



Understanding the Conditions for Postsecondary Success

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Purpose

Quality research can support educator practice and drive school improvement. The Network for College Success postsecondary approach stems from research coming out of the UChicago Consortium on School Research. Specifically, the 2008 *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College* report continues to help our Coaches and partner educators better understand the school conditions that foster or hinder student postsecondary success. The accompanying case studies explore real student and school assets as well as barriers when navigating the process to and through college.

How & When to Use

Reading the *Potholes* report is an excellent way to begin connecting postsecondary research with school practice. The report summary and case studies can be used in professional learning communities to explore school systems and structures that foster college enrollment and success. The sample research presentation further explores the major findings from *Potholes* and invites Counselors and other educators to think about how to apply school-wide postsecondary supports in their unique contexts.



Understanding the Conditions for Postsecondary Success

From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College

The goal of this research report is to help Counselors, educators, district leaders, and policymakers understand the adaptive challenges and practical steps to improve postsecondary outcomes for first-generation students and students of color, who now overwhelmingly aspire to go to college. The report uses qualitative and quantitative data from seniors in Chicago Public Schools in 2005.

The executive summary of the report is included in this Toolkit. For the entire report, [click here >>](#)

To access the corresponding research presentation and video, [click here >>](#) Coming soon!



CONSORTIUM ON
CHICAGO SCHOOL RESEARCH
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Executive Summary

From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College



Melissa Roderick, Jenny Nagaoka, Vanessa Coca, Eliza Moeller
with Karen Roddie, Jamiliyah Gilliam, and Desmond Patton

Executive Summary

Over the past several decades, the United States has witnessed a dramatic shift in the educational aspirations of high school students, particularly among low-income and minority students. Thirty years ago, the task of applying to college was not on the agenda of most students in American high schools. In 1980, only 40 percent of all tenth-graders and only 20 percent of low-income tenth-graders hoped to complete at least a bachelor's degree.¹ In 2005, 83 percent of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) seniors stated that they hoped to earn a bachelor's degree or higher, and an additional 13 percent aspired to attain a two-year or vocational degree.

Since 2004, the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) has tracked the postsecondary experiences of successive cohorts of graduating CPS students and examined the relationship among high school preparation, support, college choice, and postsecondary outcomes. The goal of this research is to help CPS understand the determinants of students' postsecondary success and to identify key levers for improvement. Our 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*, provided a baseline of where CPS stood as a school system. We looked at how many students enrolled in college and what types of schools they attended, and we examined the role of students' qualifications (e.g., grades, test scores, and course-taking patterns) in shaping access to and graduation from college. The conclusion of our first report, confirming a significant body of research on the link between high school performance and college access and graduation, is that increasing qualifications is the most important strategy for CPS students to improve college participation, access to four-year and more selective colleges, and ultimately college graduation rates.

This report, the second report in the series, looks beyond qualifications to examine whether CPS students who aspire to four-year colleges are effectively participating in the college search and application process and where they encounter potholes on the road to college. Drawing on prior research, we examine both how students manage the college application process and what types of colleges students apply to and ultimately enroll in. First, are CPS students who aspire to attend a four-year college taking the steps they need to enroll in a four-year college? Second, do CPS students effectively participate in college search and

get the support they need to make informed choices about what colleges they could apply to and what colleges may best fit their needs?

A critical goal of this report is to understand where CPS students encounter difficulty and success as they navigate the college search and application process, as well as the extent to which high school educators can create environments that support students in thoroughly engaging in this process. Thus, throughout this report, we pay particular attention to differences in students' experiences across high schools. We examine whether the norms for college enrollment of high school environments shape students' likelihood to plan to attend, apply to, and enroll in four-year colleges. Supporting students in the college search and application process also requires that high schools be organized to maximize information and guidance for students as they cross critical hurdles. While this report is not intended to provide a blueprint for what high schools should be doing, wherever possible we have tried to examine the impact of these critical steps in determining whether and where students who aspire to attend a four-year college ultimately enroll.

Examining Students' College Search, Application, and Match Process: The Data and Organization of this Report

In this report we use both qualitative and quantitative data to identify the barriers students face, and we focus specifically on the extent to which high school practices and environment shape students' participation in the college search and application process and their college enrollment patterns. We surveyed seniors about their college plans and activities and used CPS's postsecondary tracking system to follow successive cohorts of CPS graduates into college. We also talked to students. In addition to using qualitative data to elaborate on some of the findings presented in this report, we also present case studies from our qualitative study, each of which highlights a student who struggled at a different point in the postsecondary planning process. These case studies draw on our longitudinal, qualitative study of 105 CPS students in three high schools. They represent common themes that emerged from our qualitative work. All of the case studies can be downloaded at: ccsr.uchicago.edu/potholes.

For students to enroll in a suitable four-year college, they must effectively negotiate two sets of tasks. First, they must take a series of basic steps for four-year college enrollment: they must submit applications on time, apply for financial aid, gain acceptance, and ultimately enroll. Second, throughout this process, beyond hitting benchmarks, students must also be fully engaged in the often overwhelming task of finding the right college for them. This means thinking about what kinds of colleges they will likely be admitted to, what kind of college experience they want, and which colleges fit those descriptions. They must search for and decide upon a set of colleges that best meet their needs and provide a good college match. As we will illustrate in Chapter 1, CPS students are predominantly low-income, first-generation college-goers, and previous research finds that these students are particularly likely to encounter problems in both of these sets of tasks.

Clearly, these two sets of tasks are intertwined and are part of a larger process of college search and selection, but it is important to distinguish between these two ideas: taking the steps to enroll in college and engaging in the process of finding the right college. Students could take the steps necessary to enroll in a four-year college but fail to conduct a broad college search, limiting their applications. Or, students could conduct a broad college search, but miss important steps or deadlines. In Chapter 2, we focus on the first set of tasks: do students who aspire to attain a four-year college degree take the steps necessary to enroll in a four-year college? In Chapter 3, we look at the second set of tasks and consider the messier question of college match. In these two chapters, we analyze how students' negotiation of these tasks, as well as their schools' college climate, impacts *whether* they enroll in a four-year college (Chapter 2) and *where* they enroll (Chapter 3).

