engineering and diligently researched application deadlines and admissions requirements on the Internet. However, he still was only able to identify a few college possibilities and couldn't answer why he believed those schools would be a good choice for him.

Despite his lack of information, Javier was ahead of the game with his applications. By November, he had already applied to three schools, all far below his

match: DeVry University, Robert Morris College, and Northwestern Business College. Javier continued to attend classes at Northwestern Business College and was rewarded with an $11,000 scholarship for completing the program and having a GPA over 3.5.[6] This would cover the bulk of his tuition, but he would still be responsible for a few thousand dollars. Even with the scholarship, he was still concerned about paying for college. He believed that the bulk of his tuition should be paid for through independent scholarships, so he put great energy into searching the Internet for scholarships. Javier also expected to take out loans but hadn't begun to make sense of how to do this. When he spoke to his mother about tuition, she told him not to worry about the cost, but he still saw it as a barrier:

> "[My parents] told me…money isn't an issue, but I think it is. So I'm trying to pick a college that would make it easier for my family."

Javier would be the first in his family to pursue higher education. Although his parents couldn't offer specific advice as he searched for colleges, they always supported his decision to attend college.

Winter Senior Year: Now What?
By February, Javier was at a standstill. He hadn't researched or applied to any additional colleges. All three colleges he applied to had accepted him, but he was ambivalent about which he wanted to attend, even though Northwestern Business College had offered him a scholarship. He put the college decision on the back burner while he waited for his parents to finish filing their taxes so he could complete the FAFSA. He figured he'd decide after the financial aid letters arrived.

Spring Senior Year: A Choice He Understands
At the end of senior year, Javier shifted gears again. His drafting teacher brought in a representative from the Universal Technical Institute (UTI), a local automotive and diesel repair school with an 18-month job certification program. Right away, Javier became very interested in an automotive repair career. After the presentation, Javier asked the UTI representative for his card, contacted him, and the representative arranged a meeting at Javier's home. During this home visit, Javier filled out the application and was soon accepted. His parents were supportive of their son's decision. Javier never visited UTI, but it seemed like a practical option and he latched onto it.

> "I decided to go to UTI because I was more interested in the program, and it's less time. The other colleges would have been three or four years. I just want to get the studies over with and go to work."

This was the first time an adult sat down and asked Javier specific questions about college and walked him through the steps to apply and enroll in school. UTI also offered the small class size that Javier preferred and would help him find a job while in school. No other college provided Javier with information and attention like UTI.

At that point, Javier decided the cost of the school was no longer a concern. To cover the $23,000 tuition, Javier would continue to work part-time and was assured that UTI would help him find a higher paying job when classes started. He reported that the school gave him modest financial aid: $1,900 for books and supplies. He was still waiting to hear back about his FAFSA, and UTI told Javier they would *"check into it."* It is unclear whether or not he applied for financial aid correctly and why he chose UTI over Northwestern Business College, where he had already received a substantial scholarship. UTI seemed to be a safe choice; he had someone who had taken an interest in his future and personally walked him through the process.

During high school, Javier attended presentations by four postsecondary institutions—the only four schools to which he applied. Javier's college search barely went beyond these four schools and never included even one selective college. Javier is an example of an intelligent, motivated student whose limited information prevented him from completing a thorough search for a match school. A one-on-one conversation with an adult at school who recognized his academic potential could have altered his outcome dramatically, ensuring he at least considered schools he was qualified to attend.

Franklin–*A Case Study*

A successful search with modest qualifications

Does a student have to be highly qualified to thoroughly engage in the college search and application process? Franklin demonstrates that with the right information, strong supports at home, and a drive to attend college, a student with modest qualifications can make a college match—and a successful transition.

A charismatic African-American student at Ellison High School, Franklin[1] graduated with a B average and an ACT score of 19, giving him access to a somewhat selective college. Since many of the colleges in Illinois are considered somewhat selective, Franklin was at an advantage in finding a match school. His thoughtful, extroverted nature brought enthusiasm to his baseball team and a liveliness to the classroom. When asked about his future, Franklin never wavered in his desire to attend a four-year college. To Franklin, success meant some day owning a music production company, and he demonstrated his commitment to this goal by spending countless hours in his cousin's recording studio. He planned to major in business.

Though Franklin was committed to his schoolwork, he did not achieve the highest grades. Teachers and staff at Ellison knew Franklin well and recognized his potential to mature. His English teacher described him as "lively, funny, and creative . . . he very much needs to hear that he has potential, not only in the music world but also academically." Another teacher nominated him for a leadership program, and Franklin took his role as a leader seriously.

Junior Year: Ahead of the Game With His Search

Unlike most students, Franklin knew his way around a college campus because he spent many weekends with his brother, a Northern Illinois University student. Franklin liked Northern and could see himself as a student there, but he hesitated to follow in his brother's footsteps.

Thanks to his family's guidance, Franklin never seemed overwhelmed by the college search process, a problem that stymied so many of his peers. In the fall, Franklin started making a list of possible colleges,

including Northern, the University of Illinois, and Illinois State University. He zeroed in on schools that offered a business major and the opportunity to play baseball. Franklin's brother played an important role in his search, and his mother pushed him to attend college outside the Chicago area.

Franklin knew his grades were crucial for college acceptance, and he worked harder in his junior year classes than he had in previous years. He took a business class, improved his writing, and relished the challenge of his AP and honors classes:

> "Colleges, they look at that and see [me] getting As and Bs in honors classes . . . and [they say], 'I think he can do well in a college class.'"

Franklin completed his junior year feeling confident about his achievements and his decisions for senior year. After careful thought, he decided not to take a math class during his senior year; instead, he decided to take a class in which he was sure to earn an A or B in order to keep his GPA high.

Summer: A Little Work, a Little Play

Over the summer, Franklin spent many hours working on his music at his cousin's recording studio. At his mother's suggestion, he got a job at the library—which he held throughout his senior year and felt strengthened his *"people skills."* He also attended baseball camps around the Midwest, including one camp at Ohio University. While there, Franklin decided to add Ohio University to his list of possible schools. For Franklin, a pattern was emerging: each college campus he visited made its way onto his college list.

Fall Senior Year: Relying on Family, Honing His List

In the fall, Franklin carefully narrowed his list. School brochures accumulated, and Franklin diligently read each piece of mail. He fell behind schedule because he spent more time looking at applications than filling them out. He said:

> "I'm not going to rush to make a decision. 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 recognized which schools were realistic for him and considered schools he knew matched his qualifications, as well as a few "reach schools." Franklin was aware that colleges look beyond academic qualifications and also consider a student's personal qualities. He knew it would be important to portray himself well in his essays.

Despite all of his hard work, Franklin had not spent much time talking to adults in his school. He had not visited his counselor, but he knew he needed to do so to obtain his transcripts. Although he always sought his mother's counsel, his main source of guidance was his brother who Franklin credited with providing the best advice about how to pick the right school.

When it came to financing college, Franklin was in a better position than many of his peers. Franklin's mother and brother both were attending college and had experience with applying for financial aid. Franklin's mother assured him she would handle it, which he reported she did in February. The cost of college never intimidated Franklin; he felt comfortable taking on college loans to attend the school of his choice. He and his mother spoke often about the cost of college, and they both agreed he would attend college no matter what it took. If it took him 30 years to pay off his college debt, he was OK with that. Above all, he wanted to identify a college he could both enjoy and afford.

Winter Senior Year: Finding His Favorites

Late in the fall, Franklin visited a friend at Southern Illinois University. He immediately felt comfortable there and added Southern to his list—in fact, he moved it to the top. Because Franklin applied primarily to state schools with less complex applications, he was able to start and finish his applications in January and not miss any deadlines. He worked on his personal statement in his business class and submitted it to his two top schools. Before applying, he had asked both his teacher and mother to read his essay. In total, Franklin applied to seven schools.

Spring Senior Year: Filling in the Final Details

By the end of his senior year, Franklin had taken all the necessary steps to ensure he would attend college. While he did not always meet priority deadlines, he still applied early enough to gain acceptance to all seven schools. One final campus visit sold Franklin on attending Southern. He liked the environment and location of the university, felt comfortable among the students, liked the business program, and could afford the tuition. By spring, Franklin had already attended orientation, spoken with business professors, and registered for classes. Overall, Franklin felt his high school did a good job preparing students for college, but the responsibility for following through largely fell to the student:

> "It was like we couldn't always rely on them being there to help us through every little step, even though the guidance is good, but still as a student you still have to push forward and get it done."

Franklin did not know the specifics of his financial aid package but knew he was in good shape.[7] Because he would be the third person in his family enrolled in college, he was offered an aid package that made it affordable for him to attend Southern. At the end of senior year, he had met his goals of graduating on time and getting all As except for one B. By fall after graduation, Franklin was happily enrolled at Southern and active in campus life. He played intramural baseball, joined a business fraternity, and worked at a radio station. Franklin was a rare example of a student who navigated the college process successfully and landed in a well-matched college.

Amelia–*A Case Study*

As hard as a person can work

Can students complete successful college searches and go on to colleges that match their qualifications through personal motivation and hard work alone? Amelia worked as hard as can be expected in pursuit of higher education but still encountered tremendous difficulty on the road to college match.

An expressive young African-American woman and dedicated student, Amelia[1] was involved in an array of extracurricular activities at Silverstein High School, including cheerleading, mock trial, drill team, and drama team. She was nominated by her school for a prestigious four-year college scholarship, was written up in *Who's Who Among America's High School Students,* raised her own money to travel to Europe with the school's choir, and participated in a selective leadership program that prepares students for careers in law enforcement and public service. In addition to the program's after-school classes, Amelia also was inspired to take courses on society and law enforcement at a local two-year college and became active in her community through volunteer work and attending *"beat meetings."*

Amelia worked hard in her classes, spending about three hours a night on homework and earning a 3.1 weighted GPA. She took the ACT three times and ultimately received a 20.[8] Her grades and scores qualified her to attend at least a somewhat selective college. Amelia's motivation to attend college was reflected in her attentiveness during class:

> "I always sit in front of the class as close to the teacher as possible, so you can hear everything, take down everything, just suck in everything again so that you have no questions . . . I'm motivated, I'm capable of doing whatever [is necessary]."

