

Measuring Patterns of Immediate and Continued College Enrollment among CPS Graduates

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Technical Paper, October 2024

Introduction

The To&Through Project reports rates of college enrollment and college persistence in community colleges and bachelor's degree granting institutions for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) graduates in our annual post-secondary attainment report and on the To&Through Online High School and Community Tools. We have reconsidered our definitions for both of these metrics, and report both our process and our decisions in this brief.

College enrollment and college persistence metrics allow college counselors and other practitioners to track the progress and impact of their work with CPS students and alumni over time. College enrollment is the most proximate post-secondary outcome to high school graduation. And as college enrollment rates have increased for CPS graduates over time, college persistence has become an even more important measure, as it shows the proportion of growing numbers of enrollees who have remained enrolled through a second year and are likely to complete college.

We have reported on rates of college enrollment and persistence for 10 years, and it is important that we revisit our metrics periodically to ensure that we are providing data that continues to be meaningful and actionable for educators, practitioners, and policymakers. There is no one standard definition of immediate college enrollment or college persistence, since the purpose of measuring these metrics, as well as data availability, varies across institutions and organizations. Given that many national and local organizations, including CPS, use definitions

of enrollment and persistence that differ from those we have historically reported, we sought to identify opportunities for greater alignment across organizations that track outcomes for CPS students, and to clarify the differences in metric definitions across organizations that remain.

Historically, the To&Through Project has reported college enrollment and persistence rates according to the following definitions:

- **Immediate College Enrollment:** Students are considered to have immediately enrolled in college if, and only if, they enrolled in a post-secondary institution in the summer or fall term following their graduation from CPS. We have calculated the immediate enrollment rate as the proportion of CPS graduates from a particular year who immediately enrolled in college. We provide rates for enrollees in community colleges and enrollees in bachelor's degree granting institutions, and a combined rate for all college enrollees.
- **College Persistence:** Students are included in the numerator (i.e., considered to have persisted in college) if, and only if, they were enrolled in any combination of community colleges and bachelor's degree granting institutions during the fall AND spring semester of both of the first two years following their graduation from high school (four semesters total of enrollment). Students are included in the denominator if they were counted as immediate enrollees (see above).

Note that our existing definitions differ in meaningful ways from definitions used by CPS and higher education institutions that track college outcomes for CPS graduates. CPS defines college enrollment as students who enrolled in the summer, fall, or spring the first year after high school graduation. And CPS considers students to have persisted if they were enrolled in at least one term in their first year post-graduation and one term in their second year post-graduation, whether or not they maintained continuous enrollment across all four semesters in the first two years.

As we considered several alternatives to our current metrics, we referred back to the definition of an ideal indicator as one that would be strongly related to college completion, easily understood and calculated, available on a timely basis, causally linked to attainment, and malleable in that the work of practitioners can impact them over time.¹ In considering possible changes to our definitions, we paid attention to the predictive value of these metrics as indicators of college completion, but also considered other impacts of possible changes to the metrics, the number of students who meet the criteria, the variation across student characteristics, and the magnitude of changes in school-level rates. Because our metrics are used by CPS practitioners, we also aimed to have greater consistency with CPS's definition of persistence. We also considered

¹ Allensworth, Nagaoka, & Johnson (2018).

timing of the availability of the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data on college enrollment and how that would affect when we would be able to provide enrollment and persistence metrics so they can be used by practitioners.

Following the analysis outlined in this brief, we made two key decisions regarding our college enrollment and persistence metrics:

1. Our definition of immediate college enrollment will stay the same, and we will find additional opportunities to provide data on spring first-year enrollees. In this memo, we outline the analysis we conducted on these metrics and our reasoning for our decisions. In the first section, *Immediate Enrollment in College*, we reconsider our exclusion of first-year spring enrollees in our definition of immediate enrollment. We look at the number of spring enrollees over time as well as the institutions they attend and the demographic composition of spring enrollees as compared to fall enrollees. We check whether the inclusion of spring enrollees to our definition would lead to substantial changes in 1) rates of enrollment in bachelor's degree granting institutions, 2) the rates of enrollment in community colleges, and 3) differences in patterns by student characteristics.

In the second section, *Measures of College Persistence*, we walk through the measures of continued engagement with college that we considered as alternatives to our existing definition of college persistence, comparing their predictive value and utility.

2. We will redefine our college persistence rate as follows: Students are included in the denominator if, and only if, they immediately enrolled in college in the summer or fall term following their graduation from CPS (no change from prior definition). Students are included in the numerator (i.e., considered to have re-enrolled in the second year) if, and only if, they immediately enrolled in college *and* were enrolled in college *in the fall term of the second year* after their graduation from CPS.

The difference between the new and original definition and is how the numerator is defined. The original numerator only included students who were enrolled during the fall AND spring semester of both of the first two years following their graduation from high school (four semesters total of enrollment), while the new definition only requires enrollment in the fall semester of the first two years (two semesters of enrollment). Both definitions include students enrolled in any combination of community colleges and bachelor's degree granting institutions.

Immediate Enrollment in College

The To&Through Project historically defined immediate enrollment in college as enrollment in the first summer or first fall term following students' graduation from CPS. CPS defines immediate enrollment in college as

enrollment at any time within one year of their graduation from CPS, which includes students whose first enrollment was in the summer, fall, or spring term of the year following their CPS graduation.

We considered altering our definition of immediate college enrollment to align with CPS's definition, as alignment with CPS helps with clarity for practitioners, and because including spring enrollees would provide a more complete picture of CPS graduates' college enrollment. However, in order to include spring enrollees, we would have to push back our annual data reporting timeline and not be able to provide data in as timely fashion to practitioners. Therefore, we focused our analysis on how much including spring enrollees would alter the information we provide on enrollment rates for different groups of students.