Key Findings

1. CPS students who aspire to complete a four-year degree do not effectively participate in the college application process.

Among CPS students who aspire to attain a four-year degree, only 41 percent took the steps necessary in their senior year to apply to and enroll in a four-year college. An additional 9 percent of students managed to enroll in a four-year college without following the standard steps, for a total of 50 percent of all CPS students who aspired to a four-year degree. Our look at CPS seniors' road from college

aspirations to enrollment identifies three critical benchmarks that even well-qualified students too often failed to make. First, many students opt to attend a two-year or vocational school instead of a four-year college. Fewer than three-quarters (72 percent) of students who aspired to attain a four-year degree stated in the spring that they planned to attend a four-year college in the fall. Second, many students who hoped to attend a four-year college do not apply. Only 59 percent of CPS graduates who stated that they aspired to attain a four-year degree ever applied to a four-year college. Third, even students who apply to and are accepted at a four-year college do not always enroll.

- **Students of all levels of qualifications have difficulty taking the steps to enroll in a four-year college.**

Students who aspired to attain a four-year degree and graduated with low GPAs and ACT scores, and thus very limited access to college, were unlikely to plan to attend, apply to, or be accepted to four-year colleges. However, many of the more qualified students did not consider attending a four-year college, and even some who planned to attend did not apply. Only 73 percent of students qualified to attend a somewhat selective college (the majority of four-year colleges in Illinois) expected to attend a four-year college in the fall, and only 61 percent applied. Similarly, only 76 percent of students qualified to attend a selective four-year college applied to a four-year college, even though students with access to a selective four-year college were accepted at very high rates when they applied.

- **Latino students have the most difficulty managing college enrollment.**

Latino students were the least likely to plan to enroll in a four-year college after graduation and the least likely to apply to a four-year college. Only 60 percent of Latino graduates who aspired to attain a four-year degree planned to attend a four-year college in the fall, compared to 77 percent of African-American and 76 percent of White/Other Ethnic graduates. Fewer than half of Latino students who aspired to a four-year degree applied to a four-year college, compared to about 65 percent of their African-American and White/Other Ethnic counterparts. One common explanation for why Latino CPS students do not enroll in four-year colleges is that they are immigrants. However, we found that immigrant status does not fully explain the gap in college enrollment between Latino and other students; after controlling

for immigrant status, qualifications, and other student characteristics, Latino students are still 13 percentage points less likely to enroll in a four-year college than African-American students.

2. Attending a high school with a strong college-going culture shapes students' participation in the college application process.

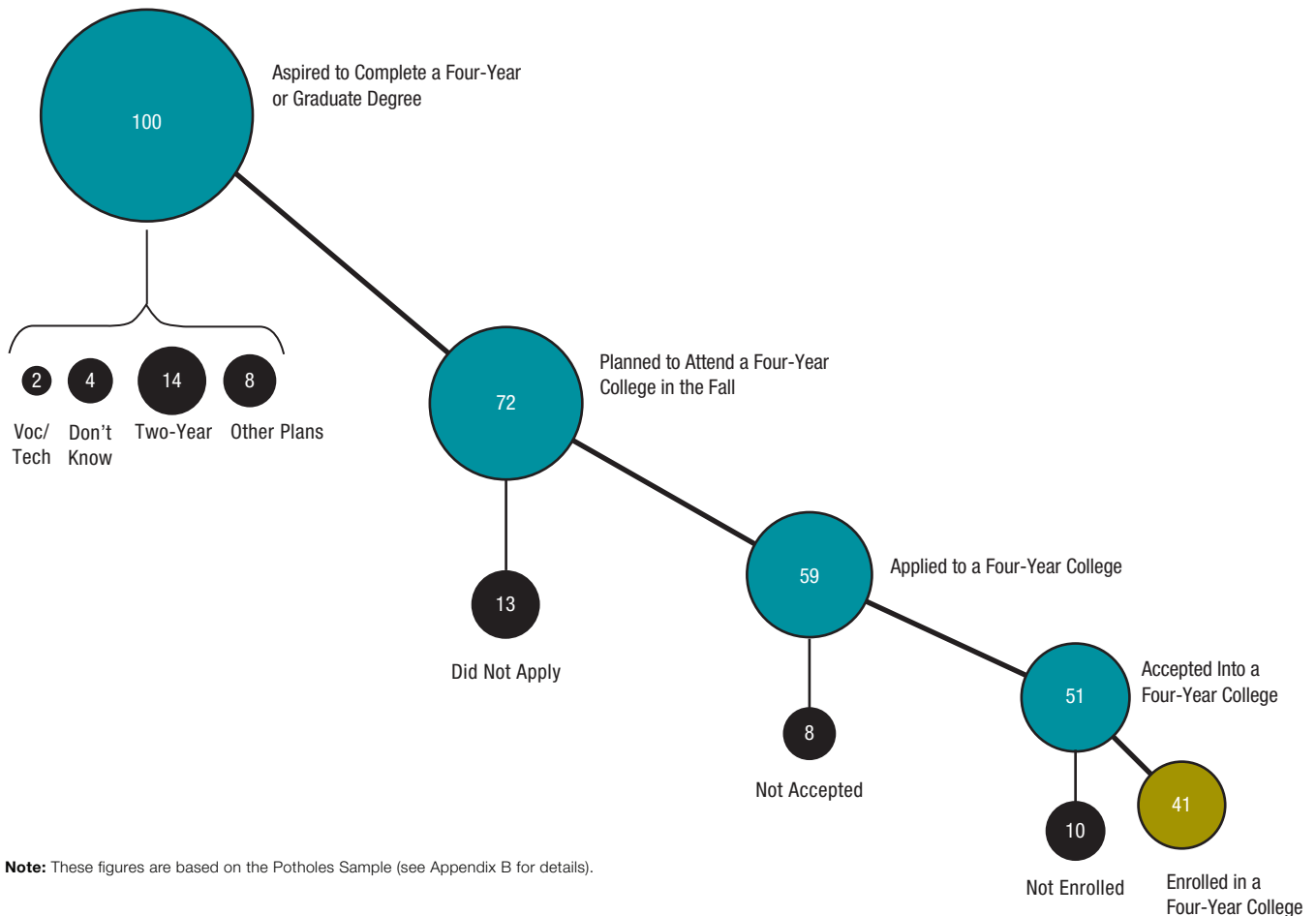
Across all our analyses, the single most consistent predictor of whether students took steps toward college enrollment was whether their teachers reported that their high school had a strong college climate, that is, they and their colleagues pushed students to go to college, worked to ensure that students would be prepared, and were involved in

