



the
To&Through
project

MYTHS & FACTS

About What Matters
for Postsecondary
Success



THE UNIVERSITY OF
CHICAGO



URBAN
EDUCATION
INSTITUTE



NETWORK
FOR COLLEGE
SUCCESS



the To&Through project

The To&Through Project is a partnership among the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration and Urban Education Institute. 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The path to and through high school and college is riddled with misguided notions and outdated assumptions about what students should know, do, and focus on in order to maximize their chances for success.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.



GRADES

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.



GRADES

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.



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.



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.

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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