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Contact: William Harms
(773) 702-8356
w-harms@uchicago.edu

Grades Matter More than ACT Scores for College Success Among Chicago Public School Students

For Chicago Public School graduates, grades are a more important predictor of college enrollment and graduation than college entrance test scores, according to a study from the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago. The Consortium study also found substantial differences across colleges in graduation rates among highly qualified CPS graduates, suggesting that the colleges students attend matters a great deal.

The study paints a discouraging picture of college success for CPS graduates. Despite the fact that nearly 80 percent of seniors state that they expect to graduate from a four-year college, only about one-third enroll in a four-year college within a year of high school graduation, and only 35 percent of those who enroll received a bachelor's degree within six years. In addition, the report found that boys are less likely to enter and graduate from college than girls with similar abilities, largely because boys have lower high school grades. The study also found that CPS Latino graduates attend college below both national and Illinois averages for Latino high school graduates.

“What we are seeing is a significant gap between students’ aspiration and their college access and performance,” said Melissa Roderick, Professor in the School of Social Service Administration and Principal Investigator of the Chicago Postsecondary Transition Project. “We find that CPS graduates’ low grades and low test scores are creating significant barriers to four-year and particularly selective four-year colleges like the University of Illinois at Chicago and that low high school grades are undermining the chances for graduation among those who enroll. Improving students’ qualification is the single most important strategy that CPS can use to give students access to colleges that match their aspirations. This will require as much a focus on grades as high schools are currently placing on test scores.”

The report builds on an effort underway at CPS to track high school graduates as they enter college. The Consortium study is the first in the country to comprehensively follow individual graduates of a major urban school system and examine what kinds of colleges they attend and how many graduate from college. The Consortium’s findings are reported in “From High School to the Future: A first look at Chicago Public School graduates’ college enrollment, college preparation, and graduation from four-year colleges.” Roderick is author of the report along with Elaine Allensworth, Associate Director of the Consortium, and Jenny Nagaoka, Project Director of the Chicago Postsecondary Transition Project.

The report follows recent graduates of CPS, including the classes of 1998, 1999, 2002 and 2003. It uses data from Chicago high school records and from the non-profit National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to match individual CPS graduates with their college experiences. The NSC has records on more than 90 percent of college students nationwide, and Consortium researchers estimate that NSC data captures 95 percent of CPS graduates who enroll in college. Among the study’s findings are these:

- With the exception of Latino students, CPS graduates attend college at rates only slightly lower than students of similar race/ethnicity in the rest of Illinois, as well as the nation. CPS students, however, are concentrated in two-year and less selective four-year colleges. They also graduate from four-year colleges at rates much lower than students of similar race/ethnicity nationally.

- Low grades, in particular, contribute to a significant gap in both college enrollment and college graduation between males and females. The researchers found that while male and female graduates had comparable ACT scores and eighth-grade preparation for high school, males were much more likely to graduate with very low GPAs. Over half (56 percent) of African-American and 48 percent of Latino male graduates from CPS left high school with less than a 2.0 GPA, compared to 29 percent of African-American females and 26 percent of Latino females. These low grades mean that minority males have few college options.

- Students’ grades in high school were the most important predictor of college graduation. “To put the GPA effect in context, these results suggest that if two students entered college with the same achievement test scores and similar coursework, the student with a high school GPA of 3.0 would be 15

percentage points more likely to graduate than a student with a 2.5 GPA. Grades are an indicator of students' ability to complete assignments and prepare high quality work, something necessary for success in college," author Elaine Allensworth explained.

- Among the top CPS graduates, those with a 4.0 GPA, six year graduation rates in four-year colleges ranged from a low of only 30 percent at Northeastern Illinois University to highs of nearly 90 percent at Loyola University and over 90 percent at Northwestern University. The report also showed that few high schools have been successful in sending students to a range of colleges.

- Latino graduates in CPS were much less likely to enroll in college even though they had aspirations similar to their African-American counterparts. "This is one of the most troubling findings in our report," Jenny Nagaoka, report author, commented. Nationally, 55 percent of Latino graduates are enrolled in college in the fall after graduation, compared to only 41 percent of CPS graduates. Nagaoka said the gap might be the result of the particular challenges faced by Latino children of recent immigrants in negotiating the college application process.

"As CPS works to increase graduates' qualifications, there must be an equivalent attempt to ensure that students are searching and aspiring to colleges that demand those qualifications, and that students are getting the support they will need to translate those qualifications into access," she said.

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