supporting students in completing their college applications. Indeed, students who attended high schools in which teachers reported a strong college climate were significantly more likely to plan to attend a four-year school, apply, be accepted, and enroll. Importantly, having a strong college climate seemed to make the biggest difference for students with lower levels of qualifications. In addition, the college plans and behaviors of Latino students in CPS are particularly shaped by the expectations of their teachers and counselors and by connections with teachers. This suggests that Latino students may be much more reliant than other students on teachers and their school for guidance and information, and that their college plans are more dependent on their connections to school.

FIGURE 11

Only 41 percent of CPS graduates who aspired to complete a four-year degree took these steps and enrolled in a four-year college in the fall after graduation—an additional 9 percent enrolled in college without taking these steps

Tracking students through the steps to college enrollment:



3. Filing a FAFSA and applying to multiple colleges shape students' likelihood of being accepted to and enrolling in a four-year college.

Applying for financial aid is not easy, but it may be the most critical step for low-income students on the road to college. It is also one of the most confusing steps, and it is a point at which many CPS students stumble. Our analysis finds, moreover, that many CPS students may end up facing higher costs for college because they do not take the step of filing a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is needed to maximize federal, state, and institutional support. In addition, CPS has set the goal that students should apply to at least five colleges to maximize their options. Our analysis supports this approach.

- **Not filing a FAFSA may be a significant barrier to college enrollment for CPS students.**

Students who reported completing a FAFSA by May and had been accepted into a four-year college were more than 50 percent more likely to enroll than students who had not completed a FAFSA. This strong association holds even after we control for differences in students' qualifications, family background and neighborhood characteristics, and support from teachers, counselors, and parents. Not surprisingly, Latino students who aspire to complete a four-year degree were the least likely to report that they had completed a FAFSA.

- **Applying to multiple colleges makes it more likely that students will be accepted to a four-year college.**

Controlling for students' qualifications, family background, and reports of the individual support they received from teachers, counselors, and parents, students who applied to at least one four-year college were more likely to be accepted if they applied to three or more, and particularly six or more, schools. The effect of multiple applications was most significant for students who have lower levels of qualifications. It is these students who may have the most difficulty getting accepted at a four-year college. Their likelihood of acceptance is most affected by whether they are active in the application process and by whether they attend schools where the norm is applying to multiple colleges.

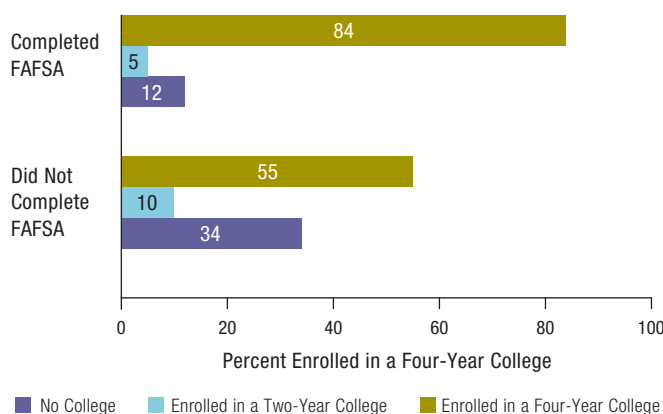
4. Only about one-third of CPS students who aspire to complete a four-year degree enroll in a college that matches their qualifications.

In this report, we use the concept of "match" to describe whether a student enrolled in a college with a selectivity level that matched the kind of colleges the student would likely have been accepted to, given his or her high school qualifications. College "match" is an easily quantifiable outcome, but ultimately finding the right college means more than gaining acceptance to the most competitive college possible. It is about finding a place that is a good "fit:" a college that meets a student's educational and social needs, as well as one that will best support his or her intellectual and social development. Match is just one consideration of the larger process of engaging in an effective college search, but it is also an important indicator of whether students are engaged more broadly in a search that incorporates the larger question of fit. Furthermore, research, including our own, has consistently found that college choice matters, particularly for well-qualified students; there is wide variation in college graduation rates, even among colleges that serve similar students.²

When we examined match among CPS students, the dominant pattern of behavior for students who mismatch is not that they choose to attend a four-year college slightly below their match. Rather, many students mismatch by enrolling in two-year colleges or not enrolling in college at all. Across all students, about two-thirds (62 percent) of students attended a college with a selectivity level that was below the kinds of colleges they would have most likely been accepted to, given their level of qualifications.

FIGURE 19
Students who were accepted into a four-year college were much more likely to enroll if they completed the FAFSA

Difference in college enrollment by whether students completed their FAFSA among students who were accepted into a four-year college:



Note: FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) completion rates come from student responses to the 2005 CPS Senior Exit Questionnaire. Numbers are based on the Potholes Sample (see Appendix B for details).

- **Among the most highly qualified students in CPS, only 38 percent enroll in a match college.**

One-quarter of students with qualifications to attend a very selective college enrolled in a college with a slightly lower level of selectivity (a selective college). About 20 percent enrolled in a somewhat selective college (a college with a selectivity rating far below their level of qualifications). An additional 17 percent enrolled in a nonselective four-year college, a two-year college, or no college at all. Taken together, the most-qualified students were equally likely to not enroll in college or enroll in a college far below their match (37 percent) as they were to enroll in a very selective college (38 percent).

- **Mismatch is an issue among CPS students of all levels of qualifications.**

Students in our sample with access to selective colleges (e.g., DePaul University or Loyola University) were actually less likely to match than their classmates with access to very selective colleges. Only 16 percent of students with access to selective colleges enrolled in a match college. An additional 11 percent enrolled in a very selective college, a rating higher than their match category—what we term “above match.” Thus only 27 percent of CPS graduates in the Match Sample with access to a selective college enrolled in a selective or very selective college, while fully 29 percent of these students enrolled in a two-year college or did not enroll at all. This mismatch problem is nearly as acute for students who had access to somewhat selective colleges (the majority of four-year public colleges in Illinois).

