



Barriers to College Attainment

Lessons from Chicago

Jenny Nagaoka, Melissa Roderick, and Vanessa Coca,

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Introduction and summary

The aspiration to attain a college degree has become nearly universal among high school students, and the percentage of students making the immediate transition to college has risen among all racial and ethnic groups.¹ While college enrollment is now a reachable goal, the proportion of students who complete a college degree has barely changed. Moreover, despite increases in enrollment, minority students continue to lag in both four-year college enrollment and degree completion rates. The primary issue in college access is no longer building college aspirations, but building a clear path for students to achieve their goals.

Several barriers face students, particularly urban, minority students, as they attempt to bridge the gap between their educational aspirations and college degree attainment. Over the past several years, the policy discussion has coalesced around three central explanations: poor academic preparation that undermines minority and low-income students' access to and performance in college, students' difficulties in navigating the college enrollment process, and the declining real value of financial aid combined with rising college costs.

The first focuses on human capital, or investments in high school reform in order to increase students' academic preparation.² The second focuses on the role of social capital—the role of guidance, information, and support in helping students effectively navigate the college search and application process.³ The third centers on financial explanations, particularly the rising cost of college, the declining real value of federal financial aid, and the resulting net price burden that low-income families face.⁴

This paper focuses on these first two explanations by drawing on the findings from a multi-year research project at the Consortium on Chicago School Research, or CCSR, at the University of Chicago that is studying the college qualifications, enrollment, and graduation patterns of Chicago graduates and examining the relationships among high school preparation, support, college choice, and postsecondary outcomes. The goal of this research is to better understand the determinants of students' postsecondary success and to identify key levers for improvement in Chicago and elsewhere. By focusing on the issues facing students in one large urban district, the project can serve as a case study for other cities and communities.

Chicago is a useful laboratory for national and state policymakers for a number of reasons. Over the past several years, the Chicago Public School system has engaged in a major initiative to address what has become a national policy question: How do we increase college access and attainment for low-income minority and first generation college students?

In 2003, the CPS administration established the Department of Postsecondary Education and Student Development, charged with ensuring that all Chicago 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 tracked and reported college participation rates of its graduates using data from the National Student Clearinghouse, becoming the first major school system in the country to do so. The data from the NSC verifies and tracks the enrollment and degree completion for more than 2,800 colleges, covering 91 percent of postsecondary enrollment in the United States. The CPS initiative also includes new supports to build strong postsecondary guidance systems and accelerated efforts to expand participation in rigorous coursework such as Advanced Placement courses.

In collaboration with CPS, CCSR mounted a major research project to track the postsecondary experiences of successive cohorts of graduating Chicago students and examine the relationship among high school preparation and supports, college choice, and postsecondary outcomes. The CCSR project works closely with CPS to identify critical points of intervention and potential levers for improving graduates' educational attainment. This partnership can provide useful lessons to national and state policymakers as well districts and schools.

The first section of this paper defines the policy problem: the aspirations-attainment gap, namely the gulf between students' educational aspirations and their actual attainment of college degrees. Students are largely convinced of the importance of a college education, particularly for improving their future earnings potential. However, these increased aspirations have created a demand for access to postsecondary education that poses new challenges for high schools and postsecondary institutions. Simply having access to college is not enough; students must also have the skills and support to succeed in the postsecondary environment.

The next section of this paper examines the first explanation for the aspirations-attainment gap: the extent to which academic qualifications shape access to four-year colleges—particularly selective and very selective four-year colleges—among Chicago graduates.⁵ Improving high school qualifications has become one of the central strategies in improving postsecondary access and success, as the link between high school and postsecondary outcomes has become explicit.⁶ We then examine the effect of academic qualifications on the six-year college graduation rates of two earlier cohorts. Data from Chicago suggest that the current policy focus on increasing qualifications is warranted; low qualifications pose a significant barrier to college enrollment and degree attainment for graduates, particularly Latino, African-American, and male graduates.

In section three, we turn to our primary focus, the second set of explanations that center around social capital.⁷ We examine whether Chicago students who aspire to attain four-year college degrees take the necessary steps to apply to and enroll in four-year colleges. Research suggests that if we are to address the central barrier to college access—raising academic qualifications—there must be an equivalent attempt to ensure that first-genera-

tion students aspire to attend the colleges that demand those qualifications, and that they have access to the guidance, information, and support they need to effectively navigate the college application process that their more advantaged counterparts have. Andrea Venezia and colleagues found that few minority students and their families fully understand the requirements of college application and admission.⁸ Similarly, others have found that low-income students lack critical information about the steps they must take to effectively participate in college and financial aid applications.⁹ In our work, we find that students struggle with navigating the college enrollment process, and that schools can help bridge the gap in students' ability to successfully enroll in a four-year college.

Section four examines the role of college search and college choice—a different aspect of the social capital explanations—and how they affect students' likelihood of attaining a college degree. Our analysis suggests that Chicago students, even those who are qualified to attend four-year colleges, often do not conduct broad college searches, and, as a result, they enroll in colleges that are less selective than they are qualified to attend. Then, using our earlier analysis of the college graduation rates of prior cohorts, we demonstrate the importance of college choice for low-income minority students. Supporting students in the college application and enrollment process, as well as paying attention to the wide variation in college outcomes across colleges of differing selectivity, should be an important part of the policy discussion.

Finally, we discuss three strategies that district, state, and federal policymakers can use to help close the aspirations-attainment gap. First, our work in Chicago—and any efforts to increase college attainment—rests on having data systems that link high school to college outcomes. Accountability systems and understanding the nature of the problem require tracking outcomes across schools and institutions and over time. Second, improving college readiness and college access will require supporting and building the capacity of high school educators to meet the challenge of providing their students the skills and guidance they need. Finally, the federal government, states, and districts must develop policies that send strong signals and provide incentives to students and schools about what is required to gain access to and succeed in college.

We do not explicitly address the third area, financial explanations. There is a rich literature demonstrating the extent to which cost has a negative impact on college enrollment and completion, and it is clear that the financial barriers faced by urban students are daunting. However, this area is largely beyond the realm of high school policy, which is our primary focus. We do examine the intersection between social capital and financial barriers, and how a lack of participation in the financial aid process undermines students' likelihood of college enrollment. A critical goal of the research project in the Chicago schools is to understand where students encounter difficulty and success as they navigate the college search and application process. Promoting understanding and effective participation in the financial aid process is a critical component of any strategy to improve college access and attainment.

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