



**the
To&Through
project**



Busting Myths About What Matters for High School and College Success

The path to and through high school and college is riddled with misguided notions and outdated assumptions about what students should know, do, and focus on in order to maximize their chances for success.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.




MYTH: Students' academic trajectories are pretty much set by the time they enter high school: either they're college-bound at that point or they're not.

FACTS:

Ninth grade is a “make it or break it” year for students at all achievement levels. Academic performance sometimes changes dramatically in the shift from eighth to ninth grade, and how students perform in eighth grade is crucial for eventual high school graduation and college readiness. In fact, course performance in the ninth grade is more predictive of a student's odds of graduating high school than all other factors, including race, gender, socioeconomic status, and prior academic achievement, combined. Freshmen who are “on-track” in the ninth grade, earning five full-year credits and no more than one semester F in a core class, are nearly four times more likely than their off-track peers to graduate from high school. And the main driver of course failure is absences: Course attendance is eight times more predictive of course failure in the freshman year than eighth-grade test scores.

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.* University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

Allensworth, E., & Easton, J.Q. (2005). *The on-track indicator as a predictor of high school graduation.* University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



MYTH: Missing a day or two of school each month is no big deal.

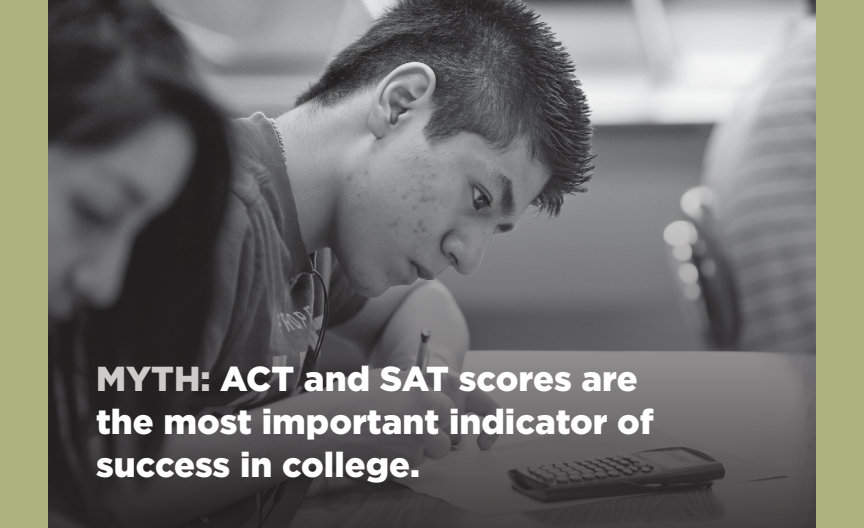
 **FACTS:**

Attendance contributes more than any other factor to course failure and low grades. College-ready students (those who have the best chance of enrolling and persisting in college) have average attendance rates of 98 percent, meaning they miss less than a week over the course of the entire school year. Yet, in Chicago Public Schools, 30 percent of ninth-graders are chronically absent, attending school less than 90 percent of the time. Each week of absence per semester in ninth grade is associated with a more than 20 percentage point decline in the probability of graduating from high school. In light of this, schools are working to help students and families understand the cost of frequent absences, and using close data monitoring and support from teachers and staff to help students get to class.

Rosenkranz, T., et al. (2014). *Free to fail or on-track to college: Why grades drop when students enter high school and what adults can do about it*. 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*. University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

Allensworth, E., et al. (2014). *Looking forward to high school and college: Middle grade indicators of readiness in Chicago Public Schools*. University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



MYTH: ACT and SAT scores are the most important indicator of success in college.

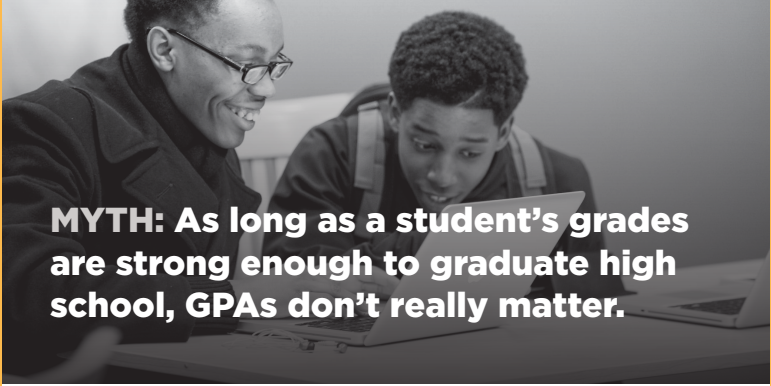
 **FACTS:**

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. 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 college at rates of nearly 70 percent.

MYTH: Using class time to prep for the ACT and SAT is a good way to improve students' scores.

FACTS:

Spending class time on test prep does not make students more prepared for the ACT and SAT. In-class test prep takes time away from developing the higher-level reasoning skills needed to get better scores. In-class test preparation also tends to be ineffective at raising test scores and can even give a false sense of the test and testing conditions. Instead, a challenging academic atmosphere and a class curriculum that teaches critical thinking gives students the best shot at succeeding on the ACT. For students, the most effective way to improve ACT scores is to work hard in academic classes: students who earn As and Bs in their classes make larger test gains during the year than students who get lower grades. To be effective, test prep should involve full, timed practice tests, and students and teachers or tutors should work together to interpret the results to figure out what it is that students need to work on to improve their scores.