5. Among the most highly qualified students, having discussions on postsecondary planning and having strong connections to teachers is particularly important in shaping the likelihood of enrolling in a match school.

In addition, we found that all students were much more likely to match if they attended schools with strong college-going cultures. Thus, attending a high school where teachers are oriented to prepare and support students in their postsecondary aspirations has a strong impact on whether students go on to attend a match college.

Concluding Points

No Child Left Behind has made closing the gap in educational achievement among racial/ethnic groups and between low-income students and their more advantaged peers a priority of every school in the United States. One area where we have seen dramatic reductions in gaps across race/ethnicity and income is in educational aspirations. But we know that closing the gap in high school performance is critical if we are to help students attain their college aspirations. In our last report, we found that poor qualifications undermined CPS students’ college access and performance. We argued that central to improving college access was getting students to increase their qualifications, work harder, and value their classroom performance.

If we are to ask students to work harder and value achievement, educators and policymakers must work equally as hard to deliver on the promise that if students achieve high levels of qualifications, they will have equal access to the kinds of colleges and opportunities as their more advantaged counterparts. In a world of rising college costs, CPS educators unfortunately will have difficulty delivering on that promise. But, the findings of this report demonstrate the myriad of ways in which CPS students, even the highest performers, are disadvantaged as they work to translate those qualifications into college enrollment. Too many Chicago students who aspire to attain a four-year college degree do not even apply to a four-year college. Too many students who are accepted do not enroll. In this report, we show how the social capital gap—the extent to which students have access to norms for college enrollment, information on how to prepare and effectively participate in college search and selection, and effective guidance and support in making decisions about college—shapes students’ college access. Like previous research, we find that low-income students struggle in the process of college search and application and encounter potholes that divert them off the road to four-year colleges. The good news in this report is there are ways that CPS teachers, counselors, and administrators can improve college access for students: ensuring that students who aspire to attain a four-year degree get the help they need to understand how to make decisions about potential colleges, making sure that students effectively participate in the college application process and apply for financial aid in time to maximize their financial support, and urging students to apply to colleges that match their qualifications.

“The rising aspirations of urban students demands that high school educators see themselves as playing a new and important role in students’ lives...Ensuring that students effectively participate in the college search and financial aid processes is not just important for students’ college outcomes. It may also be a critical component of any larger high school reform effort.”

—Interpretive Summary, *From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College*

To download a copy of the full report or request a printed copy, visit: ccsr.uchicago.edu/potholes

The analysis in this report suggests two important take-home messages to educators. The first is that 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 search, planning, and application process.³ The second take-home message is that if the most highly qualified students do not attend colleges that demand high qualifications, then their hard work has not paid off. Making hard work worthwhile must be a central goal if CPS is going to ask all students to work hard and value their course performance and achievement.

Paying attention to whether students effectively participate in the college search and application process could be an essential support for high school reform if we use it to convince students that working hard in high school and valuing achievement will pay off for them in the future. This task is not an easy one. The interpretive summary highlights three critical areas that high schools must develop if they are to help students understand why achievement matters, aspire to postsecondary institutions that demand that achievement, and obtain access to those institutions by effectively participating in college search and selection. These areas are: (1) building strong systems of support for the college search and application process during junior and senior years; (2) creating strong college-going cultures that set norms for college attendance and provide information,

relationships, and access to concrete supports and expert knowledge to build bridges to the future; and (3) providing access to information and guidance in obtaining financial aid, information about how to afford colleges, and the true costs of different college options.

Indeed, the findings of this report raise the question: What will it take to build new systems of support and new capacity at the district, school, and classroom levels? The problems outlined in this report are complex, and we have provided no easy list of solutions. The scope suggests that multiple and varied solutions will be required and must include a focus on building capacity. What are we asking teachers, counselors, and school staff to accomplish? What are the best ways of organizing systems of supports, staffing, and information that will build the capacity of teachers, counselors, and schools—and ultimately of parents and students? What kinds of incentives, programmatic and personnel resources, and management systems will best promote a strong focus on college access in a diverse set of high schools? CPS has already begun to take the first steps to build a system to support its students on the road to college with its postsecondary initiatives, but the task will also require substantial resources from the district and strong commitments from each high school to develop new approaches and capacity. We hope the analysis and data provided in this report provide a useful tool for policymakers, educators, and the larger community to begin this work.

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2004).
- 2 Titus (2004); Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth (2006).
- 3 McDonough (1997); Cabrera and La Nasa (2000); Gonzales, Stoner, and Jovel (2003).



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Consortium researchers spent nearly two years interviewing and tracking the academic progress of 105 students in three Chicago high schools. Each of the ten case studies included in the “Potholes” report tells the story of an individual student but also highlights the difficulties faced by many students in the postsecondary planning process.

“My parents told me to do whatever I want, that money isn’t an issue, but I think it is. So...I’m going to pick a college that would make it easier for my family.”—*Javier, a first-generation college student, lacked strong college guidance from his school and enrolled in an automotive technical school, despite an academic record that qualified him for a selective college.*

“I just keep seeing those essays. I’m like, ‘OK, I’m going to get back to that. And then...I just feel like I don’t have enough time in the day.” —*Sabrina, a highly qualified student with an overwhelming senior year workload, became too focused on one college option and never enrolled in college in the fall after graduation.*

“I have no idea. I want to go to college, but I’m at the point [where] I don’t know what I want to be. That’s pretty much how you’re spending the rest of your life...so I find it’s a pretty big decision.”—*Jennie, a well-rounded student who earned top grades in a rigorous International Baccalaureate program but made an early decision to attend a two-year college.*

“I’m going to apply to many different schools because I don’t want to get stuck and focus on one university and that doesn’t go through.”—*Franklin, a charismatic student with modest academic qualifications and strong support at home who conducted a thorough college search and landed in a well-matched state public university.*

To read their stories and download the case studies, see: ccsr.uchicago.edu/potholes



Understanding the Conditions for Postsecondary Success

Increasing College Success for High School Seniors

A sample research presentation on the importance of a school-wide focus on college success in order to increase student enrollment and persistence. The presentation was created with Network for College Success Coaches and a UChicago Consortium researcher.

