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## **Despite challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, CPS grads maintained four-year college enrollment and slightly increased four-year college retention rates**

*New strategies to adapt to students' needs led to double-digit enrollment increases at some Illinois colleges*

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and shift to virtual learning, the class of 2020 faced unprecedented challenges to enroll in and return to college in the fall of 2020. Nationally, four-year college enrollment for first-time freshmen declined around 4 percent in fall 2020. Comparatively, four-year college enrollment declined just 2 percent among the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) class of 2020, according to a new study, [College During the Pandemic: Immediate Enrollment and Retention of CPS Graduates in Fall 2020](#), by the [University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](#). Declines in two-year college enrollment were significantly greater, both nationally and among CPS graduates. Two-year college enrollment declined by 18 percent for CPS graduates, compared to a 13 percent drop in two-year college enrollment nationwide.

In light of the national rates, there were assumptions that enrollment rates for CPS graduates would similarly decline, that two-year colleges would be more popular because they usually cost less, and that private colleges would be less affected because they have more resources to quickly adapt to virtual learning. "The data is showing that many of these assumptions were inaccurate," said Jenny Nagaoka, Deputy Director, UChicago Consortium. "We're actually seeing some very interesting outcomes in enrollment and retention at four-year colleges among CPS graduates. Innovative strategies undertaken by CPS, college-access organizations and higher education to adapt to students' needs led to double-digit increases in enrollment at some colleges."

Four Illinois colleges (Western Illinois, Columbia College Chicago, DePaul University, and Northern Illinois) experienced increases in enrollment greater than 30 percent. Illinois State, Northern Illinois, and Western Illinois increased retention rates more than 15 percent. These colleges implemented new policies that appear to have enabled more CPS students to enroll in college for the first time or remain enrolled. Some of those policies included suspending financial holds on enrollment for returning students, providing emergency grants, implementing test-optional and test-blind admissions policies, and awarding merit scholarships.

CPS graduates from 2015-2019 who were already enrolled in a four-year college at the onset of the pandemic returned to college at similar rates to previous years. This finding was consistent across race/ethnicity and gender groups.

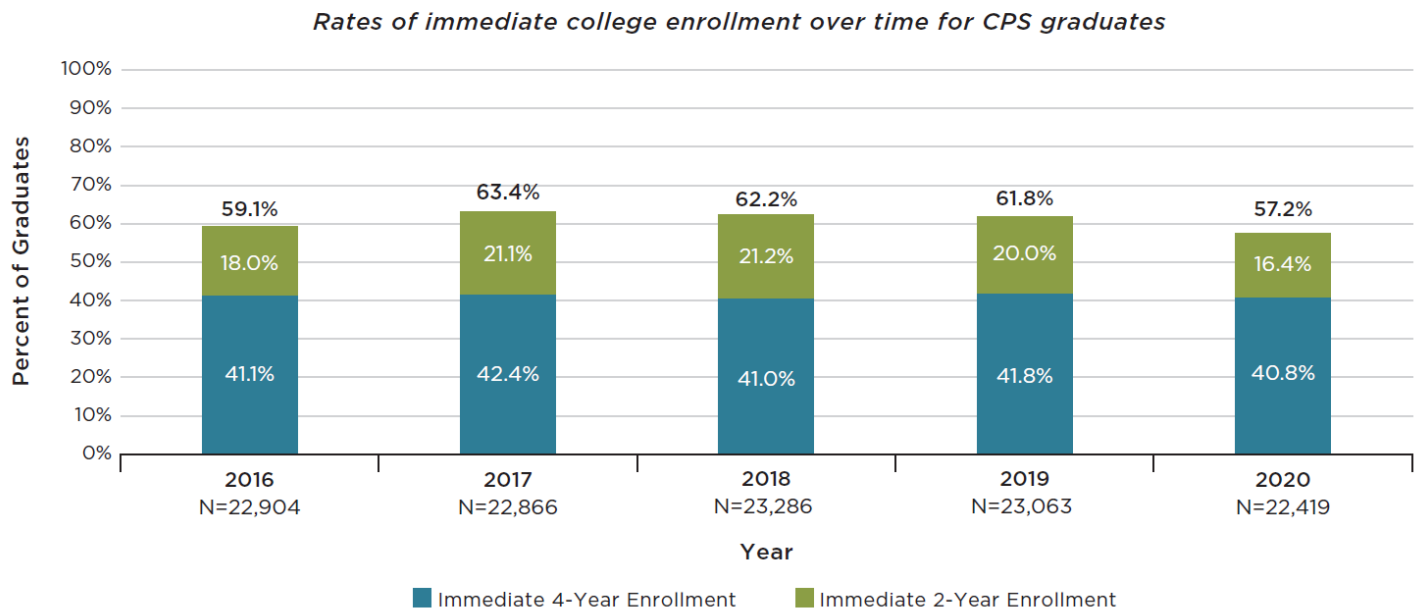
CPS graduates were less likely to enroll in or return to a two-year college during the pandemic, particularly Black and Latinx students. "We know that the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted communities of color," said Shelby Mahaffie, Research Analyst, UChicago Consortium. "Two-year college students may have borne more of the direct financial impacts of the pandemic and may have taken on more family health concerns and caregiving responsibilities."