We considered the impact of the differences between reported To&Through rates and identified the characteristics of the students who enrolled in college for the first time in the spring term of their first year after graduating from CPS, who were classified as immediate enrollees in college within the To&Through rate. Throughout this analysis, we used enrollment data for CPS graduates from the NSC from the classes of 2005–21.²

How much would our enrollment rates change if we included spring enrollees?

Spring first-time enrollment in bachelor's degree granting institutions was relatively rare among CPS graduates. The difference between the college enrollment rate of CPS graduates including spring enrollees and the rate that does not include spring enrollees in our analysis was very small (see **Figure 1**). The inclusion of spring enrollees in the college enrollment rate did not meaningfully impact the trend and did not change the rate by more than two percentage points for any of the 16 cohorts of graduates for which we reported college enrollment data.

Spring first-time enrollment in community college was more common but has been decreasing over time and still represents a small proportion of all first-year community college enrollees. Among 2021 CPS graduates, 1% of students' first enrollment in college was a spring first-year enrollment at a community college, while per our current definition, 16% of students' first enrollment in college was a fall first-year enrollment at a community college. Inclusion of spring enrollees in the immediate college enrollment rate thus increased the 2021 community college enrollment rate from 16% to 17% (see **Figure 2**). Older cohorts of CPS graduates enrolled in community colleges in the spring at even higher rates, peaking in 2009, when 6% of graduates' first enrollment in college, if any, was a spring enrollment at a community college.

² Data from NSC has several key limitations, including 1) post-secondary institutions can opt out of reporting data to NSC, 2) individual students can exercise their rights under FERPA to block the use of their enrollment and completion records for research purposes, and 3) records are matched to CPS students through an imperfect matching algorithm. For more information about the limitations of NSC data, see Nagaoka & Mahaffie (2020).

FIGURE 1

Very few students enroll in bachelor's degree granting institutions for the first time in spring

Rate of immediate enrollment in a bachelor's degree granting institution for CPS high school graduates, with and without spring enrollees

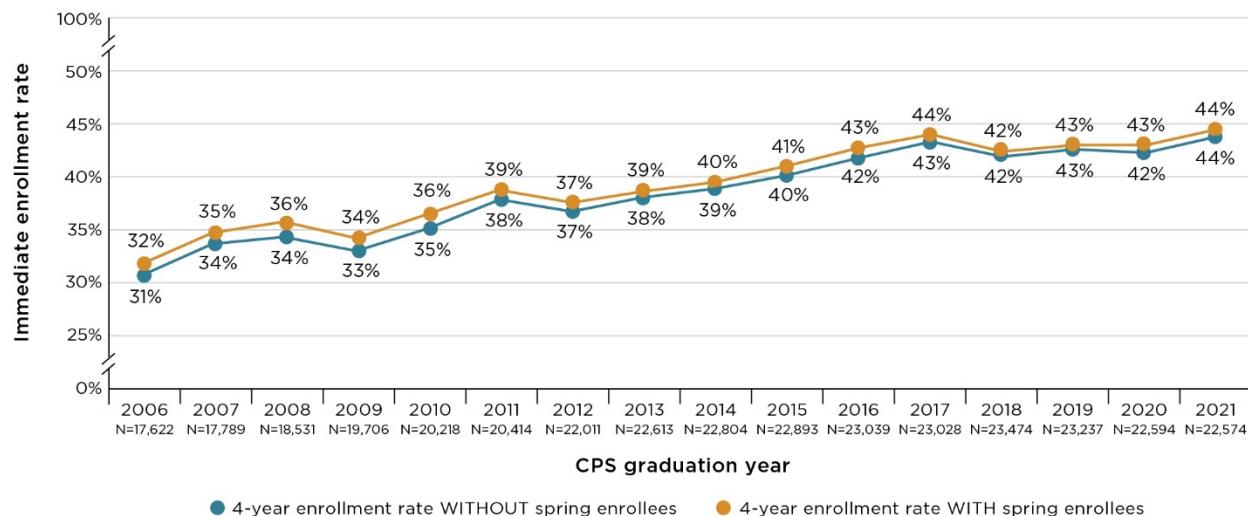
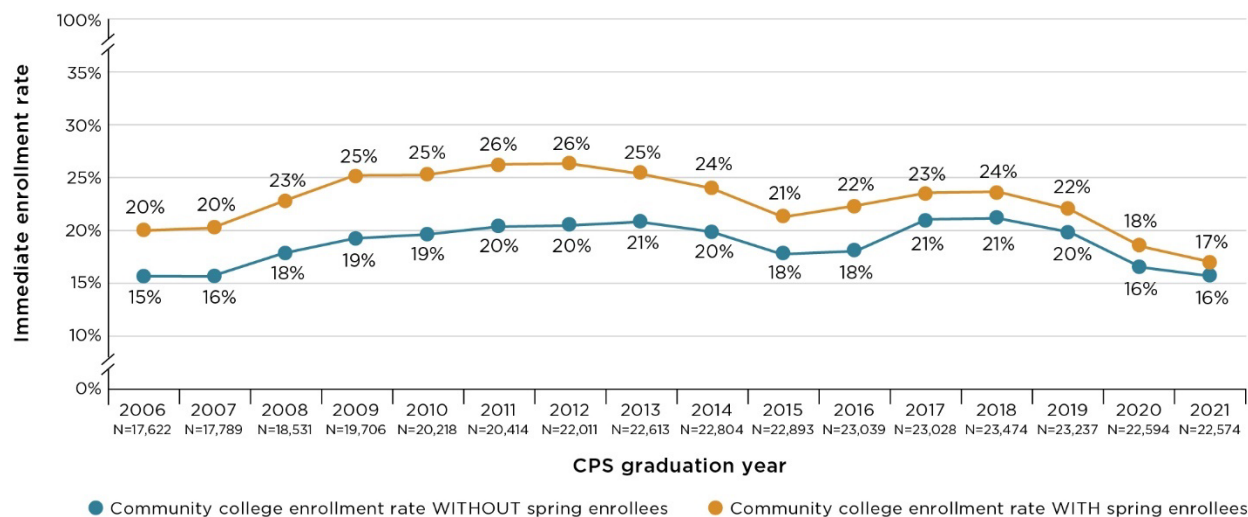


FIGURE 2

Many students enroll in community college for the first time in spring, particularly in 2012 and earlier

Rate of immediate enrollment in a community college for CPS high school graduates, with and without spring enrollees



How do the characteristics of spring enrollees differ from those of fall enrollees?