Junior Year: Ahead of the Curve

Amelia applied the same intense motivation to her college search as she did to her coursework and extracurricular activities. While the law-enforcement program typically steers students toward completing an associate's degree for careers in public service, this experience led Amelia to consider a law career. In her junior year, she attended Chicago's biggest national college fair and had already received her PIN for financial aid. She also discussed her interest in becoming an attorney with the leaders from her law enforcement program. Interested in studying criminal justice at a four-year school, Amelia planned to take a law course and a fourth year of math as a senior, both of which she believed would prepare her for college.

Unfortunately, despite her hard work pursuing college plans, Amelia didn't fully understand the concept of law school. When asked what she would need to do *after* college to pursue her law ambitions, Amelia admitted her confusion:

> "I would love to become an attorney, but it's just hard, because I don't know exactly where I will find a job after you take a certain class. Do people come and scout you or you do a certain trial and they see how you would fit? I know you need an Associate's Degree, plus your Bachelor's, to even think about being considered a lawyer."

Amelia could have greatly benefited from some guidance on this issue. While she did report spending some time talking with her counselor, she also said it was hard to catch her in her office, and that it usually took about two weeks to get an appointment.

Amelia thought carefully about which schools she would like to attend and finished her junior year with a well-rounded pool of colleges to which she might apply. At the college fair, she learned about Spelman and Georgia Tech, and considered both because she had previously visited family in Atlanta and loved the area.

She also considered Loyola University and St. Xavier College. She had visited St. Xavier—a small Catholic school in the south suburbs of Chicago—and admired its beautiful campus.

Fall Senior Year: A Flurry of Applications

Amelia displayed her trademark determination when it came time to begin her college applications in the fall. Although her ACT score of 20 was two points above the average for St. Xavier, she retook the ACT twice by the end of October. Amelia knew a student could re-take the ACT twice for free, and she couldn't understand why any college-bound senior *wouldn't* try again. Amelia celebrated her eighteenth birthday by going to an open house at St. Xavier, which still remained at the top of her list.

Amelia was busy completing applications to several schools in the fall. She had already given recommendation forms to several teachers because she wanted to make sure they were done well, stating that, *"Without recommendations, your application is useless."* She finished her personal statement. She also attended several college fairs throughout the Chicago area and learned the value of talking individually with admissions representatives. At the same time, Amelia struggled to understand the financial aid process, pointing out a puzzling paradox:

> "You have to send in your application before you find out how much money you can actually get, so it's kind of like, I'm accepted but then I'm not accepted because I don't know if I could pay for it."

Amelia knew that she had to complete a FAFSA and already had her PIN. Amelia's mother helped too, tapping her social networks and asking people at work about how to finance college costs.

Winter Senior Year: Plowing Ahead Amidst Confusion

By February, Amelia had applied to so many colleges she couldn't easily remember them all. She listed 11 college applications and sent a personal statement with every one, even if it wasn't required, because she felt it demonstrated her motivation. She also sent recommendations, checked in with admissions staff, and reached out to

student representatives at most of her schools.

Yet, Amelia remained perplexed. She expressed a new interest in studying child development, but still focused on her plan to become a lawyer without really grasping the necessity of law school. In February, Amelia reported that no one at her school had asked her directly about her postsecondary plans or college applications.

Financial aid proved most vexing. Aware that they didn't understand how to complete financial aid applications, Amelia and her mother attended two financial aid workshops during Amelia's sophomore and senior years. The senior year workshop they attended at Silverstein was focused mostly on how to search and apply for independent scholarships. Despite having attended these workshops, Amelia still did not understand how to request aid from the federal government or the schools she hoped to attend. Although she said she completed the FAFSA, she also said she didn't know that filing a FAFSA required extensive tax form documentation.

Spring Senior Year: Derailed

While it is unclear whether Amelia properly completed her financial aid forms, she clearly did not receive the college financing she had hoped for. Amelia was admitted to several four-year colleges, including St. Xavier, but she didn't think she could afford to attend any of them. Her hesitation and discussion of aid suggests she didn't know the difference between federal financial aid and institutional scholarships:[9]

> "I don't know how much I'm getting for financial aid yet, because I did the FAFSA thing, and . . . some of the schools that I want to go to are not offering scholarships. I'm not really a sports person, so it's like now the schools want to give all the scholarships for sports. If I don't get a scholarship, I've got to see how much financial aid they give me."

In May, Amelia was still waiting for news of her financial aid and had not committed to attending St. Xavier. Amelia enrolled at Harold Washington City College in the fall after graduation, where in her first semester she took a mixture of noncredit and first-year courses. She found the classes very easy and said college was *"just like high school,"* but with older students.

Chapter 3: Case Study Endnotes

1   All names of students, high schools, and programs in the case studies in this report are pseudonyms.

2   In some cases, such as those of Clara and Sakaarah, revealing a student's college choice would compromise his or her anonymity. College choice is kept confidential in these cases.

3   All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college. Clara, for example, appeared to have figured out the financial aid process well enough between her winter and spring interview to leverage a strong aid package from her school, though she wasn't able to recall specific numbers.

4   Sakaarah's records indicate an ACT score of 22, but she reported receiving a 26 on at least one of her ACT attempts.

5   Though Sakaarah appears to have an excellent understanding of financial aid and the financial aid packages offered to her by different schools, it is important to note that all reports of financial aid packages in the case studies in this report are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college.

6   All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college.

7   All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college. In this case, Franklin delegated his financial aid footwork to his mother, who appeared to have the requisite understanding to effectively seek aid.

8   Amelia's records indicate a first ACT score of 16, but she ultimately reported receiving a 20 on at least one of her retakes. An ACT score of 20 would have given her access to selective colleges and universities.

9   All reports of financial aid packages in these case studies are based on student reports only and might not reflect the actual aid package offered to a student by his or her prospective college. Amelia, for example, appears not to understand the complexities of need-based vs. merit-based aid and couldn't clearly answer questions about the financial aid process, making it very difficult to ascertain what the cost of attending various colleges would truly have been for her.

Chapter 4

Interpretive Summary

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 to those students on the promise that if they 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 costs to college, 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 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 making sure that students apply to colleges that match their qualifications.

Chicago high schools currently face tremendous pressure to reform. High school educators in Chicago are being pushed to raise test scores, increase ninth grade on-track rates, decrease dropout rates, and engage students in more rigorous coursework. This report calls for another dimension of high school reform and could be interpreted as adding a new agenda item on an already full list. But 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 and one that will fundamentally support the larger goals of high school reform. How do we get students to work harder and raise their course performance expectations? One critical step may be connecting high school to the future. We know that making this connection matters for course performance. In a recent CCSR report, Elaine M. Allensworth and John Q. Easton found that the extent to which ninth graders in a school reported that the work they were doing in high school was preparing them for the future was one of the most important predictors of ninth grade course absences, course failures, and GPA.[75]

At a more basic level, high schools cannot ask students to work harder and set high expectations for themselves if they do not aspire to postsecondary experiences that demand high performance. As we saw in the previous chapter, too many CPS students enroll in colleges that are less selective than they are qualified to attend. This pattern of college enrollment suggests that many CPS graduates could have actually worked less in high school, given the colleges they ultimately attend. True, well-prepared students will face higher probabilities of graduating than their less-prepared peers who attend the same institution. But, we also know that college choice matters, particularly for the most qualified students. Institutional graduation rates vary greatly, even among institutions of similar selectivity. In addition, research by the Illinois Education Research Council, for example, finds that students are more likely to graduate from colleges with higher levels of selectivity, even when they have lower qualifications than their classmates.[76] The pattern of college attendance we observe in Chicago, where too many students attend colleges with lower levels of selectivity than they are qualified to attend, is not a pattern that sets a high bar for students, pushes them to excel, and ultimately increases their chances of earning a college degree. In summation, the patterns of mismatch we observed in the previous chapter send precisely the wrong message to students. Any effort to improve achievement must be accompanied by an equivalent emphasis on guidance and the development of normative environments and support structures that make achievement pay off. We have found strong evidence in this report that high schools matter. When students attend high schools that have strong college-going cultures with high expectations and a focus on college preparation, students are more likely to apply to and enroll in four-year colleges and colleges that

demand higher levels of qualifications. Thus, strong guidance programs and strong college norms may be both a precursor to and an essential support for raising achievement.

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.[77] While this is clearly important for all students, it is particularly important for Latino students. Latino students show the greatest gap between their college aspirations and college enrollment. We find that qualifications and family background do not explain Latino students' lower levels of enrollment in four-year colleges. Rather, we can explain the lower rates of Latino students versus their non-Latino counterparts by the fact that Latino students who aspire to complete a four-year degree in CPS simply do not plan to attend and do not apply to four-year colleges. Latino CPS students are, however, much more likely to take these steps when they attend high schools with strong college-going cultures and have strong connections to teachers and peer groups that support college going.

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. The question is: What will it take to support students in this process? We would like to highlight three main implications of our findings to assist schools as they take on the task of helping students attain their college aspirations.

1. Special attention must be paid to structuring the college search and application process during junior and senior years; early awareness can only take you so far.

Many discussions about college access for urban students start with the contention that orientating students toward college cannot wait until the end of high school. Many college orientation programs such as GEAR UP focus on this early awareness approach and attempt to raise students' awareness about college, orient students and their families towards an interest in postsecondary education, and encourage students to focus on their academic preparation. This argument is not without merit. Letting students know what grades and coursework they will need to have access to and be successful at a four-year college is critical. Early awareness of the concepts and components of college search and college choice are also important. Many of the students we presented in the case studies had a very limited understanding of the process by which they could begin a college search and finance a college education.