[Click here to view >>](#) Coming soon!



Understanding the Conditions for Postsecondary Success

Potholes Case Studies and Analysis Exercise

The case studies included in the *Potholes* research report highlight ten students who struggled at different points in the postsecondary planning process. The corresponding analysis exercise can help Counselors and other educators analyze the case studies and collectively think about the implications for practice.

Three case studies are included in this Toolkit. To read all of the case studies, [click here >>](#)



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Case Studies

From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College



Melissa Roderick, Jenny Nagaoka, Vanessa Coca, Eliza Moeller
with Karen Roddie, Jamilyah Gilliam, and Desmond Patton

Clara—A Case Study

Making her hard work pay off all by herself

Can it be assumed that smart, motivated students can manage the postsecondary planning process just fine on their own? Clara shows that, when it comes to college planning, even the best students in a school can go almost unnoticed by adults.

From the first semester of her freshman year until the day she walked across the stage at graduation, Clara¹ was the one of the top students in her class at Ellison High School. She graduated from the IB program with a weighted GPA of 4.7 and an ACT score of 24. Her stellar high school performance afforded her the opportunity to attend not only a very selective school but almost any college or university in the country. Clara's teachers confirmed her academic ability. Her English teacher described her as: "A rare individual. The only problem or weakness I see in this student is the pressure she places on herself." Her math teacher said: "She has extremely high expectations of herself and has a strong work ethic that allows her to meet her high standards. At the same time, she always helps her peers." Clara was a prolific writer of fiction and poetry, for which she won numerous awards, including some scholarships. In the minds of her teachers, peers, and family, there were few doors not open to this remarkable young woman.

Clara lived with both her parents and younger sister. Although Clara's parents, who are of Puerto Rican descent, had virtually no experience with college, Clara made it clear her mother was her greatest ally in college planning. Clara's mother insisted that Clara attend a "good school," but neither Clara nor her mother was sure what schools are considered "good."

Junior Year: An Active but Uninformed College Search

During the spring of her junior year, Clara was clear about her intent to go to a four-year college but had a hard time describing her ideal college. She did, however, know that she wanted to stay in Chicago so she could continue to live at home and that she preferred a small college. And while Clara had never taken an art class

in high school, she wanted to study art and design. When asked why she said:

"I'm not really sure what [graphic design] consists of. I just know it's like you're designing. There's this website and you make your own pages with all these codes, and I did it and I liked the results. And that's why I really want to go into graphic design."

By the end of junior year, Clara's plan was to study art or design at a school where she could take a variety of courses. A teacher had encouraged her to attend a more comprehensive college than an art and design school. Clara liked this idea because it would allow her to experiment with different kinds of courses. In the end, though, her list of colleges was the same as many of her less-qualified peers, including schools like Northeastern Illinois University, the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Loyola University. Clara wasn't excited about attending any of them.

Summer: Doing Her Research Campus by Campus

Clara's mother was as active as Clara in the process of college search and selection. Every time Clara mentioned a college that she was interested in attending, her mother insisted on driving to the campus for a tour and even sitting in on classes. Clara and her mother visited several colleges over the summer, and Clara completed a week of classes at the Illinois Institute of Art.

Fall Senior Year: Making Up Her Mind

In the fall of her senior year, Clara continued a college search that was extensive, but not well directed. Clara spoke casually with her teachers about her college plans, but she had not spoken with a counselor or had a

serious conversation about her college choices with any educator at her school. Clara reported an incident in the counseling office when she was trying to figure out the difference between official and unofficial transcripts:

“Everyone’s so grouchy . . . in the [counseling] office. I guess I can understand, because they wouldn’t remember one single application, but I don’t know . . . they could be more approachable.”

Clara invested significant time and energy in completing applications to about eight schools. Many of Clara’s peers in the IB program struggled to balance the demands of rigorous IB culminating projects and the college application process. Clara got everything done on time—even submitting applications for Loyola and Columbia College in Chicago (a nonselective four-year college) by the priority deadlines—without her school work suffering. In the fall, Clara said she planned to attend Columbia “*for sure*.” She toured the school, enjoyed the atmosphere and downtown location, and knew she could study graphic design.

Winter Senior Year: Changing Her Mind

During her winter interview, Clara said she changed her mind and decided to “*definitely*” attend Loyola, again based largely on having toured the campus and sat in on a class there, which she enjoyed. She was accepted to Loyola and Columbia, and Loyola offered her a merit-based scholarship to cover some of her tuition. Though Clara had no problem completing her college applications, she was overwhelmed by the process of applying for financial aid. She was familiar with tax documents because she helped her parents complete their forms, but she was confused by certain questions on the FAFSA. Clara was confident she’d figure it out and complete her financial aid applications by April or May. She never met with a counselor.

Spring Senior Year: Changing Her Mind Again

Clara changed her mind about which college to attend one more time before graduation, and finally planned to attend a small, in-state liberal arts school ranked as somewhat selective.² Spring of her senior year was the first time she ever mentioned this school:

Interviewer: [That school] is not on this list. Last time you said Loyola, UIC, and Columbia . . . [laughing] What happened?

Clara: [Laughing] [My mom and I] passed by the school, and I’m like, ‘This is a nice school. What is that?’ So my mom started looking up stuff. She [told me], ‘I think you’d like this school.’ And so we looked at it, the web page and then we signed up for the tour. I really love this school.

Clara was one of the top five students in her graduating class, but she never considered applying to a very selective college. Apparently, no one steered her to one either. Her teachers recognized that she was a remarkable young woman, but she never spoke to a counselor and never seriously discussed her plans for the future with any adult at her school.

Not surprisingly, Clara was accepted at all the institutions to which she applied. Though her confusion over financial aid looked like it might have been a serious stumbling block when she discussed it in February, Clara ended up figuring out financial aid, presumably with the help of her new college, and she did end up receiving enough federal, institutional, and private scholarship money to make her college education affordable for her and her family.³ Clara’s IB coursework and test scores helped place her into advanced freshmen courses at her college. In the fall, she was thoroughly engaged as an English major and very happy with her college choice.