We examined whether the characteristics of fall enrollees differed from spring enrollees to understand whether our current definition is disproportionately underrepresenting rates of total college enrollment for specific groups of students. Spring enrollees did differ somewhat from fall enrollees in terms of their demographics and their academic qualifications. Black students made up a higher proportion of spring four-year enrollees than fall four-year enrollees, and a higher proportion of spring community college enrollees than fall community college

enrollees (see **Figure 3**). This means that Black college enrollees were somewhat more likely than other students to enroll in college for the first time in the spring. However, the impact of including spring enrollees on the college enrollment rate for Black students was still small: only 178 out of 4,176 Black immediate college enrollees enrolled for the first time in the spring. Students with lower high school GPAs (GPAs below 3.0) also made up a larger proportion of spring enrollees (see **Figure 4**).

FIGURE 3
Black students are slightly overrepresented among spring college enrollees

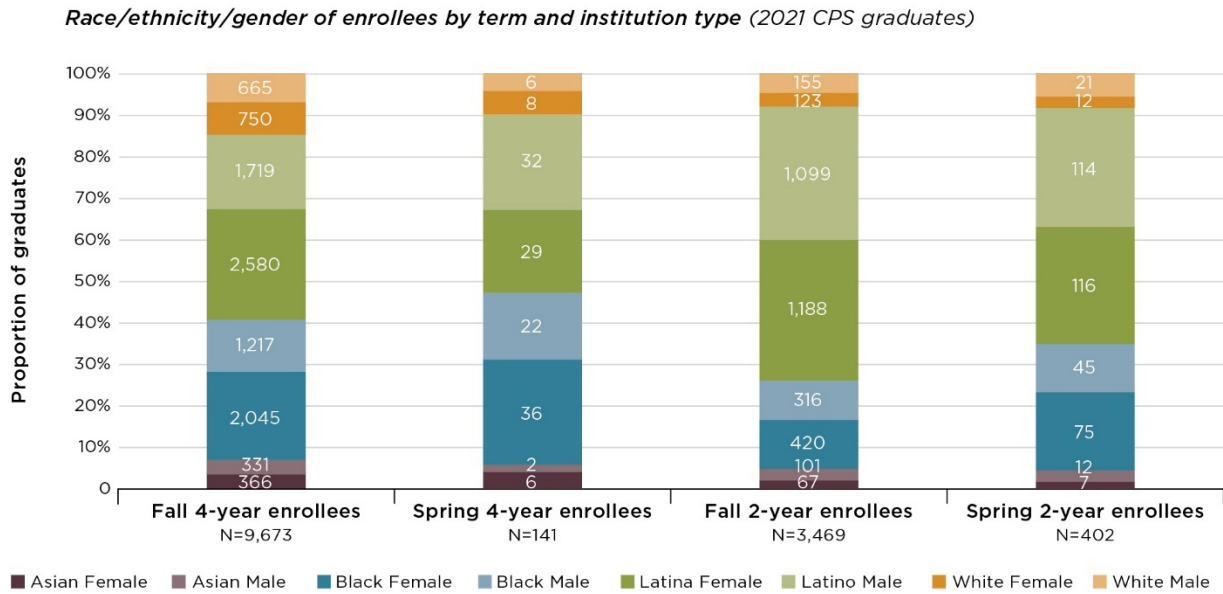
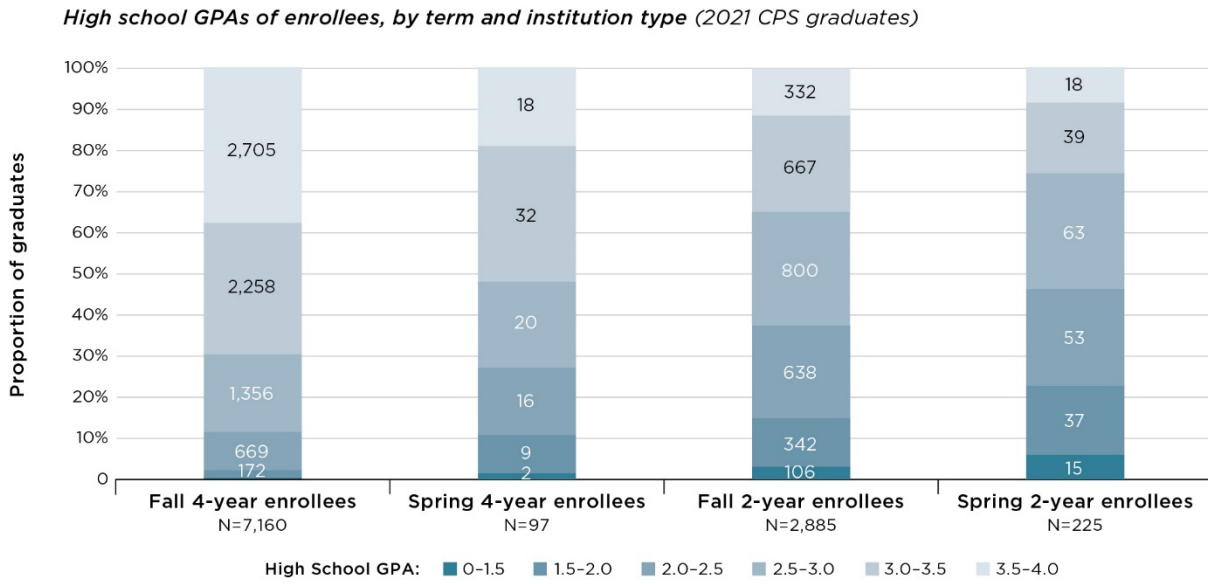


FIGURE 4

Students with lower high school GPAs make up a slightly larger proportion of spring enrollees



Note: Graduates of charter schools are not included, as their GPAs were not available for this analysis.