What is clear, however, is that the process of building students' and their families' orientation toward college must culminate in an intensive and structured effort at the end of high school to support students in effectively navigating the college search and application process. There is a prevailing belief that, if educators could just start early and convince students and parents that a college education is a worthwhile goal, the rest of the problems of postsecondary planning will solve themselves: essentially, that this is ultimately a problem of orientation. We have demonstrated in this report the limitations of this approach. Many CPS students with strong orientations toward college and strong qualifications still struggle. They lack the knowledge of how to begin thinking about what colleges they should

"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. It is particularly important for Latino students, who show the greatest gap between their college aspirations and college enrollment."

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apply to, how to make choices among colleges, and often miss important steps in the college application and financial aid processes. Unfortunately, the college application process occurs in a very compact time frame and early awareness will only get students so far. In a matter of mere months during their senior year, students must finalize their college lists, complete their college applications, undertake the entire process of financial aid, and make their college choices. Students armed with information will have an easier time navigating this road, but no amount of information can actually decrease the workload.

As we noted in Chapter 2, getting prepared for college is a process that takes students' entire elementary and high school careers, but the tasks of translating qualification into enrollment—finding and applying to colleges, applying for financial aid, getting accepted and choosing a college—happens in a very short time line with very real deadlines. This reality calls for high schools to pay careful attention to how they structure support in the junior and senior year. Who is talking to students about making their college lists and checking in on their college search? Who is checking that students and their families understand the financial aid system and the costs and benefits of different college options? Who is monitoring whether students are applying to multiple colleges, and making sure that they have the time and support to write effective applications? Who is making sure that students have completed their FAFSAs in a timely fashion? These and many other detailed questions are ultimately the questions high school educators must grapple with as they work to move beyond general approaches that give students an orientation to college toward a structured system that meets the needs of first-generation and low-income college students. This report has shown that when schools are organized around these questions, it matters. In both of the previous chapters, we

found that students were more likely to take the steps to apply to and enroll in four-year colleges when they attended a school where a high proportion of students were systematically engaged in the college application and financial aid processes, as measured both by the percentage of students applying to multiple colleges and the percentage of students completing their FAFSA.

2. Teachers and counselors have a significant impact on whether more marginally qualified students go to four-year colleges and whether more highly qualified students enroll in a match college. High schools must work to create strong college-going cultures.

While we emphasize the importance of paying attention to whether students effectively participate in the college search and application process senior year, creating an orientation for college and readiness for these critical activities must occur over four years and requires a strong college-going climate. How do schools create a strong college-going climate? Most schools try to do this with what we term school-wide "college talk" and "college activities." Many schools in the city have college fairs, assemblies where they talk about college and give information to students, and activities such as college tours. This may be an important component of any school-wide effort, but it may not be the most effective approach to creating a college culture in high schools in which many students lack basic information and support about how to begin college search and participate in the college application process. Barbara Schneider, in her recent monograph, *Forming a College-going Community in U.S. Public High Schools* emphasizes that "especially for minority students, the foundation of a college-going community is initiated, formed and reinforced in the context of the high school classroom." It begins with individual relationships—what Schneider terms relational trust. As Schneider argues:

> "The most fundamental element of relational trust is advancing the best interest of the students, including their academic and social development. In the high school, this translates into shared goals among the staff that all students can go to college, and it is their personal responsibility to try and make that happen. . . . Today, more parents of adolescents, even if they have limited resources or have never been to college, expect that their teenagers will attend college. Similarly, an overwhelming majority of teenagers expects to attend college. This expectation is inconsistent among high school teachers. To help promote a consistent message, all teachers in a high school should explicitly articulate the expectation that all students will attend postsecondary school and provide resources and opportunities to make that happen."

The findings in this report are in many ways a dramatic endorsement of Schneider's argument. We have demonstrated that in Chicago many students and their parents aspire to attain a college degree but often lack access to the information, what Schneider terms the "knowledge base," they will need to translate aspirations into college enrollment. But, we have also demonstrated that which high school students attend matters in whether they will have access to the expectations, resources, and supports needed to translate their aspirations into readiness and enrollment. To restate our findings, the most significant predictor of whether students took each of the steps to enroll in a four-year college was teachers' reports of the extent to which they and their colleagues were working to create the college-going culture that Schneider describes—where teachers expected students to go to college, worked hard to prepare students, and worked to provide the information, resources and support students needed to fill in their knowledge gap. Moreover, the focus of these efforts must differ by students' qualifications. For students with more marginal qualifications, attending schools with strong college-going cultures and traditions made it much more likely that they would apply to, get accepted to, and attend four-year colleges. Thus,

strong college expectations, norms, and supports cannot be reserved for the top students in the school or students in honors and Advanced Placement classes. Without such strong expectations and supports schoolwide, students who are eligible to attend a four-year college but who may not be as highly qualified are at risk of not enrolling in a four-year college. The most highly qualified students in high schools are very likely to enroll in a four-year college. For these top students, our findings on college match suggest that the central task is building a climate of relationships and trust so that teachers and counselors are seen as trusted advisors and mentors for students and their parents. As Schneider argues:

> "Parents are an important asset in the college process, primarily by reinforcing the message to their children about the value of attending college. While educational expectations are imperative, matching students' abilities and interests with a college program is becoming increasingly complex and requires a sophisticated knowledge base. This is a knowledge base that many parents, especially those who never attended college, do not have… They may believe that all colleges are similar and that it does not matter where one attends, even if their student has special talents or skills. This message is passed on to their children, who then articulate similar beliefs. In these instances, the school becomes a critical player in the college-going process."

Thus, she suggests that the task for high schools educators is more than convincing students and their parents that they should go to college. She argues that their task is to provide the relationships and supports that students need to understand the importance of college choice and the expert guidance on how to engage in that process. Clearly, this cannot wait until senior year but requires engaging families over four years in developing a concept of college choice, an understanding of what different colleges offer, and an understanding of the benefits of high qualifications and working hard in high school.

3. Rising college costs may be a significant barrier, but lack of knowledge of real college costs and effective participation in FAFSA should not be.

CPS educators cannot solve the problem of rising costs to college, but CPS can work to decrease the barriers CPS students face in understanding college costs and finance. Throughout this report, we have demonstrated the multiple ways in which the lack of knowledge about college costs and lack of effective participation in applying for financial aid become significant barriers to CPS students. First, we found that many students limit their college search because of what has been termed "sticker shock," making decisions about whether to go to a four-year college on the basis of the price tag of college rather than what would be expected to pay after financial aid. Second, many students limit their college options and encounter barriers to enrollment because they simply do not complete their FAFSAs or apply so late that they minimize the financial aid that they can obtain. This is a national problem. As we describe in Chapter 2, many low-income students across the nation either fail to file a FAFSA or file late. There is growing recognition that the federal financial aid system is so complicated that it creates significant barriers for students.

Beginning last year, CPS initiated a new online tracking system that provides significant resources to schools to manage this problem. School staff can access an online FAFSA tracking system that shows them whether a student has filed a FAFSA, what grants the student might be eligible for, and whether the FAFSA application is complete. This is a significant step forward but it is only a first step. Schools must organize to use these data effectively. Schools must also 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 that students may be eligible for.

Getting students to fill out their FAFSA may make important differences in their college options and enrollment, but we do not know what actual difference it may make. We find strong associations between students' reports of filing their FAFSA and their college enrollment outcomes but these findings are simply associations. We do not know if students do not complete the FAFSA because of a misunderstanding of financial aid, a lack of information about deadlines and procedures, problems that students are having in filling out the forms, or whether other nonbureaucratic and more systematic barriers make it difficult for families to file FAFSAs. We also do not know if not filing a FAFSA is a broader indication of students' uncertainty about their college choice. Knowing that lack of FAFSA completion is associated with lower enrollment does not tell us why students are encountering barriers and whether simply getting students to file a form will be enough. Thus, schools must begin to address the problem with little guidance of exactly how to do so and what the problem really is. In this context, our findings on FAFSA and the new CPS system would seem to call for easy fixes to a problem when in fact this problem may be quite complex and require a significant amount of attention and work.

At the beginning of this interpretative summary, we argued that building a strong college culture may be an essential component of high school reform. Students may work harder in high school and value achievement if they believe it will pay off in the future with regards to the outcome they care about—a college degree. But this task is not an easy one. We have highlighted 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 the college search and application process: (1) Building strong systems of support around the college search and application process in junior and senior year; (2) creating strong college-going cultures that set norms for college attendance and that provide information, relationships, and access to concrete supports and expert knowledge to build bridges to the future; and (3) providing access to information, guidance, and concrete support in obtaining financial aid and understanding how to make colleges more affordable and the costs of different college options.

It is also important to recognize that high schools cannot do these three things alone. Colleges have important roles to play in closing these information

gaps and building strong systems of support. Indeed, this report raises the question: What responsibility does higher education have to "reach back" into high schools and work to bridge the information and access gap that low-income and first-generation college-goers face? Most colleges espouse a belief that there is an inherent value in having a diverse student body. There is also a growing recognition that colleges must pay attention to the barriers caused by rising college costs and an increasingly competitive college admissions environment. The issues raised in this report suggest that addressing these barriers will require that colleges make significant investments in targeting, recruiting, and supporting low-income and first-generation students. It will require partnering with high school districts and building new systems for the postsecondary transition. The scope of the demands that this will require of higher education raises a serious policy question: What incentives and disincentives are there currently for institutions of higher education to make these considerable investments in building a diverse student body?