In a [national survey](#) by New America, "could no longer afford the program" and "had to work" were among the top reasons keeping community college students from enrolling in or returning to college in the fall. Among all City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), enrollment of CPS graduates dropped 22 percentage points while the rate of CPS graduates returning to CCC decreased by 2 percentage points.

"The steep decline in two-year college enrollment in 2020 underscores the need for institutional changes and additional supports for students who may have been most affected by the pandemic," said Alexandra Usher, Associate Director, To&Through Project. "Going forward, it is critical that we learn from this period in order to make changes to policy and practice that support students in pursuing their educational aspirations."

**FIGURE 1**

The CPS Class of 2020 Had a Small Decline in 4-Year Enrollment and a Larger Decline in 2-Year Enrollment, As Compared to Earlier Cohorts



## Key Findings

### Fall College Enrollment of 2020 CPS Graduates

- The overall rate of immediate college enrollment declined 4.6 percentage points, which was primarily driven by a decline in the rate of immediate enrollment in two-year colleges (3.6 percentage points).
  - CPS graduates from the class of 2020 were about as likely to enroll in a four-year college as previous cohorts: 41.8 percent in 2019 vs. 40.8 percent in 2020.
  - CPS graduates from the class of 2020 were less likely to enroll in a two-year college: 20.0 percent in 2019 vs. 16.4 percent in 2020.
- Among Black and Latinx students, rates of immediate four-year college enrollment held relatively stable, however two-year college enrollment rates declined.
- Among students with disabilities, rates of immediate four-year college enrollment held relatively stable, however, two-year college enrollment rates declined.
- Some four-year colleges in Illinois had increases in enrollment greater than 30 percent, including Western Illinois (66%), Columbia College Chicago (38%), DePaul University (36%), and Northern Illinois (33%).
- There was no clear pattern of enrollment according to schools' reopening model (fully online, primarily online, hybrid, primarily in-person, and fully in-person).

### College Retention of 2019 CPS Graduates

- CPS graduates from the class of 2019 were slightly more likely than previous cohorts to remain in four-year colleges between spring and fall 2020: 81.5 percent in 2019 vs. 84.1 percent in 2020.
- The percentage of CPS graduates returning to four-year public colleges in Illinois rose by 7 percentage points from 78.7 percent in 2019 to 86.0 percent in 2020.
- Three public colleges in Illinois had increases more than 15 percentage points in the rate of students continuing at that college in the fall: Illinois State University (24%), Northern Illinois University (23%), and Western Illinois University (17%). Each of the three colleges used a different reopening model in fall 2020.

- The percentage of first-year students enrolled in the spring at a two-year college who continued at the same college in the fall has been decreasing since 2017 and continued to decline in 2020.

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#### **About the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research**

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

#### **About the To&Through Project**

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