Takeaways: College Enrollment

Because the number of spring enrollees was small (only 322 students among 2021 CPS graduates) and including them in the immediate enrollment rate would delay the release of college enrollment data, we plan to continue to use only summer and fall enrollment in our definition. However, the systematic differences by race/ethnicity and gender and by GPA between cohorts of fall and spring enrollees mean that tracking spring enrollment and outcomes for spring enrollees is important in understanding pathways for all CPS students. Because we only count summer and fall enrollment and not spring enrollment, our college enrollment rate will continue to be lower than the CPS rate. Going forward, we plan to find more opportunities to report rates of spring enrollment and outcomes for spring enrollees, alongside the rates of immediate fall enrollment that we have historically reported, including in our annual attainment report and on our online tool.

Measures of College Persistence

We considered many possible alternatives to our existing persistence measure. The ideal persistence indicator would be predictive of college completion rates³ and would be clear, comprehensible, calculable on a timely basis, and actionable for both high-school and higher education stakeholders.⁴ We also considered the degree of alignment with definitions used by CPS and other partner organizations.

In considering alternate persistence indicators, we first looked at the completion rates of students who remained continuously enrolled across each number of semesters in the first four years following high school graduation to determine the impact that modifications would have on the predictiveness of our indicator (see **Figure 5**). We confirmed that each additional term of college enrollment was associated with a higher completion rate, but did not find clear cutoff points that indicated any specific semesters had particular predictive value over and above other semesters of enrollment. The group of students who met our existing definition of persistence, which required at least four semesters of continuous enrollment, completed college at a rate 6 percentage points higher than the students who were enrolled continuously for at least three semesters: students who persisted for at least four semesters completed at a rate of 71%, while students who completed at least three semesters of college completed at a rate of 65%. Said another way, the longer students continuously persisted in the first four semesters of college, the more likely they were to complete a degree.

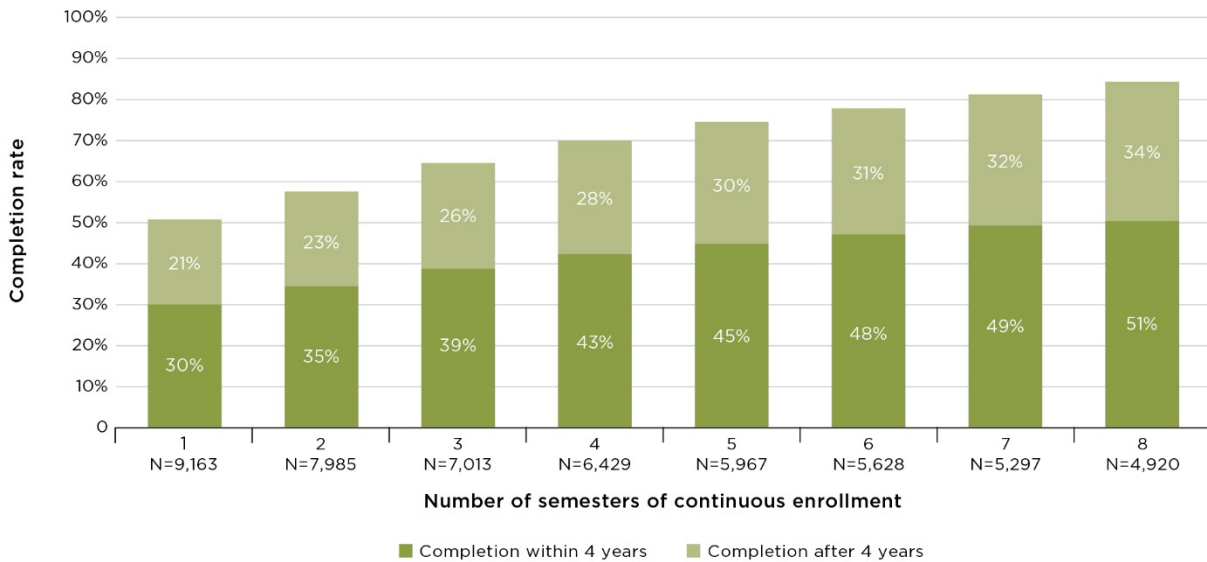
³ An indicator is predictive of college completion if the completion rate of students who meet the indicator criteria is higher than the completion rate of students who do not meet the criteria.

⁴ Allensworth et al. (2018).

FIGURE 5

Every subsequent semester of continued college enrollment is associated with a similar increase in the likelihood of completion.⁵

Bachelor's degree completion rates and number of students who enrolled in bachelor's degree granting institutions, by number of semesters of continuous enrollment following high school graduation



Note: We define a semester of college enrollment as a fall or spring semester. For schools using non-traditional terms, including quarter systems, students who were enrolled for a full academic year were considered to have completed a fall and spring semester.