Meeting the challenge presented by the rising aspirations of today's students requires creating new systems and capacities at both the high school and postsecondary level. The rising aspirations of urban students demands that high school educators see themselves as playing a new and important role in students' lives. Why would educators have difficulty meeting those expectations? One reason is that many teachers and counselors may not, in fact, feel that they are capable of providing expert advice. Other studies have found that teachers are often reluctant to provide concrete information and advice on college, because they feel they know little about college admissions, financial aid, college costs, and often

themselves have a great deal of misinformation. Teachers seldom receive training on how to guide students on the road to college. Too often, teachers must rely on the same information (i.e., flyers and announcements) that students get or hope that their personal experience still applies to today's college search. Thus, solving the information gap for students must first begin by building strong guidance, professional development, and information systems within high schools so that teachers and counselors are able to learn what they need to know to best meet the needs of their students.

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 level? The problems outlined in this report are complex, and we have provided no easy list of solutions. The scope of the problem 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 schools, teachers and counselors, 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 taken 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 that the analysis and data provided in this report provide a useful tool to both policymakers, educators, and the larger community to begin this work.

"Meeting the challenge presented by the rising aspirations of today's students requires creating new systems and capacities at both the high school and postsecondary level. The rising aspirations of urban students demands that high school educators see themselves as playing a new and important role in students' lives."

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Appendix A

Description of Selectivity Ratings Used in this Report

Throughout this report, we categorize colleges by their selectivity using categories that are based on the 2005 *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*. This college ranking system rates four-year colleges on the academic qualifications of the students who attend the college (e.g., ACT or SAT scores, GPA, and class rank), as well as on the percentage of applicants who are accepted. In our analysis, we grouped four-year colleges into four separate groups based on Barron's ratings: nonselective four-year colleges, somewhat selective four-year colleges, selective four-year colleges, and very selective four-year colleges. This top category, very selective, combines Barron's two top categories ("most competitive" and "highly competitive").

The nonselective category combines Barron's "less competitive" and "noncompetitive" categories.

Nonselective colleges in Illinois include Northeastern Illinois University, DeVry University, Columbia College, and Roosevelt University. Somewhat selective colleges include several large public universities, such as the University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago State University, Northern Illinois University, and Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Selective colleges in Illinois include DePaul University and Loyola University. Finally, very selective colleges in Illinois include the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Chicago, and Northwestern University. To provide a broader national context, the table on the next page presents examples of colleges from our selectivity categories for various regions of the United States.

Ratings Grouping Used in This Report	Barron's Ratings	Barron's Definition	Percent of 2005 CPS College-Goers Attending School in Category (N=7,559)
Very Selective	Most Competitive	Admit fewer than 1/3 of applicants. Average freshman: top 10%–20% of high school class; GPA of A or B+; median ACT of 29 or higher.	2.2%
	Highly Competitive	Admit 1/3 to 1/2 of applicants. Average freshman: top 20%–35% of high school class; GPA of B+ or B; median ACT of 27 or 28.	7.8%
Selective	Very Competitive	Admit 1/2 to 3/4 of applicants. Average freshman: top 35%–50% of high school class; GPA of no less than a B-; median ACT between 24 and 26.	10.2%
Somewhat Selective	Competitive	Admit 75 to 85% of applicants. Average freshman: top 50%–65% of high school class; GPA mostly B-, with some C or C+; median ACT between 21 and 23.	31.9%
Nonselective	Less Competitive	Admit 85% or more of applicants. Average freshman: top 65% of high school class; GPA below a C; median ACT below 21.	6.9%
	Noncompetitive	Students must have graduated from an accredited high school with minimum high school requirements. Colleges with higher than a 98% admittance rate are automatically in this category. Some colleges have no requirements for state residents but some requirements for out-of-state residents. Some colleges require students to take placement examinations to place into college-level courses.	6.8%
Other Four-Year College	Not Rated by Barron's	Some four-year colleges, often proprietary schools, were not rated by Barron's.	2.4%
Two-Year College	Not Rated by Barron's	All have open enrollment. Students usually must take placement examination to place into credit-bearing courses. Most offer associate's degrees and certificate programs.	31.3%
Special	Not Rated by Barron's	These colleges have specialized programs of study and/or are professional schools of art, music, nursing, and other disciplines. Admission usually requires evidence of talent or special interest. Colleges that serve working adults are also assigned to this level.	0.3%

Example Colleges by Selectivity	Illinois	Midwest, Outside Illinois	Northeast	South	West
Nonselective	Northeastern Illinois University	University of Akron	City University of New York (Staten Island)	University of Texas (San Antonio)	California State University (Northridge)
Somewhat Selective	Chicago State University	University of Nebraska (Lincoln)	University of Massachusetts (Amherst)	Spelman College	California State University (Long Beach)
Selective	DePaul University	Valparaiso University	Hofstra University	University of Georgia	Pepperdine University
Very Selective	Northwestern University	University of Notre Dame	Boston University	Duke University	Scripps College

Appendix B

Data Used in this Report

This report draws on two main sources of data: (1) a quantitative dataset that tracks 2005 CPS seniors through the application and enrollment process and (2) a qualitative longitudinal study that has been following 105 Chicago students (class of 2006) in three schools from eleventh grade (spring 2005) to two years after graduation from high school (winter 2007).

(a) Quantitative Data

In order to track students through the application and enrollment process, we assembled a dataset using the 2005 CCSR senior survey, the 2005 CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire (SEQ), and college tracking data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). To determine students' academic credentials, our dataset included high school transcript and ACT score data from CCSR's data archive. Each source of data is described below.

In the spring of 2005, CCSR senior surveys were sent to 82 high schools, and approximately 54 percent of students in these schools completed the surveys. Students were asked: "What is the highest level of education you plan to complete?" "What is your primary plan for next fall?" Those who said they planned to continue their education were asked: "What type of school will you attend next fall?" These three questions allowed us to identify students who aspired to complete a four-year degree and whether those same students planned to attend a four-year college immediately after graduation from high school.

Second, since 2004, CPS graduating seniors have completed the online SEQ at the end of the school year. In 2005, the response rate was 93 percent. The SEQ asks students detailed questions about what they plan to do after high school graduation, what colleges they applied to, whether they were accepted to college, and which college they plan to attend. The SEQ data allows us then to identify whether students are planning to continue their education, the number of colleges they applied to, whether they applied to a four-year college, whether they reported completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and whether they were accepted into a four-year college.

Finally, we used NSC data to identify whether graduates enroll in college in the fall after graduation and the kinds of colleges they attend. NSC is a non-profit corporation that began in 1993 to assist higher education institutions in verifying enrollment and degree completion. In 2004, NSC expanded its services to high school districts through its new program, "Success Outcomes." CPS is the first major urban school district to participate in this program and produce reports on its graduates. In 2005, more than 2,800 colleges participated in NSC's enrollment verification program, covering 91 percent of postsecondary enrollment in the United States. At present, most Illinois colleges participate in NSC's enrollment verification program. However, because not all colleges attended by CPS graduates participate in the NSC program, we adjusted our enrollment numbers for this undercount (see Appendix C for how we adjusted our enrollment count). Beginning with the class of 2004, the CPS Department of Postsecondary Education and Student Development used this data to publicly report the college enrollment rates of CPS graduates.

(b) Quantitative Samples

In the quantitative analysis in this report, we use four samples that draw on the data sources described above. These four samples include: (1) the "Potholes Sample," (2) the "Potholes Analytic Sample," (3) the "Match Sample," and (4) the "Match Analytic Sample." The descriptive statistics in Chapter 2 use the Potholes Sample. This sample only includes students for whom we have all sources of data and who responded to the questions we used to determine whether they had completed steps on the road to college (see table below). We also exclude graduates of alternative high schools and students who were enrolled in special education, reducing our sample to 6,212. In analyses that use qualifications, we exclude students enrolled in charter high schools because CCSR does not have their high school transcript data, which is a key part of determining the type of college to which they have access. Our final Potholes Sample is further limited to students who aspired to attain at least a four-year degree. Students in the Potholes Sample have higher ACT scores and unweighted GPAs than their classmates, suggesting that the results in this report are optimistic.

The Potholes Analytic Sample is a subset of the Potholes Sample. We use the Potholes Analytic Sample when we examine the predictors of taking each step on the road to college. Because we expect that selective enrollment high schools have a much stronger college orientation than other high schools, we have excluded graduates from these high schools. In addition, we do not include students with low levels of qualifications (access only to two-year colleges) because the primary reason why these students do not enroll in a four-year college is likely to be poor qualifications. While students in the Potholes Analytic Sample have higher GPAs, their ACT scores are lower than students in the Potholes Sample because selective enrollment students are excluded from this sample.

The Match Sample and Match Analytic Sample are very similar to the Potholes Sample and Potholes Analytic Sample, except they include an additional filter. We use these two samples in Chapter 3: the Match Sample in the descriptive statistics, and the Match Analytic Sample in the analysis of the predictors of students enrolling in a match college. The Match Sample and the Match Analytic Sample only include students who said they planned to continue their education in the SEQ. Like the Potholes Analytic Sample, the Match Analytic Sample does not include graduates of selective enrollment high schools and students who only had access to two-year colleges.

In descriptive analyses that use the Potholes Sample or the Match Sample, the bar charts figures use horizontal bars. In the multivariate analyses that use the Potholes Analytic Sample or the Match Analytic Sample, figures use vertical bar charts.

