



the
To&Through
project

MYTHS & FACTS

About What Matters
for High School and
College Success



THE UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO

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FOR COLLEGE
SUCCESS



the To&Through project

The To&Through Project is a partnership among the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute, Consortium on School Research, and Network for College Success that integrates research, data, and professional learning to help more students get to and through high school and college. In collaboration with educators, policymakers, and communities, the To&Through Project aims to significantly increase the percentage of Chicago Public Schools freshmen who graduate from high school and go on to earn a college degree, and to share the learning from Chicago with education stakeholders across the country.

MYTHS & FACTS

The path to and through high school and college is riddled with misguided notions and outdated assumptions about what students should know, do, and focus on in order to maximize their chances for success. Fortunately, more than a decade's worth of research and data from The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research has helped solidify the facts and dispel myths about what it takes to make it to and through college.



TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

MYTH

Students' freshman year
course performance drops
because their coursework
becomes more difficult.



TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

FACT

Existing research suggests the declines in students' grades between 8th and 9th grade cannot be explained by changes in the difficulty of students' coursework. Students' grades decline in part because of developmental and environmental challenges that they face during the transition to high school. Freshmen must adjust to new teachers, peers, environments, and expectations all at once, and they often receive less personal attention and support from teachers and other school staff in ninth grade than they did in elementary school. Challenges like these affect non-cognitive factors like students' academic identity, emotional well-being, and sense of belonging in school, which influence their grades through effects on their attendance and study habits. In 2014, UChicago Consortium researchers concluded that more than 85 percent of the gap in CPS students' Math and English performance between the 8th and 9th grade could be explained by changes in their attendance and self-reported study habits, and that almost none of the gap could be attributed to changes in the difficulty of their coursework.



Sources: Farrington, C.A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E.M., Nagaoka, J., Keys, T.S., Johnson, D.W. & Beechum, N.O. (2012). Teaching adolescents to become learners: The role of noncognitive factors in shaping schools performance. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research; Rosenkranz, T., de la Torre, M., Stevens, W.D., & Allensworth, E.M. (2014). Free to fail or on-track to college: Why grades drop when students enter high school and what adults can do about it. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

MYTH



We don't need to worry
about students who enter
high school with high eighth
grade grades and test scores.

FACT

All students are at risk of seeing significant declines in their GPA in core courses (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies) in the transition to high school, even students with strong eighth grade grades and test scores. In fact, fewer than half of students who earned a 3.0 in eighth grade earn a 3.0 in ninth grade. These declines in GPA for high-achieving students matter because high school grades are a critical component of students' college access and college readiness. Losses during the transition to high school put many students who began high school with a strong record of academic achievement out of range for likely admission to selective or highly selective colleges.



Source: Seeskin, A., Nagaoka, J., & Mahaffie, S. (2018). Hidden risk: Changes in GPA across the transition to high school. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

MYTH



Eighth grade test scores are the best predictors of ninth grade performance.

FACT

Eighth grade test scores are strong predictors of high school test scores, but they are not strong predictors of high school course performance. Only a third of students with high test scores in eighth grade go on to earn a B average in high school. Students' middle school attendance and grades are much stronger predictors of ninth grade GPA than their test scores.



Source: Allensworth, E., Gwynne, J., Moore, P., & de la Torre, M. (2014). Looking forward to high school and college: Middle grade indicators of readiness in Chicago Public Schools. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

MYTH

Failing a non-core class like Art or PE in the ninth grade is no big deal — it doesn't really affect students' odds of graduating from high school.

FACT

A non-core course failure is just as detrimental as a core course failure to students' likelihood of graduating from high school. For recent cohorts of CPS students, all course failures in ninth grade, regardless of subject area, were associated with large decreases in students' likelihood of graduating from high school. The graduation rate for students with one core course failure and no other failures in ninth grade was 70%; for students with one non-core course failure and no other failures, the graduation rate was very similar, at 68%. Students who passed all of their courses during freshman year of high school, however, had a 90% chance of graduating within four years.



Source: Seeskin, A., Nagaoka, J., & Mahaffie, S. (2018). Hidden risk: Changes in GPA across the transition to high school. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

MYTH

Students always do better
academically when they
attend a selective
enrollment school.

TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

FACT

Families put lots of time and resources into determining which high school will be the best fit for their students. There is a popular perception that all students benefit when attending the highest-performing school to which they have access. However, research in Chicago found that while all selective enrollment high school students reported more positive high school experiences (e.g. feelings of personal safety and positive relationships with teachers and peers), selective high school admission had no effect on test scores, regardless of neighborhood socioeconomic status (SES). In fact, students from low SES neighborhoods who are admitted to a selective high school are 16 percentage points less likely to attend a selective college than students from low-SES neighborhoods who applied to a selective school but were not admitted.