Based on timeliness, accessibility, and predictiveness, we ultimately narrowed our analysis to five possible variants of persistence, which are defined as follows:

1. Continuous 3 Terms: Continuous enrollment through fall semester of second year
2. Continuous 4 Terms (existing To&Through definition: Continuous enrollment through spring semester of second year
3. Enrollment in Third Semester (new definition): Point-in-time enrollment in second-year fall (including students who had not enrolled in spring semester of first year)
4. Enrollment in Fourth Semester: Point-in-time enrollment in second-year spring (including students who had not enrolled one or more previous semesters)
5. Enrollment in Third or Fourth Semester (most similar to CPS):⁵ Enrollment at any point during the second year

Table 1 summarizes the semesters of enrollment required to meet each of the definition variants.

⁵ It is not possible for us to precisely replicate CPS's persistence calculations due to differences in data availability. CPS's Accountability Handbook states their persistence calculation as follows: "Numerator: Number of students who enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year college in the fall or spring after their graduation from high school who remain enrolled in college in the following fall or spring. Denominator: Number of students who enrolled in a 2-year or 4-year college in the fall or spring after their graduation from high school" (Chicago Public Schools, 2019).

Table 1. Visualizing different measures of persistence

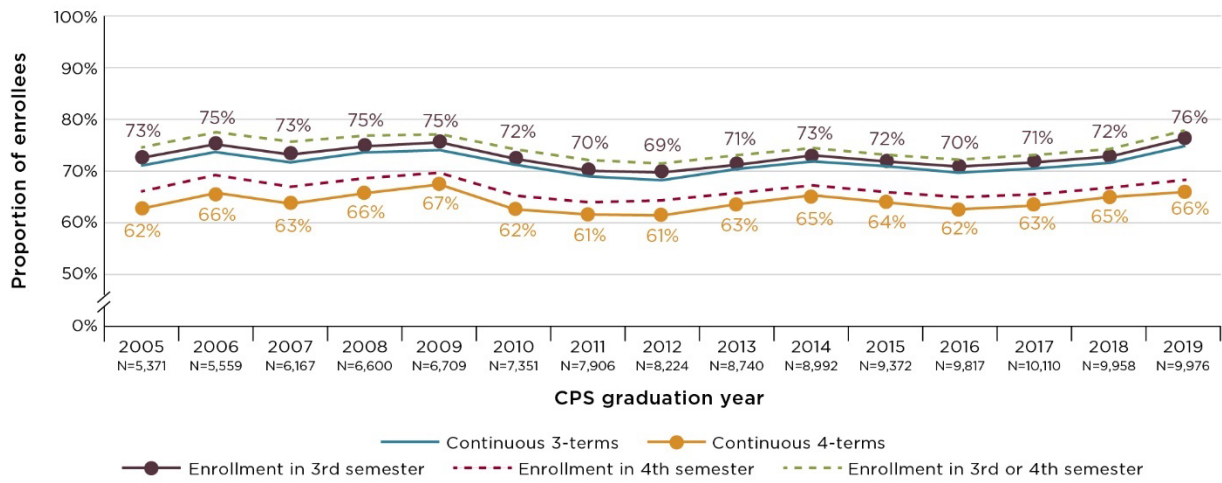
	Year One		Year Two	
	Fall	Spring	Fall	Spring
Continuous 3 Terms	✓	✓	✓	
Continuous 4 Terms (To&Through status quo)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Enrollment in Third Semester (new definition)	✓		✓	
Enrollment in Fourth Semester	✓			✓
Enrollment in Third or Fourth Semester (most similar to CPS)	✓		✓	✓

All five definitions resulted in indicators with relatively similar levels of predictiveness of four-year and six-year completion for bachelor’s degree granting institution enrollees, and rates calculated using all five definitions showed similar trends over time. As **Figure 6** illustrates, there was a 10 percentage point difference between the persistence rates of bachelor’s degree program enrollees calculated under the existing (solid orange line) and proposed (solid purple line) persistence definitions: 76% of 2019 bachelor’s degree enrollees were still enrolled in college in the third semester, while 66% remained continuously enrolled through semester four.

FIGURE 6

Trends in persistence rates are similar across different definitions

Persistence rates of enrollees in bachelor's degree granting institutions over time, under various definitions (2005-2019 CPS Ggraduates)



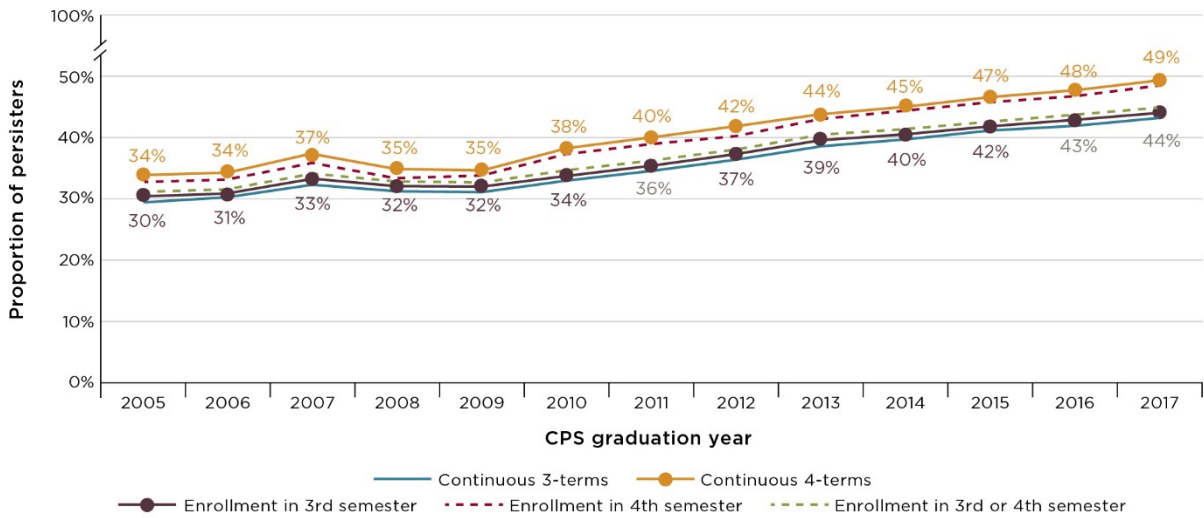
Note: Persistence rate definitions are defined in more detail in Table 1.