Samples Used in this Report	N	ACT	GPA (unweighted)
All CPS 2005 graduates	17,672	17.0	2.25
Students in all datasets with information on each step towards college enrollment	6,890	17.7	2.46
Students in all datasets with information on each step towards college enrollment, not in special education or alternative schools	6,212	18.1	2.49
Potholes Sample: Students in all datasets with information on each step towards college enrollment, not in special education or alternative schools, and aspire to complete at least a four-year degree	5,194	18.8	2.57
Potholes Analytic Sample: Students in Potholes Sample who are not graduates of selective enrollment high schools and who have access to at least a nonselective four-year college	3,138	18.0	2.77
Match Sample: Students in Potholes Sample who also said in the SEQ they planned to continue their education	4,367	18.9	2.63
Match Analytic Sample: Students in Match Sample who are not graduates of selective enrollment high schools and who have access to at least a nonselective four-year college	2,691	18.1	2.79

(c) Qualitative Data

Case studies and qualitative analysis presented in this report are drawn from a qualitative sample of 105 students in the Chicago Public Schools who graduated in 2006. We recruited students as juniors from three CPS high schools (see *What a Strong College Culture Looks Like*, p. 62). The qualitative data used in this report are primarily based on student interviews. Students were interviewed five times throughout their junior and senior years. Students were interviewed twice during spring of junior year, once before and once after taking the ACT. Students were also interviewed three times during senior year with careful consideration to the suggested time frame for completing college applications: once in October/November, when students are encouraged to be diligently working on college applications; once in February, when experts suggest that students should be finished with college applications and moving on to financial aid; and finally in May/June, or just before graduation, when students should have made a final decision about the fall. On average, interviews were completed with 95 percent of the sample at each of the five interview cycles. Interviews were then transcribed and coded and validated for students' participation in the college search, preparation, application, selection, and finance processes. Though analysis here includes only high school data, interviews continued into students' second year after graduation.

The case studies and qualitative analyses also draw on additional sources of data, including classroom observations, teacher interviews, and teachers' assessments of student course performance and college readiness. The teacher comments in the case studies are based on responses to open-ended questions on the teacher assessments. Finally, to paint a comprehensive picture of college-going in CPS, we use the quantitative sources of data described earlier to examine students and schools in our qualitative study.

(d) Qualitative Sample

The students in our Longitudinal Qualitative Sample roughly reflect the demographic diversity of CPS students. The qualitative sample is gender balanced (51 percent males, 49 percent females) and roughly reflects the racial/ethnic composition of CPS students (49 percent African-American, 47 percent Latino, 2 percent White/Other Ethnic [Polish], 2 percent Asian-American). Students in the sample live in different neighborhoods throughout Chicago, entered high school with a range of incoming achievement test scores, and accumulated very different qualifications for college in terms of their grades and ACT scores. Students also participated in a variety of curricular tracks throughout high school. To thoroughly understand the outcomes of high-achieving high school graduates, researchers oversampled students in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, as well as students taking honors and AP courses. Of the students in our sample, 25 percent participated in the IB program, 25 percent took honors and AP courses, and 50 percent participated in the standard curriculum. Sample retention was high; by the end of the high school interviews, only three students had declined to participate in the study.

(e) Qualitative Methods

Case studies, textual analyses, descriptions of the field work high schools, and other information from the longitudinal study presented in this report draw on a qualitative analysis of 105 student cases, each consisting of five student interviews. Each of the case studies shown in the report is representative of a subset of students identified after an intensive coding process. Cases were coded by a team of six project researchers focusing on four major themes: (1) students' process of searching for and choosing among schools of interest, paying careful attention to whether or not students considered and applied to "match" schools; (2) students' focus on academic preparation for college, such as ACT preparation, course selection, study habits, and work effort in junior and senior year courses; (3) the attention students gave to their college applications, including number of applications submitted, time line for submission, and effort expended on supplementary application materials; and (4) students' understanding of and participation in college finance activities, including their and their families' saving for college, applying for scholarships, filing the FAFSA, and applying for financial aid at their colleges of interest.

Each case went through an extensive process of coding and validation. Cases were coded by one researcher and then validated by a second researcher. Any discrepancies in coding between the two researchers were reconciled as a group by the qualitative research team. Additional consideration was given to students' level of support for postsecondary planning, as well as to students' social background, including experience of college-going in their families. Students' academic records were used to determine their qualifications and level of college access using the same rubric used in the quantitative analysis and then coded for students' trajectories on the road to college. Students' outcomes were determined first through their interview responses and were then verified with data from the SEQ and NSC datasets used in the quantitative analysis.

Appendix C

Adjusting for Missing NSC Data

When using data from the NSC, we had to look more closely at the students not enrolled in college because we did not know if these students were in fact enrolled in college but were attending colleges that did not share enrollment data with the NSC. To do so, we first used the NSC website to obtain the list of schools participating in NSC's Enrollment Verification program and to determine when those schools began participating. Next, we used SEQ data to check students' potential for enrolling in college. We focused on a group of students who were not enrolled in college in the fall of 2005 but said they planned to continue their education in the fall. We limited this focus to students who named a college they planned to attend *and* reported being accepted into that same college. Of this group of students, we compared the name of the college the student planned to attend to the NSC participant list. We then flagged students who planned to attend colleges that were not in the NSC participant list as of January 2006. We called this group our "adjustment group."

We used two-year and four-year attrition rates for the students not missing NSC data to estimate the enrollment rates of students in the adjustment group. We determined attrition rates for students of given qualifications by looking at the rate at which students who were accepted into a four-year or two-year college enrolled in a four-year or two-year college. We then applied these attrition rates to students in the adjustment group, given their qualifications.

The majority of students for which we adjusted enrollment rates planned to attend four-year colleges (28 percent planned to attend a two-year and 72 percent planned to attend a four-year college). Of the students who planned to attend a four-year college, the majority planned to attend a proprietary college or a college not rated by Barron's.

Where Students Missing NSC Data Said they Planned to Attend

College Name	N
International Academy of Design and Technology	118
Northwestern Business College	54
Westwood College of Technology	47
East-West University	44
Universal Technical Institute	40
Illinois Institute of Art	34
Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago	32
Fox College	24
Fisk University	16
Harrington Institute of Interior Design	16
American Academy of Art	14
Tougaloo College	10
Other Colleges	126

Appendix D:
Variables Used in this Analysis

School-Level Variables

College-Going Culture in the School

Percentage of Prior Graduates Attending a Four-Year College: The percentage of 2004 graduates, the prior cohort, who enrolled in a four-year college after high school based on NSC data.

Percentage of Prior Graduates Who Completed the FAFSA: The percentage of 2004 graduates, the prior cohort, in the school who reported on the 2004 CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire that they had completed the FAFSA.

Percentage of Prior Graduates Who Applied to Three or More Schools: The percentage of 2004 graduates in the school who reported on the 2004 CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire that they had applied to three or more schools.

Teachers' Assessment of the College Climate in their School: Teacher reports from the 2005 CCSR teacher survey of the overall expectations and press for college in the school environment. Teachers were asked the extent to which they would agree (strongly disagree to strongly agree) that: (1) teachers (in this high school) expect most students to go college; (2) teachers help students plan for college outside of class time; (3) the curriculum is focused on helping students get ready for college; (3) teachers feel that it is a part of their job to prepare students to succeed in college; and (4) many of our students are planning to go to college. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis and represents the average of teacher reports in the high school.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Student-Teacher Connections: The average of graduates' reports on the 2005 CCSR senior survey of the extent to which they know at least one teacher who: (1) would be willing to give me extra help with my schoolwork if I need it; (2) would be willing to help me with a personal problem; (3) really cares about how I am doing in school; (4) knows who my friends are; (5) I could ask to write me a recommendation for a job, program, or college; (6) knows what I will be doing next year; and (7) would be willing to help me even after I graduate. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis. The student-level version of this variable is also used in some analyses.

Structured Academic Support and Guidance

Percentage of Graduates Who Found their Counselor Very Helpful: The percentage of graduates in the school who reported on the 2005 CCSR senior survey that the counselor has been very helpful in helping them plan what to do after high school.

Counselor Press for Academic Achievement: The average of graduates' reports on the 2005 CCSR senior survey of the extent to which counselors in their school: (1) helped select courses needed for work or admission to college; (2) encouraged taking AP/honors courses; (3) encouraged continuing education after high school; and (4) talked about colleges/schools that were suited to the student's interests and abilities. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis. The student-level version of this variable is also used in some analyses.

Teacher/Counselor Structured Support: The average of graduates' reports on the 2005 CCSR senior survey of the extent to which teachers or counselors helped students with the college search and application process. Students were asked the extent to which teachers or counselors: (1) encourage students to apply to several different schools; (2) talk to students about what college would be like; (3) help students fill out applications for colleges or vocational/technical schools; (4) help students find scholarships to apply for; (5) help students decide which school to attend; (6) help students plan how to pay for tuition and other expenses; and (7) help students with college application essays or personal statements. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis. The student-level version of this variable is also used in some analyses.

Student-Level Variables

Parents and Peers

Parental Press for Academic Achievement: The extent to which parents pushed student to do well in school. Students were asked the extent to which their parents/guardians: (1) encourage me to work hard in school; (2) talk to me about how I am doing in my classes; (3) encourage me to continue my education after high school; (4) talk to me about what I am studying in class; (5) talk to me about my homework assignments; (6) help me select courses that will prepare me for college or work; and (7) push me to take the steps I need to make my plans happen. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis.

Parent/Guardian Structured Support: The extent to which parents helped student in the college search and application process. Students reported the extent to which their parents/guardians: (1) encourage the student to apply to several different schools; (2) talk to the student about what college would be like; (3) help the student fill out applications for colleges or vocational/technical schools; (4) help the student find scholarships to apply for; (5) help the student decide which school to attend; (6) discuss with the student how much tuition she can afford; and (7) help the student with college application essays or personal statements. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis.

Peer Support for Academic Achievement: The extent to which peers provided support for academic success. Students were asked the extent to which their friends: (1) try hard in school; (2) discuss class activities; (3) help each other prepare for tests; (4) think it is important to do well in school; (5) help each other with homework assignments; and (6) think it is important to attend every class. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis.