With the help of an exceptionally involved parent, Clara managed to find her way to a school that made her feel at home, took care of her as a first-generation college student, and promised to support her academic ambitions throughout college. It is also apparent that this choice was arrived at through no small amount of luck, with Clara and her mother accidentally happening upon a college that proved a good fit for Clara. With such limited guidance from her school, it is easy to imagine how Clara’s story might not have had such a positive ending.

Endnotes for this case study can be found on page 96.

Javier—A Case Study

When schools talk about college, students listen

How closely do students listen to the messages schools convey about postsecondary education? Javier, a quiet teen with a strong drive to attend college and excellent academic qualifications, illustrates how first-generation college-goers depend on their schools to provide postsecondary guidance.

A Mexican-American student born and raised in Chicago, Javier¹ graduated from Silverstein High School with a 3.95 weighted GPA and a 21 on the ACT, earning him access to a selective college. Javier—with an easygoing nature and genuine desire to learn—thived in the classroom. His teacher described him as “very gifted . . . his reading, writing, and composition skills are superior. He is focused, motivated and a true pleasure to have in class.” Like many other well-qualified students, Javier managed to apply to multiple colleges, but without guidance, this wasn’t enough to ensure he would consider colleges that matched his qualifications.

Junior Year: Seeking the Right Information

Javier and his entire family expected that he would attend a four-year college. He believed college would make life easier. Javier’s drafting teacher, a former architect, often talked to the class about college requirements and deadlines. Javier was very invested in this class and spoke at length with his teacher, who provided him with career guidance, including information about internship opportunities. From that point on, Javier was set on becoming an architect.

Javier chose a rigorous senior year course schedule to prepare to attend a four-year college. He enrolled in AP English and honors college algebra.

“I chose math because I just couldn’t see next year without math, I would be all confused the first year of college. I think colleges are looking for the students that take challenges.”

Javier also participated in a program in his junior and senior years that allowed him to earn college credit

by taking a computer information technology class at Northwestern Business College every Saturday morning. At the end of junior year, Javier started researching colleges on the Internet, but his college search was limited to schools he heard about on television or who sent him information.

Fall Senior Year: Confused Search, Diligent Applications

Javier returned to school from summer vacation and continued to struggle to understand how the college search process worked. Applying to college was new territory for him and his family, so he needed all the help he could get: “*I don’t know anything about college, so information is information.*” He listened intently to his teachers as they shared scholarship information and important deadlines, but they never talked to him one-on-one about college. As advised, he retook the ACT and improved his score from a 19 to a 21. He never spoke with a counselor about his postsecondary plans. He explained:

“She doesn’t talk to us individually. We could go talk to her, but . . . she’s always busy.”

Even without personalized help, Javier eagerly participated in the college search process with what limited information he had. He now planned to study computer engineering and diligently researched application deadlines and admissions requirements on the Internet. However, he still was only able to identify a few college possibilities and couldn’t answer why he believed those schools would be a good choice for him.

Despite his lack of information, Javier was ahead of the game with his applications. By November, he had already applied to three schools, all far below his

match: DeVry University, Robert Morris College, and Northwestern Business College. Javier continued to attend classes at Northwestern Business College and was rewarded with an \$11,000 scholarship for completing the program and having a GPA over 3.5.⁶ This would cover the bulk of his tuition, but he would still be responsible for a few thousand dollars. Even with the scholarship, he was still concerned about paying for college. He believed that the bulk of his tuition should be paid for through independent scholarships, so he put great energy into searching the Internet for scholarships. Javier also expected to take out loans but hadn't begun to make sense of how to do this. When he spoke to his mother about tuition, she told him not to worry about the cost, but he still saw it as a barrier:

“[My parents] told me...money isn't an issue, but I think it is. So I'm trying to pick a college that would make it easier for my family.”

Javier would be the first in his family to pursue higher education. Although his parents couldn't offer specific advice as he searched for colleges, they always supported his decision to attend college.

Winter Senior Year: Now What?

By February, Javier was at a standstill. He hadn't researched or applied to any additional colleges. All three colleges he applied to had accepted him, but he was ambivalent about which he wanted to attend, even though Northwestern Business College had offered him a scholarship. He put the college decision on the back burner while he waited for his parents to finish filing their taxes so he could complete the FAFSA. He figured he'd decide after the financial aid letters arrived.

Spring Senior Year: A Choice He Understands

At the end of senior year, Javier shifted gears again. His drafting teacher brought in a representative from the Universal Technical Institute (UTI), a local automotive and diesel repair school with an 18-month job certification program. Right away, Javier became very interested in an automotive repair career. After the presentation, Javier asked the UTI representative for his

card, contacted him, and the representative arranged a meeting at Javier's home. During this home visit, Javier filled out the application and was soon accepted. His parents were supportive of their son's decision. Javier never visited UTI, but it seemed like a practical option and he latched onto it.

“I decided to go to UTI because I was more interested in the program, and it's less time. The other colleges would have been three or four years. I just want to get the studies over with and go to work.”

This was the first time an adult sat down and asked Javier specific questions about college and walked him through the steps to apply and enroll in school. UTI also offered the small class size that Javier preferred and would help him find a job while in school. No other college provided Javier with information and attention like UTI.

At that point, Javier decided the cost of the school was no longer a concern. To cover the \$23,000 tuition, Javier would continue to work part-time and was assured that UTI would help him find a higher paying job when classes started. He reported that the school gave him modest financial aid: \$1,900 for books and supplies. He was still waiting to hear back about his FAFSA, and UTI told Javier they would “*check into it.*” It is unclear whether or not he applied for financial aid correctly and why he chose UTI over Northwestern Business College, where he had already received a substantial scholarship. UTI seemed to be a safe choice; he had someone who had taken an interest in his future and personally walked him through the process.

During high school, Javier attended presentations by four postsecondary institutions—the only four schools to which he applied. Javier's college search barely went beyond these four schools and never included even one selective college. Javier is an example of an intelligent, motivated student whose limited information prevented him from completing a thorough search for a match school. A one-on-one conversation with an adult at school who recognized his academic potential could have altered his outcome dramatically, ensuring he at least considered schools he was qualified to attend.