Among CPS graduates who were enrolled in bachelor's degree granting institutions in the third semester, the most recent four-year completion rate was 44% and the most recent six-year completion rate was 68%, 5 and 7 percentage points lower, respectively, than the rates for just students who were continuously enrolled for four semesters (49% and 75%) (see **Figure 7**). Among 2015 CPS graduates, the six-year completion rate for students who did not persist under the third-semester enrollment definition was 7%, while the completion rate for students who did not persist under the continuous four term definition was 8% (see **Figure 8**), meaning that the predictiveness of both indicators was relatively similar.

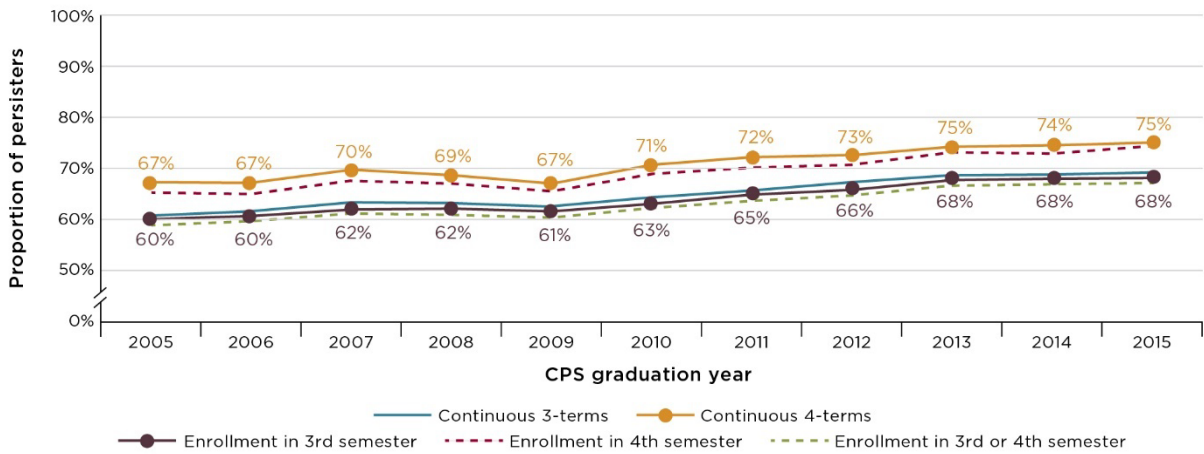
FIGURE 7

Trends in completion rates are similar across definitions, although four-year completion rates have been rising faster than six-year rates

Four-year completion rates of enrollees in bachelor's degree granting institutions who persisted in college, by graduating class (2005-2017 CPS graduates)



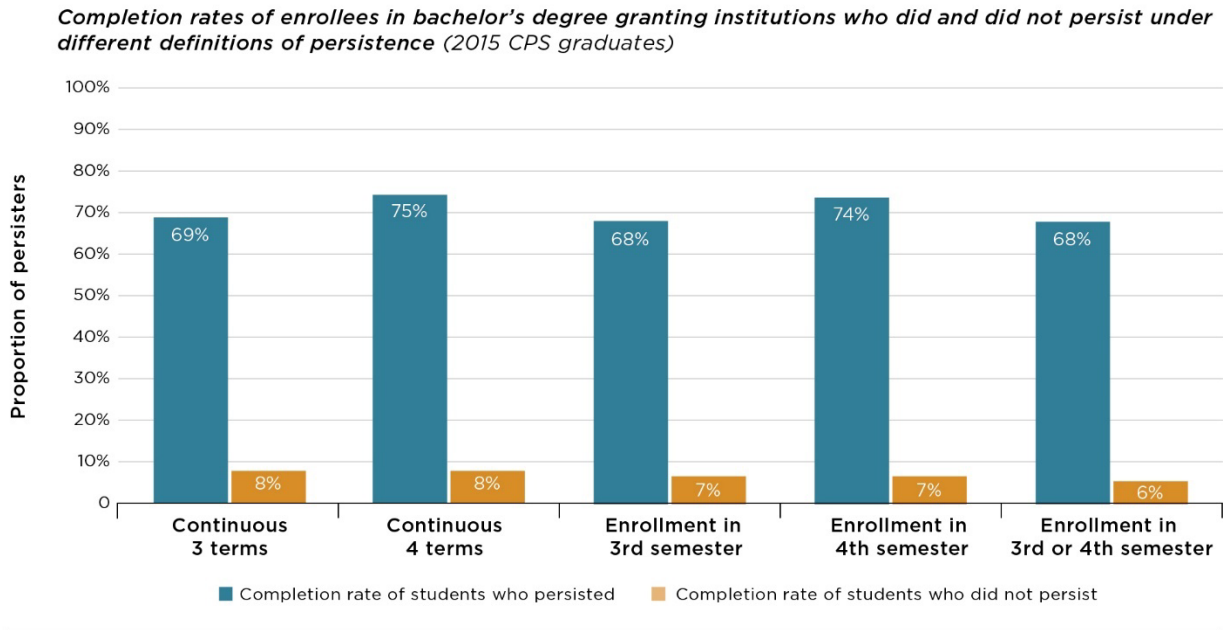
Six-year completion rates of enrollees in bachelor's degree granting institutions who persisted in college, by graduating class (2005-2015 CPS graduates)



Note: Persistence rate definitions are defined in more detail in Table 1.