School Support

Student-Teacher Connections: The extent to which student had a teacher she felt personally and academically connected to. Student reports of the extent to which they know at least one teacher who: (1) would be willing to give me extra help with my school work if I need it; (2) would be willing to help me with a personal problem; (3) really cares about how I am doing in school; (4) knows who my friends are; (5) I could ask to write me a recommendation for a job, program or college; (6) knows what I will be doing next year; and (7) would be willing to help me even after I graduate. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis. The school average of this variable is also used in some analyses.

Counselor Press for Academic Achievement: The extent to which student said her counselor: (1) helped select courses needed for work or admission to college; (2) encouraged taking AP/honors courses; (3) encouraged continuing education after high school; and (4) talked about college/schools that were suited to the student's interests and abilities. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis. The school average of this variable is also used in some analyses.

Teacher Press for Academic Achievement: The extent to which student said her teachers: (1) helped select courses needed for work or admission to college; (2) encouraged taking AP/honors courses; (3) encouraged continuing education after high school; and (4) talked about college/schools that were suited to the student's interests and abilities. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis.

Teacher/Counselor Structured Support: The extent to which teachers or counselors helped student with her college search and application process. Student reports of the extent to which a teacher or counselor has: (1) encouraged the student to apply to several different schools; (2) talked to the student about what college would be like; (3) helped the student fill out applications for colleges or vocational/technical schools; (4) helped the student find scholarships to apply for; (5) helped the student decide which school to attend; (6) helped the student plan how to pay for tuition and other expenses; and (7) helped the student with college application essays or personal statements. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis. The school average of this variable is also used in some analyses.

Discussions on College Planning: Student reports of the extent to which she received information on postsecondary education from someone at school. Students were asked the extent to which someone at school has discussed: (1) different admissions requirements of community colleges vs. four-year colleges; (2) different admissions requirements among four-year colleges; (3) how to decide which college to attend; (4) the likelihood of being accepted at different types of schools; (5) ACT/SAT scores needed to get into colleges; (6) opportunities to attend out-of-state schools; (7) readiness for college-level coursework; (8) the kind of study skills needed in college or vocational/technical school; and (9) how to pay for college. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis.

Importance of High School for the Future: The extent to which student felt her high school academic experience is important for her future. Students were asked the extent to which they agree that: (1) my classes give me useful preparation for what I plan to do in life; (2) high school teaches me valuable skills; (3) working hard in high school matters for success in the work force; (4) what we learn in class is necessary for success in the future; and (5) I'm getting a good education at my school. The measure is constructed using Rasch rating scale analysis.

Student Preparation for College

Participated in Activity at School: Student reports on the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey at least weekly participation in school clubs or after-school activities (like student council, ethnic/cultural clubs, newspaper, drama, or After School Matters).

Applied to Three to Five Schools/Applied to Six or More Schools: Student reports on the 2005 CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire of the number of applications completed.

Completed the FAFSA: Student reported on the 2005 CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire completing the FAFSA.

Attended a College Fair: Student reported on the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey attending a college fair while in high school.

Used a College Guidebook: Student reported on the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey using college guidebooks (online or print) while in high school.

Took the PSAT: Student reported on the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey taking the PSAT/NMSQT (the pre-SAT) while in high school.

Followed the Steps Up to Being Accepted into a Four-Year School: Student reported on the 2005 CCSR Senior Survey and the 2005 CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire following the steps to college enrollment up to being accepted into a four-year college (aspired to a four-year degree, planned to attend a four-year college, applied to a four-year college, and was accepted into a four-year college)

Student Background

Concentration of Poverty Block (Neighborhood Poverty): Based on 2000 U.S. Census information on the block group in which students lived on two reverse-coded indicators: (1) the log of the percentage of male residents over age 18 employed one or more weeks during the year and (2) the log of the percentage of families above the poverty line.

Average Education and Occupation Status of Adults (Neighborhood SES): Based on 2000 U.S. Census information on the block group in which students lived on two indicators: (1) the log of the percentage of employed persons 16 years old or older who are managers or executives and (2) the mean level of education among people over 18.

Student Immigrant Status: Student reported on the 2005 CCSR survey if she was born in the United States and age of immigration.

Mother's Highest Level of Education: Student reported on the 2005 CCSR survey her mother/female guardian's highest level of education completed.

Mother's Nativity: Student reported on the 2005 CCSR survey if her mother/female guardian was born in the United States.

Work: Student reported on the 2005 CCSR survey how many hours per week was spent working for pay.

Appendix E

Models Used in this Report

For our analyses, we used two-level hierarchical linear modeling, with students at Level 1 and high schools at Level 2. Since all of our analyses used models with binary outcomes, our HLM analyses use a binomial sampling model with a logit link.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 models use the base equation shown on the next page. We also ran separate models by race/ethnicity (African-American, Latino, White/Other Ethnic, and Asian-American) and college access categories (access to nonselective or somewhat selective four-year college and access to selective or very selective four-year college).

In Chapter 2, we modeled four steps on the road to college and in Chapter 3, we modeled match. Step 1 models the probability of planning to attend a four-year college in the fall, given that a student wants to attain at least a four-year degree. Step 2 analyzes the probability of applying to a four-year college, given that a student wants to attain at least a four-year degree and plans to attend a four-year college in the fall. Step 3 analyzes the probability of being accepted into a four-year college, given that a student wants to attain at least a four-year degree, plans to attend a four-year college in the fall, and applied to a four-year college. Step 4 analyzes the probability of enrolling in a four-year college, given that the student wants to attain at least a four-year degree, plans to attend a four-year college in the fall, applied to a four-year college, and was accepted into a four-year college. The Match models analyze the probability a student will enroll in a school that matches or exceeds his/her qualifications, given that the student plans to continue his/her education in the fall after graduation, as reported in the SEQ.

Each of the independent variables in the models was entered grand mean centered in order to allow the intercept to represent the value for an "average" CPS graduate, except where noted otherwise. Because the analysis sample differs by the step, the meaning of the intercept also changes (e.g., the intercept in step 1 is the value of a typical CPS graduate who wants to attain at least a four-year degree). Each model used a common set of variables, although some variables were removed or added depending on the population and outcome being analyzed.

The Base Equation shows both the Level 1 and Level 2 models. The basic Level 1 model includes: neighborhood poverty; neighborhood SES; dummy variables indicating a student's race/ethnicity (African-American is the omitted category); gender (female is the omitted category); dummy variables indicating the student's nativity (born in the United States is the omitted category); dummy variables indicating the student's mother's highest level of education (students with mothers who did not graduate from high school are the omitted category); a dummy variable indicating the student's mother's nativity (mother born in the United States is the omitted category); college access categories (access to a nonselective college is the omitted category); the number of hours a student worked while in school; a dummy variable for involved in a sport; and a dummy variable for involved in an extracurricular activity. These variables are described in detail in Appendix D.

Building on the Base Equation, we included additional student predictors depending on the dependent variable in the model (see table on p. 122). Additional student variables can include dummy variables for whether a

student attended a college fair, used a college guidebook, took the PSAT, applied to three to five schools, applied to six or more schools (applied to less than three schools is the omitted category), completed the FAFSA, and followed the steps up to being accepted into a four-year school. We also included student measures of orientation for the future, parental press for academic achievement, student-teacher connections, peer support for academic achievement, teacher press for academic achievement, counselor press for academic achievement, parent/guardian structured support, teacher/counselor structured support, and discussions on college planning.

In the Level 2 model, only one school-level variable was used at a time. Predictors in the Level 2 models include: percentage of 2004 graduates enrolled in a four-year college after high school, percentage of 2004 graduates who completed their FAFSA, percentage of 2004 graduates who completed three or more college applications, percentage of 2005 graduates who reported their counselor as very helpful with making plans after high school, percentage of 2005 graduates participating in a sport, and percentage of 2005 graduates participating in an extracurricular activity.

Base Equation

Level 1

Prob (Outcome = 1) = φ_{ij}

$$\text{Log} \left[\varphi_{ij} / (1 - \varphi_{ij}) \right] = \eta_{ij}$$

$\eta_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}$ (Neighborhood Poverty)$_{ij}$ + β_{2j} (Neighborhood SES)$_{ij}$ + β_{3j}(Male)$_{ij}$ + β_{4j} (Latino)$_{ij}$ + β_{5j} (White/Other Ethnic)$_{ij}$ + β_{6j} (Asian-American)$_{ij}$ + β_{7j}(Came to the U.S. before the age of 10)$_{ij}$ + β_{8j} (Came to the U.S. after the age of 10)$_{ij}$ + β_{9j} (Mother graduated from high school)$_{ij}$ + β_{10j} (Mother attended two-year college)$_{ij}$ + β_{11j} (Mother attended four-year college or more)$_{ij}$ + β_{12j} (Mother immigrated to the U.S.)$_{ij}$ + β_{13j} (Access to a very selective college)$_{ij}$ + β_{14j} (Access to a selective college)$_{ij}$ + β_{15j} (Access to a somewhat selective college)$_{ij}$ + β_{16j} (Work)$_{ij}$ + β_{16j} (Involved in a sport)$_{ij}$ + β_{17j} (Involved in an extracurricular activity)$_{ij}$ + β_{18j} (Step predictors)$_{ij}$ + e_{ij}

Level 2

$\beta_0 = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}$ (School Level Control)$_j$ + u_j