Source: Barrow, L., Sartain, L., & de la Torre, M. (2016). The role of selective high schools in equalizing educational outcomes: Heterogeneous effects by neighborhood socioeconomic status. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

MYTH

Students' grades drop more in core courses like English, Math, and Science than non-core courses like Physical Education (PE) and the Arts between the eighth and ninth grades.



TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL

FACT

Declines in students' academic performance between the eighth and ninth grades are not limited to their grades in the core subject areas. In fact, GPA declines in the two non-core courses common to both the eighth and ninth grades—Arts and PE/Health—greatly exceed average declines in each of the core subject areas. In eighth grade, most students earn As and Bs in Arts and PE/Health but, in ninth grade, their grades in these subject areas fall to below a B average. Students see their grades fall by an average of 0.81 GPA points in PE between the eighth and ninth grades, and by 0.61 points in Arts—and Black and Latino young men see particularly disproportionate average GPA losses in the non-core subject areas. The Arts grades of Black young men fall by more than three-quarters of a point between the eighth and ninth grades, and their PE/Health grades fall a full point.



Source: Seeskin, A., Nagaoka, J., & Mahaffie, S. (2018). Hidden risk: Changes in GPA across the transition to high school. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

The background of the entire image is a dense, top-down view of numerous stacks of old, yellowed books. The pages are tightly packed, and the spines of the books are visible, creating a textured, layered appearance. The colors range from light beige to deep brown, suggesting significant age and use.

FRESHMAN YEAR

MYTH

It's better for students to
take a lighter course load
in the ninth grade than to
take on too much.

FRESHMAN YEAR

FACT

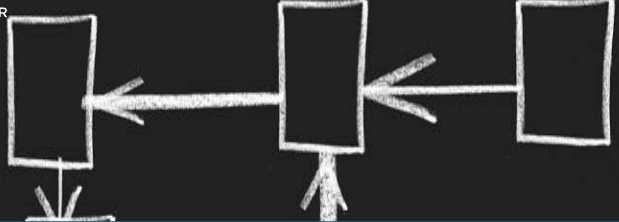
While most CPS students enroll in seven courses in their freshman year, those who earn only five credits, regardless of whether or not they've failed a course, are unlikely to graduate. Students who earn seven credits during their freshman year of high school are twice as likely as their peers who earn only five credits to graduate from high school within four years.



Source: Seeskin, A., Nagaoka, J., & Mahaffie, S. (2018). Hidden risk: Changes in GPA across the transition to high school. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

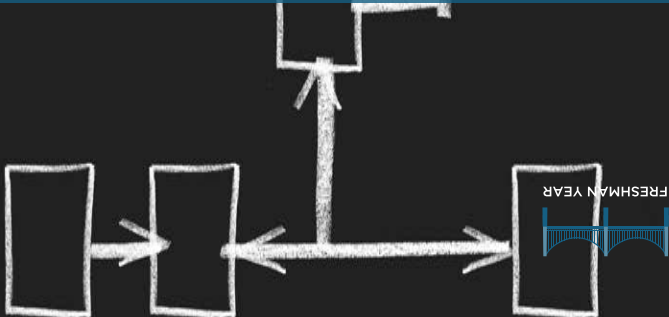


FRESHMAN YEAR



MYTH

When freshmen fail classes,
they learn important
lessons about actions
and consequences.



FACT

There is no evidence that students who fail classes during freshman year dramatically improve their performance during the rest of high school. When freshmen fail core or non-core classes, their chance of graduating is greatly reduced. With each failed semester course in freshman year, a student's chance of graduating drops by 15 percent. Although students have opportunities to retake classes and make up credits, catching up to peers is difficult work and each class failure keeps a student further behind. Failing a class can cause feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment that make it very difficult for students to recover credits at a time when belonging is really important to them developmentally. The most important lessons students can learn during freshman year are the study habits, mindsets, and positive academic identities that will equip them for the rest of high school and college.



Sources: Farrington, C. A. (2014). *Failing at school: Lessons for redesigning urban high schools*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press; Nagaoka, J., Farrington, C., Ehrlich, S., & Heath, R. (2015). *Foundations for young adult success: A developmental framework*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research; Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q. (2007). *What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago public high schools*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research..



FRESHMAN YEAR

MYTH

Freshman grades don't
matter all that much
for college.