FIGURE 8

Completion rates are fairly similar across different definitions of persistence



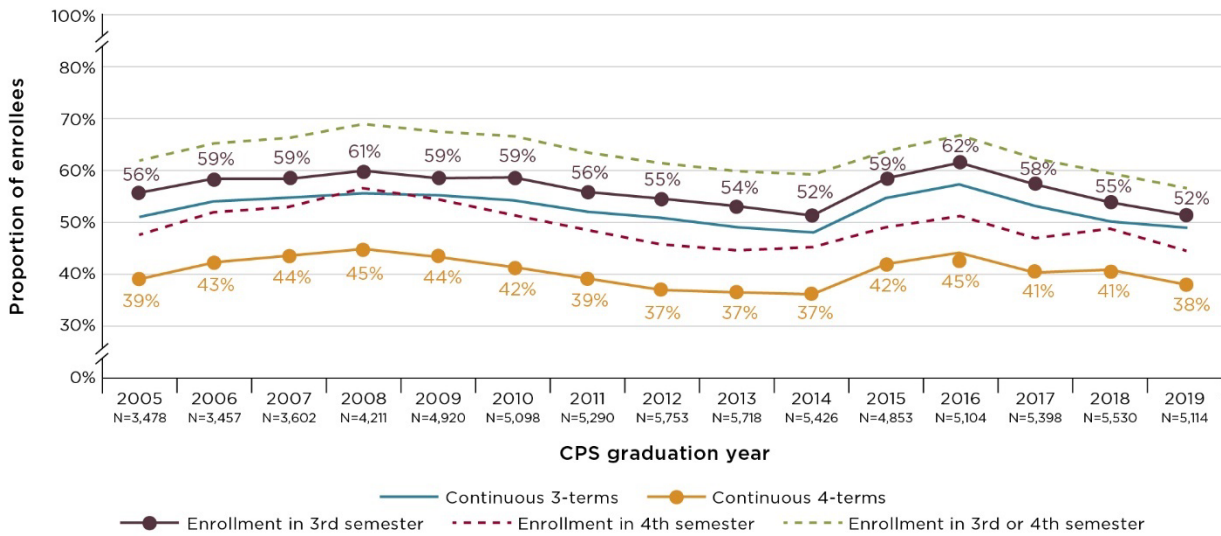
Note: Persistence rate definitions are defined in more detail in Table 1.

Among community college enrollees, there was a larger degree of variation in the persistence rates calculated under the different definitions, with 52% of community college enrollees enrolled in college at the third semester and only 38% remaining continuously enrolled through semester four (a difference of 14 percentage points; see **Figure 9**). Ultimately, for the CPS graduating class of 2015, 46% of the third semester enrollees (and 7% of those who did not meet this definition of persistence) and 59% of the students who were enrolled continuously through semester four (and 9% of the students who did not meet this definition of persistence) completed a credential within six years (a difference of 13 percentage points; see **Figures 10 and 11**).

FIGURE 9

Persistence rates of enrollees in community colleges over time, under various definitions

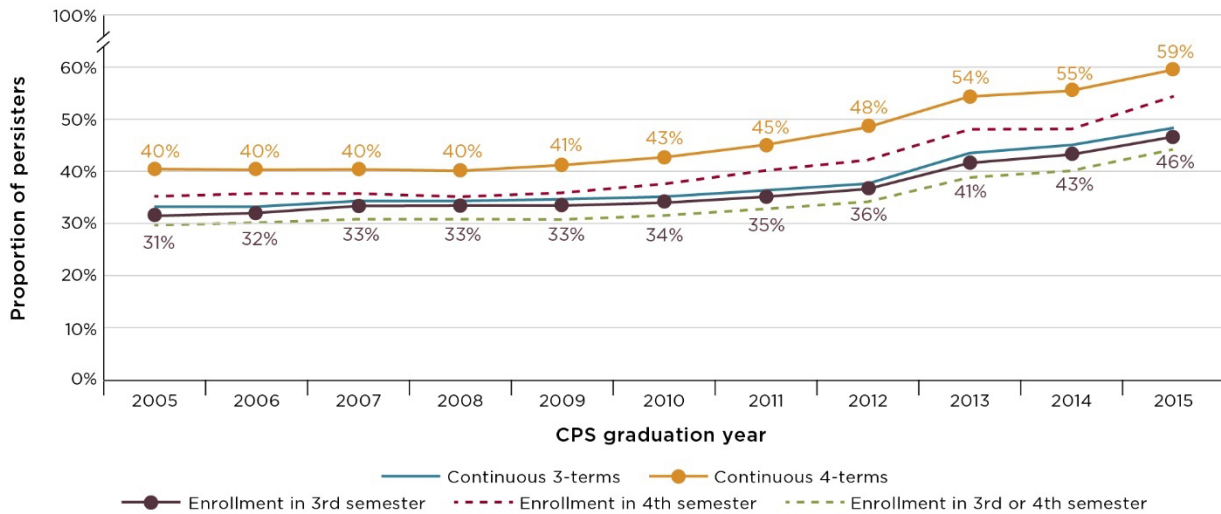
Although the trends across persistence definitions look similar, the rate for continuous 4-terms is considerably lower



Note: Persistence rate definitions are defined in more detail in Table 1.