$\beta_{pk} = \gamma_{p0}$, for p = 1 to 18

Additional Predictors Used in Each Model	Chapter 2				Chapter 3
	Step 1 Model	Step 2 Model	Step 3 Model	Step 4 Model	Match Model
Outcome					
	Planning to attend a four-year college in the fall	Applied to a four-year college	Accepted to a four-year college	Enrolled in a four-year college	Enrolled in a school with a selectivity level that matches or exceeds the student's qualifications
Filter(s) Used					
Aspired to get at least a four-year degree	X	X	X	X	X
Planned to attend a four-year college in the fall		X	X	X	
Applied to a four-year college			X	X	
Accepted into a four-year college				X	
Planned to continue their education (SEQ)					X
Student Predictors Used					
Importance of high school for the future	X				
Parental press for academic achievement	X	X	X		
Student-teacher connections	X	X	X		
Peer support for academic achievement	X	X	X		
Teacher press for academic achievement	X				
Counselor press for academic achievement	X				
Attended a college fair		X			X
Used college guidebooks		X			X
Parent/guardian structured support		X	X	X	X
Teacher/counselor structured support		X	X	X	X
Discussions on postsecondary planning		X	X	X	X
Took PSAT			X		
Applied to three to five schools			X	X	X
Applied to six or more schools			X	X	X
Completed FAFSA				X	X
Followed steps to college up to accepted to a four-year					X

Additional Predictors Used in Each Model	Chapter 2				Chapter 3
	Step 1 Model	Step 2 Model	Step 3 Model	Step 4 Model	Match Model
Outcome					
	Planning to attend a four-year college in the fall	Applied to a four-year college	Accepted to a four-year college	Enrolled in a four-year college	Enrolled in a school with a selectivity level that matches or exceeds the student's qualifications
School Predictors Used					
Percentage of 2004 graduates attending a four-year college	X	X	X	X	X
Percentage of 2004 graduates who applied to three or more schools	X	X	X	X	X
Percentage of 2004 graduates who applied to three or more schools	X	X	X	X	X
School average of student reports of student-teacher connections	X				
School average of student reports of counselor press for academic achievement	X	X			
School average of student reports of teacher/counselor structured support		X	X	X	X
School average of teachers' assessment of the college climate in the school	X	X	X	X	X
Percentage of 2005 graduates who reported their counselor as very helpful with making plans after high school	X	X	X	X	X

Appendix F

Summary of College Planning Websites

Throughout the planning and writing of this report and indeed throughout our entire study, we have attempted to consider the college planning process from a student's perspective. We asked ourselves questions such as: Do experts recommend a specific time line for conducting a college search or finishing college applications? How many colleges and universities that are considered "very selective" are there in Illinois? How does the institutional graduation rate of one college compare to that of another? Do some colleges appear to do a better job of meeting students' financial need than other colleges?

In the end, we used many online and print resources to help answer these questions—the same resources that high school students across the country use in guiding their college search. Unfortunately, though many students in our qualitative study talked about looking up information about colleges and universities online, we found very little evidence that students were using resources such as these to help guide their college search. Here, we provide a list of the online and print college planning tools we used to answer our own questions throughout the preparation of this report. This list is by no means exhaustive, and our intent is not to endorse one resource over another. Rather, we wish to provide some context for how we have thought about the transition to college. We also hope that any students, teachers, counselors, or parents who read this report might find these resources helpful in answering some of their own questions.

CPS Postsecondary/Choose Your Future

The CPS Department of Postsecondary Education and Student Development has developed an extremely user-friendly website (chooseyourfuture.org) for students, focusing on student-oriented postsecondary planning. It includes information on college preparation, college choice, and financial aid, and houses many different tools designed to encourage students to start intentionally planning and preparing for their lives after high school, starting in ninth grade or even earlier. This website can also be accessed via postsecondary.cps.k12.il.us, and there are similar websites at collegedata.com and collegezone.com.

College Board

Organizations like College Board (collegeboard.com) and Peterson's (petersons.com) have designed websites that provide very detailed information on specific colleges—virtually every college and university in the United States, including many two-year schools and technical colleges. The college profiles on College Board cover a wide range of topics, including basic facts (location, institution type, degrees offered, accreditation, etc.); admissions info (requirements, composition of freshman class, deadlines, etc.); student life (sports, activities, housing, etc.); AP credit guidelines; and cost and financial aid (tuition and fees, necessary financial aid forms, and statistics on the proportion of students who have need, have their need met, and have their need fully met). Students can also use a "matchmaker" tool to search for a college according to criteria they identify as important.

Education Trust/College Results Online

Education Trust is committed to raising awareness of the college graduation gap that occurs between students of differing races/ethnicities, and, as a part of that mission, provides detailed information on institutional graduation rates for the vast majority of four-year colleges in the United States. Their College Results Online resource (collegeresults.org) allows users to look up graduation rates at most four-year colleges across the country, as well as find that information disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender. It also constructs comparison groups for each school in its database, so users can have some frame of reference for whether that school is considered "high" or "low" in comparison to other similar schools.

Common Application

Though traditionally a tool used by small, liberal arts colleges across the nation, an ever-increasing number of schools use the Common Application (commonapp.org) in their admissions. Some use only the Common Application, some use the Common Application as an alternative to their own application, and many use the Common Application along with an "application supplement." Primarily, this is a resource meant to help students who are applying to a large number of colleges streamline their application process, to some degree. Unfortunately, many popular colleges in the Chicago area do *not* use the Common Application, but the Common Application could be a good place for students to start learning more about small colleges, and perhaps identify a few small colleges to which they might apply, without adding tremendously to the already intense workload of applying to college.

Fastweb

Fastweb is a popular website (fastweb.com) for searching for scholarships. Students can create a profile, and Fastweb sends them applications for scholarships for which they appear to be qualified to apply. Applying for small scholarships like this (they're traditionally in the range of $200–$2,000 per scholarship) is very time consuming. The core part of financial aid depends on submitting a FAFSA, and scholarships should only be used to supplement other financial aid.

Print Resources

Some tools are unavailable online but can be found in printed form. This is especially true of college ranking indices that are released yearly, such as:

- *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges:* Gives profiles of colleges and universities throughout the country. Barron's puts schools into the categories from which we've developed our "selectivity" rankings.

- "America's Best Colleges" in *U.S. News & World Report*

- The *Newsweek*/Kaplan rankings of America's 25 "Hot Schools"

College Search Tips

In using these websites to provide a context for college planning, we found some consistently recommended steps for college search. Specifically, these websites encourage students to find a college that is a good "fit" by following the steps listed below.[1]

Steps for Finding a Successful College Fit

1. In junior year, students should begin creating and *prioritizing* a list of important criteria they want in a college *before* any college search occurs. Criteria include location, size of school, graduation rates, student organizations available, and qualifications. Don't rush this step—students should allow themselves plenty of time to come up with their list. Once this is complete, students can then begin researching colleges and universities that fit these criteria. Students should be realistic when considering schools, but students should not dismiss a school just because it is above their qualifications.

2. Once students have generated a list of possible colleges, the next step is to narrow down that list to five to eight schools where they will apply, keeping their options open. To make this decision, students should carefully consider each school next to their list of priorities. Campus visits are ideal for gaining insight into how well the college may or may not fit the student. Also, students are advised to talk with teachers, counselors, family, and friends; but students should always verify information that they receive.

3. In the fall of senior year, students should begin applying to colleges and prioritizing their final list of schools by first choice and which schools best match their qualifications. Students should be thorough—submitting *all* necessary application materials is crucial for college acceptance.

4. Students can submit their FAFSA beginning January 1, and they should do so as soon as possible to receive government aid. Students should also apply for institutional financial aid by the priority filing dates (as early February for some schools) to ensure the best financial aid package possible from each school. Several financial aid packages will allow students to have a choice between colleges—another reason why it is important to complete several applications.

5. By spring of senior year, students begin to receive college acceptance letters and financial aid packages—time to make a final decision. Students should revisit their list of priorities, compare financial aid packages, schedule one more or college visits, and choose a school where they can thrive.

Endnotes

Introduction

1 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2004).
2 In 2002, 66 percent of tenth-graders in the lowest quartile of socioeconomic status expected to attain a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 37 percent in 1990 and 22 percent in 1980. Among racial/ethnic minority students, 77 percent of African-American tenth-graders and 73 percent of Latino tenth-graders expected to attain a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 59 percent and 47 percent in 1990, and 41 percent and 33 percent in 1980, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).
3 Hecker (2005).

Chapter 1

4 McDonough (1997); Cabrera and La Nasa (2000a); Cabrera and La Nasa (2000b); Bloom (2007).
5 Cabrera and La Nasa (2001b); Kirst and Venezia (2004); Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth (2006).
6 Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2002).
7 College Board (2007).
8 The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006).
9 St. John (1990); Dynarski (2003); Kane (2003); Bettinger (2004); Institute for High Education Policy (2006).
10 Adelman (1999); Education Commission of the States (2000); National Research Council (2000); American Diploma Project (2004); Klopfenstein (2004); American Diploma Project (2005); Center for Best Practices (2005a); Center for Best Practices (2005b); Adelman (2006).
11 McDonough (1997); Plank and Jordan (2001); Avery and Kane (2004); Kirst and Venezia (2004).
12 Kirst and Venezia (2004).
13 McDonough (1997); Plank and Jordan (2001); Avery and Kane (2004); Kirst and Venezia (2004).
14 McDonough (1997); Kohn (1999); Schneider and Stevenson (1999); Cabrera and La Nasa (2000a); Rosenbaum (2001); Stanton-Salazar (2001); Wimberly (2002); Gonzalez, Stoner, and Jovel (2003); Howard (2003).
15 For example, McDonough (1997) and Perna (2000) use Coleman's (1988) conceptualization of social capital. They and others have also framed these barriers as a deficit in cultural capital. See also Bourdieu and Passerson (1977); DiMaggio (1982); Lareau (1987); Farkas, Sheehan, Grobe, and Shuan (1990); Lareau and Weininger (2003).