FRESHMAN YEAR



FACT

Freshman year is not only predictive of high school graduation, but also has a strong correlation with college enrollment and persistence. Moreover, GPA at the end of freshman year is strongly correlated with 11th grade GPA, which is the GPA submitted on college applications. Among students with similar prior achievement who attended the same high school, 70 percent of students with mostly As in ninth grade enrolled in college, compared to 50 percent of students with mostly Cs in ninth grade.



Source: Easton, J.Q., Johnson, E., & Sartain, L. (2017). The predictive power of ninth-grade GPA. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



FRESHMAN YEAR

MYTH

By the time students reach high school, they should take full responsibility for what they need to do to succeed.

FRESHMAN YEAR



FACT

Fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds entering high school are still very much adolescents, and adolescent brains are still developing. Their pre-frontal cortex is still forming, so adolescents struggle with executive functioning, which means that skills like organization, time management, and long-term planning do not come naturally to them. In addition, adolescents are deeply engaged in the process of forming an identity, and their sense of themselves as learners and as people at this stage of development is highly malleable. All of this developmental context means that it is important for teachers to support students in developing the executive functioning skills they need to succeed in the classroom and beyond. This means ensuring students build their academic skills and habits, such as completing homework and participating in class, and receive the message that they are capable of succeeding in school.



Sources: Farrington, C. A. (2014). *Failing at school: Lessons for redesigning urban high schools*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.; Nagaoka, J., Farrington, C.A., Ehrlich, S.B., Heath, R.D., Johnson, D.W., Dickson, S., & Hayes, K. (2015). *Foundations for young adult success: A developmental framework*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research



MYTH

Many freshmen go on to
improve their GPAs
during sophomore
and junior years.

FRESHMAN YEAR



FACT

Ninth grade is the year when students develop habits and behaviors that persist through the rest of high school, and even through college. Since 9th grade GPA is highly predictive of 11th grade GPA, a student who is successful in 9th grade is more likely to be successful in later years. A student who does not do well in the ninth grade can recover, but will likely remain on the trajectory established in the freshman year. Starting strong in high school is crucial for finishing strong at graduation.



Sources: Easton, J.Q., Johnson, E., & Sartain, L. (2017). The predictive power of freshman year high school GPA. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research; Rosenkranz, T., de la Torre, M., Stevens, W.D., & Allensworth, E.M. (2014). Free to fail or on-track to college: Why grades drop when students enter high school and what adults can do about it. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



MYTH

As long as a student's grades are strong enough to graduate from high school, GPAs don't really matter.

GRADES



FACT

The GPA that gets you into college is not the GPA that gives you the skills to manage the academic demands of college. Strong grades are a sign that students are able to meet challenges and expectations, and are developing the skills they need to handle new academic challenges in the future. Students may be admitted to some colleges with less than a 3.0 GPA, but only students who enter college with a high school GPA of 3.0 or above have greater than a 50 percent chance of earning a four-year college degree within six years of graduating high school.



Sources: Easton, J.Q., Johnson, E., & Sartain, L. (2017). The predictive power of ninth-grade GPA. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research; Allensworth, E., & Easton, J.Q. (2007). What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago public high schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and attendance in the freshman year. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research; Roderick, M., et al. (2006). From high school to the future: A first look at Chicago public school graduates' college enrollment, college preparation, and graduation from four-year colleges. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



GRADES

MYTH

Not all “As” are
created equal.

GRADES



FACT

One of the most pervasive myths in secondary education is the belief that an A at a struggling school is inherently less meaningful than an A at a high-performing school. Often lurking behind this myth is the belief that it takes very little effort to get an A at an underperforming school. In fact, students' high school grades are similarly predictive of their success in college, regardless of what high school they attended. Much of the difference in college outcomes between similarly-qualified students can be attributed to institutional effects of the colleges students attend.



Source: Roderick, M., Holsapple, M., Clark, K., & Kelley-Kemple, T. (forthcoming). From high school to the future: Delivering on the dream of college graduation. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



MYTH

Standardized test scores are better indicators than grades of how well high schools are preparing students for college.

GRADES



FACT

Research shows considerable variation by high school in college graduation rates for students with either the same GPAs or the same ACT scores. However, high school GPAs show a very strong relationship with college graduation despite sizable school effects, and the relationship does not differ across high schools. In contrast, the relationship between ACT scores and college graduation is weak-to-nothing once school effects are controlled, and varies depending on the high school a student attends.

As researchers and policymakers evaluate practices designed to improve college readiness, these findings suggest that strong reliance on standardized test scores could lead to inaccurate assessments of how well high schools are preparing students for college, and that practitioners and families should rely mostly on students' GPAs when evaluating students' college readiness.



