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Navigating enrollment discourages many students from pursuing aspirations

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Too many Chicago students do not successfully navigate the daunting process of enrolling in four-year colleges and often do not enroll or default to schools for which they are overqualified, according to a study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research.



In an effort to encourage more Chicago Public Schools students to visit more top colleges, a group of International Baccalaureate CPS students were invited to tour the University campus. Organized by Zarinah James, Associate Director of College Admissions, the tour gave these high school students a chance to hear about the College through the perspective of University College students, who led the tour.

Photo courtesy of Tracy Dell'Angela

“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 process. And, if the most highly qualified students do not attend colleges that demand high qualifications, then their hard work has not paid off.

“It sends precisely the wrong message,” said Melissa Roderick, a co-director at the consortium, the Herman Dunlap Smith Professor in the School of Social Service Administration and the lead author of the study, *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College*.

For all Chicago Public Schools students who reported aspiring to a four-year degree, only 59 percent applied to a four-year college and only 41 percent successfully navigated this process, ultimately enrolling in the fall following high school graduation. This drop-off is even worse for Latino students who wanted to earn a bachelor’s degree, with only 46 percent applying and 30 percent enrolling in a four-year college in the fall after

graduation—a gap that persisted regardless of students' immigration status.

Furthermore, only about one-third of CPS students who aspire to complete a four-year degree enroll in a college that matches or exceeds their qualifications. That drops to 28 percent for Latino students, compared to 45 percent for African-American students.

While finding the right student-to-college match is only one consideration, it is an important one because earlier consortium research demonstrated that graduation rates among the most popular Illinois colleges vary dramatically—even among graduates with high school grade-point averages of 3.5 or above.

The consortium's three-year longitudinal study already has triggered reforms in CPS, which has made postsecondary access a key priority for high school graduates.

Since 2004, the consortium has tracked the postsecondary experiences of successive cohorts of CPS graduates and examined the relationship among high school preparation, support, college choice and postsecondary outcomes.

The consortium's 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*, showed that increasing qualifications is the most important strategy to improving students' college participation, access to four-year and more selective colleges, and ultimately college graduation rates.

This second report in the series tackles some of the unresolved issues identified in the first; namely, why students tend to enroll in a limited number of colleges, and why college enrollment varies so dramatically across schools and racial groups. The study relies on qualitative and quantitative data for CPS seniors in 2005 —student and teacher surveys, transcripts, college enrollment data reported by the National Student Clearinghouse and student interviews.

Consortium researchers spent nearly two years interviewing and tracking the academic progress of 105 students in three Chicago high schools. The 10 case studies included in the “Potholes” study each highlight a student who struggled at a different point in the postsecondary planning process.

Many students interviewed for the study decided to attend a two-year or vocational school instead of a four-year college—not because they preferred this option, but because they grew

frustrated with the process and opted for what seemed the safe choice. Parents and teachers pushed students to attend college, but students still lacked structured support and concrete guidance. Students worried about college costs and lacked information on financial aid. Many reported not knowing how to pick a college and feared making the wrong choice.

Among the other findings:

- Some 95 percent of 2005 Chicago graduates hoped to complete some form of postsecondary education, and 90 percent stated that their parents wanted them to attend college after graduation.
 - Teachers matter more than parents in this process, especially for first-generation college students.
 - Applying to multiple colleges makes it more likely that students will be accepted to a four-year college.
 - Students with marginal qualifications were much more likely to enroll in a school that matched their qualifications if they had college planning discussions with someone at their school.
 - While the rising costs of four-year colleges have made it increasingly difficult to deliver on the dream of a college education for all low-income students, the research also suggests that high schools and universities can take concrete steps to improve college enrollment and match more students to the right colleges:
 - Special attention must be paid to structuring the college search and application process during junior and senior years.
 - High schools must work to create stronger college-going cultures.
 - Colleges, too, can play a role in making this process easier for first-generation students. Admissions officials can reach into high schools with new recruitment strategies and support, ensuring that students better understand the “real costs” of college and complete the financial aid process in time to maximize their aid.
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