16 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2001); American Diploma Project (2004); Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance (2006).
17 Students who are classified a "White" in their school records come from a wide range of backgrounds. Many are immigrants from countries as diverse as Iran, Germany, and Pakistan. For this reason, we use the term "White/Other Ethnic" throughout this report.
18 Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth (2006).
19 These variables were derived by geo-coding students' addresses and connecting them to the characteristics of the census block in which they live. The census variables are standardized to compare the relative characteristics of students' neighborhood across groups. See Appendix D for details about these variables.
20 Bloom (2007).
21 Kao and Tienda (1998); Avery and Kane (2004).
22 McDonough (1997); Kirst and Venezia (2004).
23 Kirst and Venezia (2004); Avery, Hoxby, Jackson, Burek, Pope, and Raman (2006); Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2006); The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2007).
24 De La Rosa (2006); Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2006).
25 McDonough (1997); Plank and Jordan (2001); Avery and Kane (2004); Kirst and Venezia (2004).
26 Plank and Jordan (2001); Pallais and Turner (2006).
27 Plank and Jordan (2001); Kim and Schneider (2005).
28 Hearn (1991); Flint (1993); McDonough (1997); Plank and Jordan (2001); Kim and Schneider (2005); De La Rosa (2006); Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2006); Person and Rosenbaum (2006).

Chapter 1 Sidebars

i We identified cutoffs for each "qualification category" (e.g., access to a selective college) using a multivariate analysis that allowed us to identify the most likely college outcome for CPS students with different GPAs and ACT scores, and by identifying descriptively the modal college attendance patterns of CPS students with different GPA and ACT combinations.
ii We use a lower standard for ACT scores for several reasons. We base the rubric on the minimum GPA and ACT scores of CPS graduates who enrolled in colleges of varying selectivity, not the average of the entering freshmen class. In addition, colleges may also weigh factors other than ACT scores more heavily when admitting minority students. Furthermore, we are using ACT scores taken during their junior year and because some students may retake the ACT and improve their scores, we may underestimate some students' ACT scores.

Chapter 2

29 Descriptions of the college search, application, and selection time line used in this chapter draw from a review of advice found on commonly used college planning tools and websites, including the CPS Department of Postsecondary Education and Student Development (postsecondary.cps.k12.il.us/do_it_now); College Board (collegeboard.com/student/plan); Barron's Profiles of American Colleges (2005); and Education Planner/Education Timeline (educationplanner.com). See Appendix F for details about these websites.

30 See commonapp.org

31 See fafsa.ed.gov/before003a.htm

32 For example, UIC has a priority financial aid deadline of March 1 (vcsa.uic.edu/MainSite/departments/financial_aid/home/), UIUC has a preferential deadline of March 15 (osfa.uiuc.edu/process/calendar/index.html), and the University of Chicago has a deadline of February 1 (collegeaid.uchicago.edu/prospective/index.shtml).

33 American Council on Education (2004).

34 McDonough (1997); Cabrera and La Nasa (2000a); Cabrera and La Nasa (2000b); Bloom (2007).

35 We also exclude students in special education programs. In the analyses that use data on GPA, students who attended charter schools are excluded because we lack their high school transcript data.

36 One concern is that, because not all colleges participate in the NSC, we may undercount college enrollment. Specifically, some students may report on the Senior Exit Questionnaire that they had been accepted to a college that did not participate in the NSC. If we base our enrollment estimate solely on the NSC data, we will count these students as having been accepted to college based on their responses to the Senior Exit Questionnaire, but not enrolled because their college does not participate in the NSC. To compensate for this undercount, we adjusted our college enrollment data by estimating a student's likelihood of enrolling if they stated on the Senior Exit Questionnaire that they were attending a college that does not participate in the NSC (see Appendix C for details on how we adjusted for this undercount).

37 Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995); Gonzales, Stoner, and Jovel (2003).

38 In this analysis, we controlled for high school qualifications, gender, family background, student's immigration status, and neighborhood characteristics (see Appendix E for details on the model and see Appendix D for variables used in this analysis).

39 It is important to note that, just like in the quantitative sample, a small proportion of students in our qualitative sample stated an ambition other than achieving a four-year degree, such as completing an associate's degree, going to trade school, or joining the armed forces. Four out of 105 students in the qualitative study did not state a goal of completing a four-year degree or attending a four-year college. This proportion is lower than in the larger sample, likely because we over-recruited IB and honors students for our qualitative sample. These students were not counted as early two-year students and were not included in this analysis, just as our quantitative analysis is limited to students who aspire to complete a four-year degree.

40 A second, equally large, group of 19 students in the qualitative sample made a last-minute, rather than early, decision not to attend a four-year school and chose a two-year or other option, sometimes despite of having been accepted to at least one four-year school.

41 For the sake of simplicity, we refer to these students as early two-year college students or students who chose a two-year school over a four-year school. This described the majority of students, but a few chose to enroll in a trade school. The patterns illustrated here were consistent across these groups of students.

42 For more detail on methods used for data collection and analysis in the qualitative study, see Appendix B.

43 Only 6 out of the 16 early two-year college students had qualifications so low as to give them access only to a two-year school. Ten were therefore qualified to attend some kind of four-year school.

44 See Long (2006) for an overview of this literature.

45 Choy, Horn, Nunez, and Chen (2000); U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2000); Bloom (2007); Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, and Yeung (2007).

46 Fletcher (2006).

47 Person and Rosenbaum (2006); Tierney and Venegas (2006).

48 80 percent of those accepted to a four-year college enroll (41 divided by 51).

49 See Appendix C for details about how we adjusted the college-going rates.

50 Avery, Hoxby, Jackson, Burek, Pope, and Raman (2006); De La Rosa (2006); Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2006); The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006).

51 American Council on Education (2004).

52 We ran this analysis using the Potholes Analytic Sample. Students who completed a FAFSA had an 84 percent predicted probability of enrolling in a four-year college versus a 56 percent predicted probability for students who did not complete a FAFSA.

53 American Council on Education (2004).

54 Ibid.

55 Chicago Public Schools (2007).

Chapter 2 Sidebars

iii Rimer (2007).

iv In the U.S. Department of Education's Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, 63 percent of first-time postsecondary students who planned to complete a bachelor's degree and who enrolled in a four-year college accomplished that goal within six years. In comparison, only 23 percent of first-time postsecondary students who planned to complete a bachelor's degree and who first enrolled in a two-year college, were able to obtain a bachelor's degree within six years (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

v CPS (2006).

vi U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2005).

vii This number is based on the Desegregation Modified Consent Decree Report for the entire CPS population of high school students in 2005, available from cps.k12.il.us/AboutCPS/deseg_reports/#dec05.

viii There is an increasing recognition of these barriers. For example, CPS (postsecondary.cps.k12.il.us/get_to_college/undocumented_students) and the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (icirr.org/index_files/undocumentedstudentaid.pdf) have websites with information.

Chapter 3

56 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2006).

57 Plank and Jordan (2001); Avery and Kane (2004).

58 Hearn (1991); Flint (1993); McDonough (1997); Plank and Jordan (2001); Kim and Schneider (2005); De La Rosa (2006); Dynarski and Scott-Clayton (2006); Person and Rosenbaum (2006).

59 The seven four-year colleges in order of popularity are: University of Illinois at Chicago, Northeastern Illinois University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Chicago State University, Northern Illinois University, Columbia College, and Southern Illinois University.

60 Hearn (1991); Turner (2004); Alon and Tienda (2005); Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth (2006); Mortenson (2007).

61 Turner (2004); Alon and Tienda (2005); Mortenson (2007).

62 Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, and Swail (2004).

63 See Appendix B for details about the Longitudinal Qualitative Sample.

64 Like the Potholes Sample in Chapter 2, we do not include students who were in special education or attended alternative high schools. Because we do not have GPAs for charter school students, they are excluded from any analysis that includes qualifications.

65 Of the 5,194 students in the Potholes Sample, 827 students did not plan to continue their education in the fall. These students are not included in the Match Sample.

66 We will be examining the college-going patterns of students in International Baccalaureate programs and selective enrollment schools in a forthcoming research brief.

67 Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal (2001).

68 This analysis is the same one used to examine the impact of applying to more colleges in Figure 29, except that the FAFSA variable is uncentered instead of the application variables. The same control variables were used in both analyses: students' high school qualifications, demographics, family background, neighborhood characteristics, parental and teacher supports, participation in college search activities, work, participation in school activities, FAFSA completion, and the number of applications submitted. The only difference between the two analyses is that the variable indicating the number of applications was uncentered in the previous analysis and the FAFSA completion variable was uncentered in this analysis.

69 Participation in college planning activities (using college guidebooks and going to college fairs), filing a FAFSA, and submitting multiple college applications are all influenced by the school's college climate. Because we wanted to estimate the direct effect of college climate on match, we did not include these variables. This analysis controls for: high school qualifications, demographics, mother's education and nativity, and neighborhood characteristics, as well as for the student's survey reports of parental and school support for postsecondary education, and whether the student worked or participated in school activities.

70 In this analysis, we also added variables for whether students had completed college search activities (attended a college fair, used college guidebooks, the number of schools applied to, completed the FAFSA) and a dummy variable indicating whether students had been accepted to a four-year college.

71 Kirst and Venezia (2004).

72 Titus (2004); Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth (2006).

73 Titus (2004).

74 Muraskin, Lee, Wilner, and Swail (2004) Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

75 Allensworth and Easton (2005).

76 Gong, Presley, and White (2006).

77 McDonough (1997); Cabrera and La Nasa (2000); Gonzales, Stoner, and Jovel (2003).

Appendices

1 We developed this list by cross-referencing advice found on the College Board, College Zone, College Data, and CPS's Choose Your Future websites.

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Melissa Roderick is the Principal Investigator of the Chicago Postsecondary Transition Project. She is the Hermon Dunlap Smith Professor at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago and a co-director at CCSR. Professor Roderick is an expert in urban school reform, high-stakes testing, minority adolescent development, and school transitions.

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The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) at the University of Chicago conducts research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. We seek to expand communication among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners as we support the search for solutions to the problems of school reform. CCSR encourages the use of research in policy action and improvement of practice, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school reform by identifying what matters for student success and school improvement, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.