Franklin—A Case Study

A successful search with modest qualifications

Does a student have to be highly qualified to thoroughly engage in the college search and application process? Franklin demonstrates that with the right information, strong supports at home, and a drive to attend college, a student with modest qualifications can make a college match—and a successful transition.

A charismatic African-American student at Ellison High School, Franklin¹ graduated with a B average and an ACT score of 19, giving him access to a somewhat selective college. Since many of the colleges in Illinois are considered somewhat selective, Franklin was at an advantage in finding a match school. His thoughtful, extroverted nature brought enthusiasm to his baseball team and a liveliness to the classroom. When asked about his future, Franklin never wavered in his desire to attend a four-year college. To Franklin, success meant some day owning a music production company, and he demonstrated his commitment to this goal by spending countless hours in his cousin's recording studio. He planned to major in business.

Though Franklin was committed to his schoolwork, he did not achieve the highest grades. Teachers and staff at Ellison knew Franklin well and recognized his potential to mature. His English teacher described him as “lively, funny, and creative . . . he very much needs to hear that he has potential, not only in the music world but also academically.” Another teacher nominated him for a leadership program, and Franklin took his role as a leader seriously.

Junior Year: Ahead of the Game With His Search

Unlike most students, Franklin knew his way around a college campus because he spent many weekends with his brother, a Northern Illinois University student. Franklin liked Northern and could see himself as a student there, but he hesitated to follow in his brother's footsteps.

Thanks to his family's guidance, Franklin never seemed overwhelmed by the college search process, a problem that stymied so many of his peers. In the fall, Franklin started making a list of possible colleges,

including Northern, the University of Illinois, and Illinois State University. He zeroed in on schools that offered a business major and the opportunity to play baseball. Franklin's brother played an important role in his search, and his mother pushed him to attend college outside the Chicago area.

Franklin knew his grades were crucial for college acceptance, and he worked harder in his junior year classes than he had in previous years. He took a business class, improved his writing, and relished the challenge of his AP and honors classes:

“Colleges, they look at that and see [me] getting As and Bs in honors classes . . . and [they say], ‘I think he can do well in a college class.’”

Franklin completed his junior year feeling confident about his achievements and his decisions for senior year. After careful thought, he decided not to take a math class during his senior year; instead, he decided to take a class in which he was sure to earn an A or B in order to keep his GPA high.

Summer: A Little Work, a Little Play

Over the summer, Franklin spent many hours working on his music at his cousin's recording studio. At his mother's suggestion, he got a job at the library—which he held throughout his senior year and felt strengthened his “*people skills*.” He also attended baseball camps around the Midwest, including one camp at Ohio University. While there, Franklin decided to add Ohio University to his list of possible schools. For Franklin, a pattern was emerging: each college campus he visited made its way onto his college list.

Fall Senior Year: Relying on Family, Honing His List

In the fall, Franklin carefully narrowed his list. School brochures accumulated, and Franklin diligently read each piece of mail. He fell behind schedule because he spent more time looking at applications than filling them out. He said:

“I’m not going to rush to make a decision. I’m going to apply to many different schools because I don’t want to get stuck and focus on one university and that doesn’t go through.”

Franklin recognized which schools were realistic for him and considered schools he knew matched his qualifications, as well as a few “reach schools.” Franklin was aware that colleges look beyond academic qualifications and also consider a student’s personal qualities. He knew it would be important to portray himself well in his essays.

Despite all of his hard work, Franklin had not spent much time talking to adults in his school. He had not visited his counselor, but he knew he needed to do so to obtain his transcripts. Although he always sought his mother’s counsel, his main source of guidance was his brother who Franklin credited with providing the best advice about how to pick the right school.

When it came to financing college, Franklin was in a better position than many of his peers. Franklin’s mother and brother both were attending college and had experience with applying for financial aid. Franklin’s mother assured him she would handle it, which he reported she did in February. The cost of college never intimidated Franklin; he felt comfortable taking on college loans to attend the school of his choice. He and his mother spoke often about the cost of college, and they both agreed he would attend college no matter what it took. If it took him 30 years to pay off his college debt, he was OK with that. Above all, he wanted to identify a college he could both enjoy and afford.

Winter Senior Year: Finding His Favorites

Late in the fall, Franklin visited a friend at Southern Illinois University. He immediately felt comfortable

there and added Southern to his list—in fact, he moved it to the top. Because Franklin applied primarily to state schools with less complex applications, he was able to start and finish his applications in January and not miss any deadlines. He worked on his personal statement in his business class and submitted it to his two top schools. Before applying, he had asked both his teacher and mother to read his essay. In total, Franklin applied to seven schools.

Spring Senior Year: Filling in the Final Details

By the end of his senior year, Franklin had taken all the necessary steps to ensure he would attend college. While he did not always meet priority deadlines, he still applied early enough to gain acceptance to all seven schools. One final campus visit sold Franklin on attending Southern. He liked the environment and location of the university, felt comfortable among the students, liked the business program, and could afford the tuition. By spring, Franklin had already attended orientation, spoken with business professors, and registered for classes. Overall, Franklin felt his high school did a good job preparing students for college, but the responsibility for following through largely fell to the student:

“It was like we couldn’t always rely on them being there to help us through every little step, even though the guidance is good, but still as a student you still have to push forward and get it done.”

Franklin did not know the specifics of his financial aid package but knew he was in good shape.⁷ Because he would be the third person in his family enrolled in college, he was offered an aid package that made it affordable for him to attend Southern. At the end of senior year, he had met his goals of graduating on time and getting all As except for one B. By fall after graduation, Franklin was happily enrolled at Southern and active in campus life. He played intramural baseball, joined a business fraternity, and worked at a radio station. Franklin was a rare example of a student who navigated the college process successfully and landed in a well-matched college.

Case Studies Analysis Exercise

The Analysis Exercise can be used during school team meetings to discuss the *Potholes* report Case Studies. Teams can divide into small groups to read different case studies and answer the following questions. Someone from each small group should take notes and prepare to share with the larger group.