Source: Roderick, M., Holsapple, M., Clark, K., & Kelley-Kemple, T. (forthcoming). From high school to the future: Delivering on the dream of college graduation. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



MYTH

The hardest part of college is getting in — once you're in, you're set.



FACT

Even students who are admitted to college and are academically well prepared for college can struggle along the way to their degrees. Colleges that have an institutional culture where administrators, faculty, and staff see it as their role to provide support in the transition to college can be particularly beneficial for students who didn't grow up in contexts where college-going is the norm. Colleges can support students by tailoring orientation sessions, providing additional counselors and mentors, ensuring students are enrolling in classes that lead to degrees, being responsive to financial needs, and encouraging first-generation students to connect with each other and with affinity groups. Absent supports, it's easy for students to fall off track: currently just 11 percent of low-income students who are the first in their family to attend college earn their degrees within six years of enrolling in college.



Sources: Day, B.J., et al. (2015). Proceedings from the Association for the Study of Higher Education 2015 Annual Conference: Inside the Black Box of College Match: The Academic, Social, and Institutional Experiences of High-Achieving, Urban High School Graduates in College. Denver, CO: Conference Paper Presented November 6, 2015; Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). Moving beyond access: College success for low-income, first-generation students. The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.



MYTH

A student's odds of graduating from college will be the same at any of the colleges he or she is admitted to.

IMPROVING COLLEGE GRADUATION



FACT

Students of all qualification levels are more likely to graduate from college if they attend a college with a high institutional graduation rate. This is even true for students with strong grades in high school; in fact, college choice matters the most for students with strong academic qualifications. Ultimately, institutional graduation rates are just one factor to consider in finding a good college match, but they can signal to college-bound students how well the institutions they're interested in are able to support students in their quests to persist through and graduate from college.



Sources: Roderick, M., et al. (2008). From high school to the future: Potholes on the road to college. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.; Nagaoka, J., & Healey, K. (2016). The educational attainment of Chicago Public Schools students: 2015: A focus on four-year college degrees. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



MYTH

Standardized test scores
are the most important
indicator of success
in college.



FACT

A good ACT or SAT score isn't a slam dunk for college success. While ACT/SAT scores matter for college access, grades (GPAs) are much more predictive of college success. In fact, strong grades—earning As and Bs in high school—are the strongest indicator of college readiness and are much more predictive of college graduation than any test score. High school GPAs show a very strong relationship with college graduation despite sizable school effects, and the relationship does not differ across high schools. In contrast, the relationship between ACT scores and college graduation is weak-to-nothing once school effects are controlled. Students with an ACT score of 21-23 have about a 50 percent chance of graduating college if their high school GPA is between 2.5 and 2.9. Yet students with ACT scores in the same range of 21-23 but with high school GPAs between 3.0 and 3.4 graduate from college at rates of nearly 70 percent.



Sources: Allensworth, E.M., & Clark, K. (2018). Are GPAs an inconsistent measure of achievement across high schools? Examining assumptions about grades versus standardized test scores (Working Paper). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research; Healey, K., et al. (2014). The educational attainment of Chicago Public Schools students: A focus on four-year college degrees. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



MYTH

Good students will
succeed anywhere.



FACT

The idea that good students will be successful wherever they go to college is deeply intuitive, and appeals to our inclination to center student success solely in the student. However, institutions do play a role in college completion and, the higher a student's academic qualifications, the more important college choice becomes. Specifically, students who attend more selective colleges and universities fare better with respect to college graduation than their similarly qualified peers who attend less selective schools.



Source: Roderick, M., Holsapple, M., Clark, K., & Kelley-Kemple, T. (forthcoming). From high school to the future: Delivering on the dream of college graduation. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



MYTH

Sending students from
low-performing high
schools to elite colleges is
just setting them up to fail.

IMPROVING COLLEGE
GRADUATION



FACT

There is a belief amongst some educators that students from struggling high schools are not equipped to succeed academically at elite institutions. While it is true that low-income and minority students do experience many challenges at elite institutions, high-achieving students from any kind of CPS high school can absolutely succeed at the most selective colleges. Students who are high-achieving, low-income, minority, and/or first generation have proven their ability to be successful in the face of adversity. We should be ensuring that these students have access to our greatest opportunities, not withholding them.



Source: Roderick, M., Holsapple, M., Clark, K., & Kelley-Kemple, T. (forthcoming). From high school to the future: Delivering on the dream of college graduation. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



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