

Steps to Improve Access to College

From High School to the Future: Potholes on the Road to College, by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, offers an unsettling picture of college access and lack thereof among students in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The report examined the 4-year college application process and identified two important steps. The first step is meeting the requirements for admissions such as submitting applications by deadlines, completing financial aid forms, getting accepted, and finally enrolling in college. The second step is finding the right college match for each student. Findings from CPS indicate that only 41% of students with plans to attend a 4-year college completed the first step. Moreover, of those who went on to enroll, 62% of students were in a college below the selectivity level where they could have gone. Another key finding from the study is that completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and applying to multiple colleges increased the likelihood that a student would not only be accepted to a 4-year institution, but also that the student would enroll. Schools could monitor the FAFSA application process and track the number of applications submitted in an effort to increase college access for all students.

The report identifies the most challenging barrier to completing the two steps as an absence of social capital which it describes as a “social capital gap”. This suggests that students who do not have access to human resources, such as parents or family friends to assist in navigating the process, are less likely to complete the processes successfully. One group that is missing this resource is first generation college students, who are at a distinct disadvantage to their peers who have access to social capital through social support throughout the application process. Without these resources at home, students go elsewhere, and in fact, CPS students reported teachers as their strongest support for post secondary planning. Principals can help students by communicating the human support resources available to students so they can get the help and support they need to complete the process.

An especially troubling finding is that Latino students were the least likely student group to enroll in a 4-year college as well as the least likely to apply. In fact, Latino students were 13 percentage points less likely to enroll in a 4-year institution than African American students, even after controlling for immigrant status, qualifications, and other characteristics. Principals should seek to change expectations of students and staff and to use school staff to provide social capital for students.

To view the complete report please visit http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/content/publications.php?pub_id=122.

“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.”