<p>Share this student’s college match story in one minute or less.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were his or her aspirations? • What kind of colleges could he or she have enrolled in? • Where did he or she end up? 	<p>Notes</p>
<p>What strengths did the student have regarding college planning and/or during the transition to college?</p>	<p>Notes</p>
<p>What would this student have needed in order to make a better transition to college? What was he or she missing? Specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What INFORMATION was the student lacking? • What RESOURCES seemed to be missing? • What SUPPORT could the student have benefited from if it was available to him or her? 	<p>Notes</p>



Understanding the Conditions for Postsecondary Success

To&Through Issue Brief: College Choice

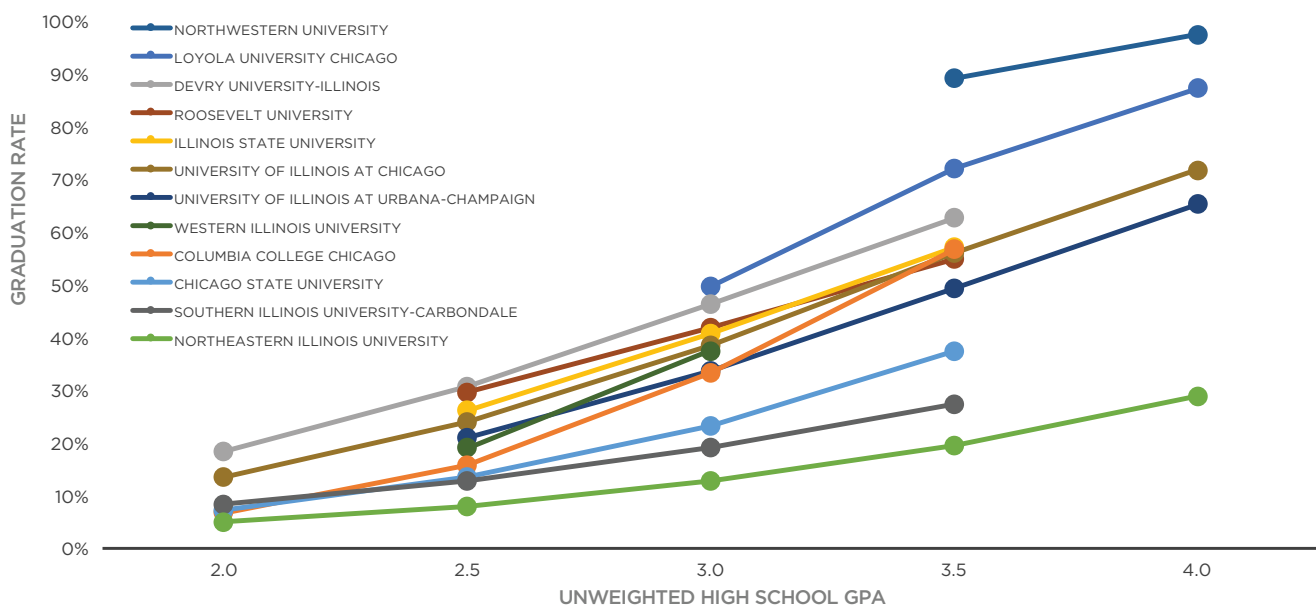
A two-page brief summarizing the UChicago Consortium's latest research on why college choice matters and strategies schools are using to help students navigate the college selection process.

What does UChicago Consortium research say about why college choice matters?

Research from UChicago Consortium shows that for students to successfully navigate the road to college graduation, they must fully engage in a many-stepped process including college search, college choice, and college enrollment. Some of these steps are technical in nature—including the timely submission of college and financial aid applications and forms—but others are more complex, particularly for students who are the first generation in their families to attend college.

An important factor that can inform students' choice is a college's institutional or underrepresented minority graduation rate. Regardless of their academic qualifications, students' likelihood of graduating from a given college mirrors the institutional graduation rate. This is also true for students with strong grades in high school; in fact, college choice matters the most for students with strong academic qualifications.

Other important factors for students to consider in making a college choice include whether or not a college represents a good match for their qualifications and a good fit with their needs and interests. A college “match” occurs when a student applies to and enrolls in a college with a selectivity level that matches the kind of colleges that accept other students with similar high school qualifications. College “fit” goes beyond just beyond selectivity and institutional graduation rate. A good fit meets a student's educational and social needs and best supports his or her intellectual and social development. A student is far more likely to persist through college if he or she feels a sense of belonging and engagement.



These lines come from logistic regression models performed for each high school, predicting graduation with GPA. The regression lines are based on data from all students at each college based on their actual (not rounded) GPA. However, points are included on the graph for a college only if at least 20 students at that college had a rounded high school GPA at that point.

What strategies are some high schools using to work on college choice?

Creating a strong, school-wide college-going culture

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, where teachers are well-versed on the most important factors for college admission and success, 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.

Encouraging students to apply to multiple colleges and strongly consider institutional graduation rates

Students who apply to at least three, and particularly six or more, schools are much more likely to be accepted. This effect is especially strong for students with lower levels of qualifications. Many schools require every senior to submit at least three applications. Moreover, either during the application process or when a student is choosing which college to attend, some schools encourage students to look at institutional graduation rates as a proxy for how well the college or university supports its students.

Ensuring students complete the FAFSA as early as possible

Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is an essential step in the road to college. Completing the FAFSA as early as possible is critical; many colleges and states have early deadlines or give financial aid on a first-come, first-served basis. For the last decade, CPS has centrally tracked how many students are completing the FAFSA and worked with counselors to support students who haven't.

Building a post-secondary team that oversees students' college-going process and the school's college-going culture

Trusted adults like school counselors, administrators, outside community partners, and senior teachers can build a post-secondary team to guide high school students to and through the college-going process. Building strong systems of support for the college search and application process during junior and senior year can have a positive effect on college enrollment. At some schools this team meets monthly or bi-weekly to review data on students' college applications, admissions, financial aid, and scholarships. Some teams also get involved during the summer and fall after graduation, looking to intervene with graduates students who were admitted to college, but might not enroll.

References

Roderick, M., Nagaoka, J., Coca, V., and Moeller, E. (2008). *From high school to the future: Potholes on the road to college*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.