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

 **FACTS:**

Earning As and Bs matters for success in both high school and college. Strong grades are a sign that students are able to meet academic challenges, and are developing the skills they need to handle new academic challenges in the future. More than 95 percent of students with a B average or better their freshman year graduate from high school, compared to 72 percent of students with a C average and 28 percent of students with a D average. 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.

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.* 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.* University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

MYTH: Students who really want to go to college will get there. If they have the will, they'll figure out the way.

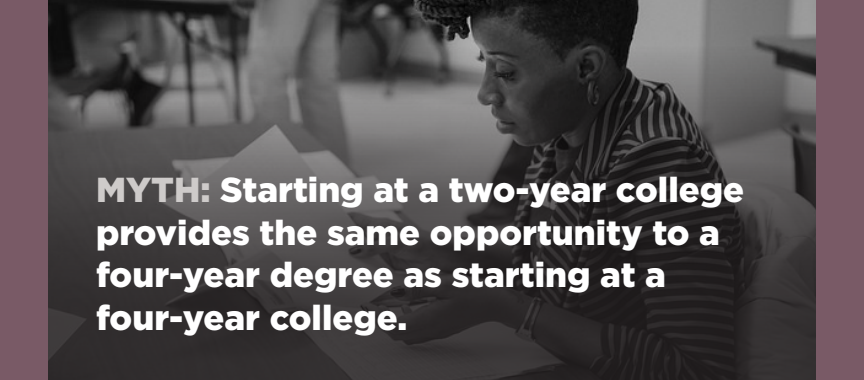
FACTS:

76 percent of CPS freshmen aspire to earn a bachelor's degree, yet only 42 percent of graduates enroll in a four-year college immediately after completing high school. This gap between students' college aspirations and enrollment isn't unique to Chicago; nationally, 80 percent of high school students aspire to earn a bachelor's degree, yet only 44 percent enroll immediately in a four-year college. The gap persists, in large part, because of the "potholes" students face along the path to and through college, such as navigating a complex financial aid application process and sorting through college options to target their applications to schools that are a good match for their qualifications and have strong institutional graduation rates. Helping students overcome barriers like these can go a long way toward helping them succeed in college. For example, students accepted into a four-year college are 50 percent more likely to actually enroll in college if they have completed their federal financial aid application (FAFSA)—a process that the U.S. Department of Education and many districts have been working to streamline.

MYTH: Talking to students about their college plans is primarily a job for their school counselors.

FACTS:

Most high school counselors are responsible for hundreds of students and struggle to find the time to routinely meet with students one-on-one. Teachers, however, interact with students every day, and can capitalize on those opportunities to share information and encouragement. The entire high school has a role to play in helping students make it to and through college by creating a strong college-going culture. In fact, a college-going culture is the single most consistent predictor of whether students take steps toward college enrollment. Students who attend high schools in which teachers report a strong college-going culture—where a school leader has established college attainment as a clear and shared goal for students and where teachers and counselors are involved in supporting students in completing their college applications—are 12 percentage points more likely to apply to and 14 percentage points more likely to enroll in a four-year college than students who attend high schools in which teachers do not report a strong college-going culture.



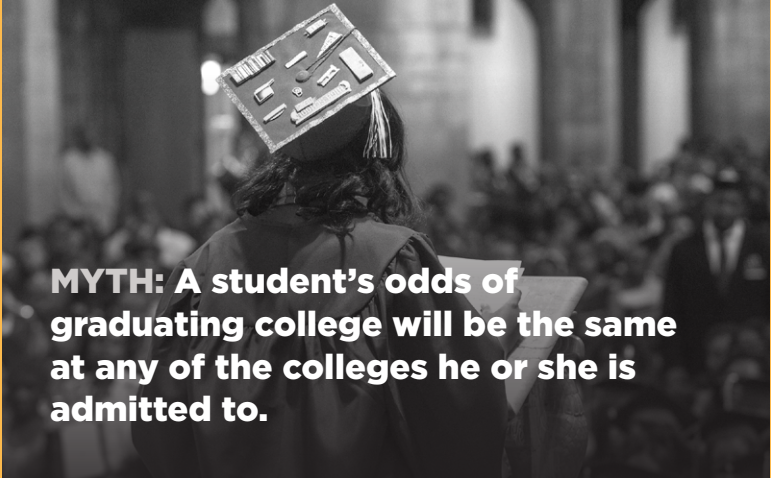
MYTH: Starting at a two-year college provides the same opportunity to a four-year degree as starting at a four-year college.

FACTS:

For students with weaker qualifications, two-year colleges are an option that can keep them on a path toward a four-year degree. However, students who are highly qualified for a four-year college have dramatically lower odds of degree completion if they start at a two-year college. In Chicago, only 8 percent of students who begin at a two-year college complete a bachelor's degree within six years of graduating high school. Nearly 90 percent of students who ultimately attain a bachelor's degree enroll in a four-year college directly after their senior year of high school. Thus, enrolling in a four-year college directly after high school remains the "surest path" to a bachelor's degree.

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*. 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*. University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.



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

 **FACTS:**

Students of all qualification levels are more likely to graduate from college if they attend a post-secondary institution 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 graduate from college.

Roderick, M., et al. (2008). *From high school to the future: Potholes on the road to college*. 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*. University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

MYTH: The hardest part of college is getting in. Once you're in, you're set.

FACTS:

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, such as those who are from low-income families or who are first-generation college-goers. 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.

Day, B.J., et al. (forthcoming journal article). "Inside the black box of college match: The academic, social, and institutional experiences of high-achieving, urban high school graduates in college."

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.



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