FIGURE 10

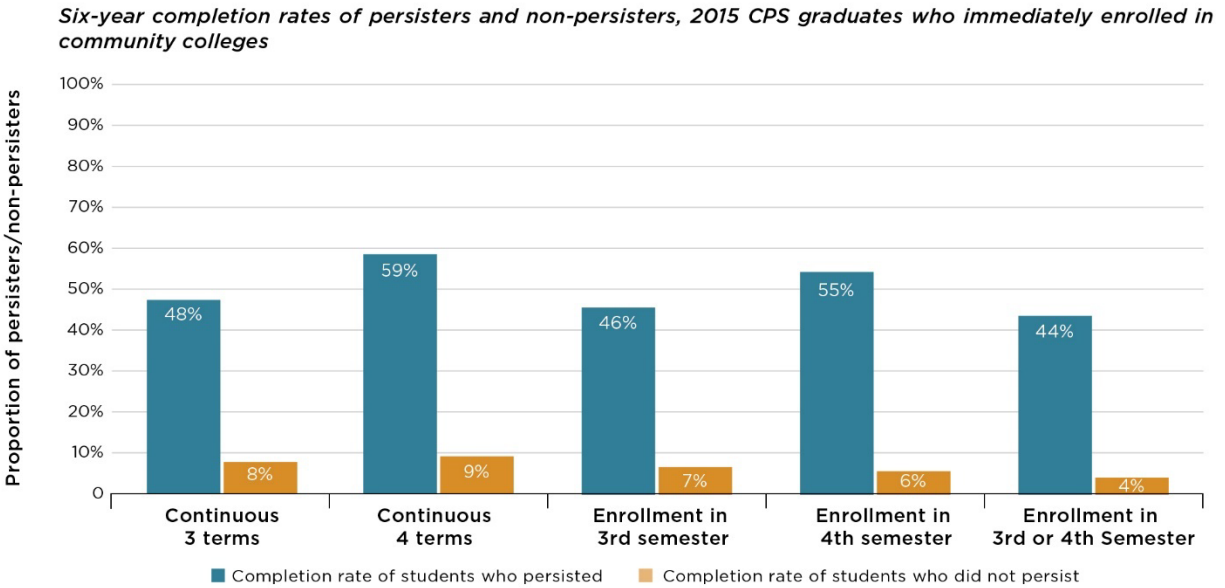
Six-year completion rates of community college enrollees who persisted in college, by graduating class (2005-2015 CPS graduates)



Note: Persistence rate definitions are defined in more detail in Table 1.

FIGURE 11

Completion rates of community college enrollees who did and did not persist under different definitions of persistence (2015 CPS graduates)



Note: Persistence rate definitions are defined in more detail in Table 1.

After considering the rates at the district level, we looked at the impact of this change on the persistence rates of CPS students at individual bachelor’s degree granting institutions and community colleges, as well as the college persistence rates of cohorts of graduates from individual high schools, which were reported on our public-facing tool. We observed that the increases in the persistence rate, changing from the current status quo to the new definition, would be largest for Black and Latino male enrollees (see **Appendix A**). The new definition of persistence changed the rates more for some types of students and in high schools where larger numbers of students enroll into community colleges, and it will be important for practitioners to consider those effects.

Takeaways: College Persistence

After considering many factors, we have decided to use a persistence definition based only on enrollment in the third semester; this means that going forward, the rates on the To&Through tool will be higher than they were with the previous definition. In addition to considering the predictive value of the indicators, our metric choice also considered other factors, including clarity, utility to practitioners, timeliness, and alignment with other organizations. We identified several advantages and disadvantages of changing our metric definition from requiring four-semester continuous enrollment to requiring only point-in-time enrollment in the third semester. Ultimately, the new definition’s benefits in timeliness and greater consistency with CPS outweighed its disadvantages.

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of persistence metric redefinition

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Calculable using fewer pulls of NSC data● Should be calculable around six months earlier than existing metric● More similar to persistence definitions used by local and national organizations, including by CPS and other key stakeholders● Simpler definition; more easily reproducible by external organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Lower completion rate for students who met persistence criteria● Will require shifting definitions on the To&Through online tool● Still not in perfect alignment with CPS definition, due to differences in immediate enrollment definition and data availability● Makes comparison to persistence rates reported in past reports invalid

Reporting an indicator that requires only fall data for the second year after high school graduation will allow us to publish data on second-year college re-enrollment up to six months earlier than our previous college persistence metric, which will make the data available to practitioners on a much more timely schedule. The predictiveness of the new persistence metric, based on point-in-time enrollment in the third semester, is slightly lower than other metrics, and it is important that practitioners understand the new reported rates may be higher, but those do not necessarily indicate higher likelihood of college graduation.

After considering the advantages and disadvantages of this metric redefinition, we decided that the importance of being able to provide data in a timely manner to practitioners and having a simpler and more familiar definition outweighed the modest benefits of predictability provided by the previous definition (see Table 2). With earlier availability of persistence data, practitioners including college counselors, will have access to more proximate information about recent graduates. We hope that practitioners will be able to use this data to think strategically about interventions for these cohorts of alumni and to reflect on their practices with current students.

References

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Appendix A: Disaggregation by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

Table A.1. Persistence rates among enrollees in bachelor's degree granting institutions across definitions, by race/ethnicity and gender, 2021 CPS graduates

Student Group	N	Continuous 3 Terms	Continuous 4 Terms (T&T Status Quo)	Enrollment in Third Semester (new definition)	Enrollment in Fourth Semester	Enrollment in Third or Fourth Semester (most similar to CPS)
Asian Female	366	89%	87%	90%	88%	90%
Asian Male	332	88%	84%	89%	86%	91%
Black Female	2039	58%	49%	60%	52%	62%
Black Male	1216	55%	46%	57%	49%	59%
Latina Female	2571	72%	65%	73%	67%	74%
Latino Male	1716	66%	59%	68%	62%	69%
White Female	749	91%	88%	91%	90%	92%
White Male	664	86%	84%	87%	86%	89%

Table A.2. Persistence rates among enrollees in community colleges across definitions, by race/ethnicity and gender, 2021 CPS graduates

Student Group	N	Continuous 3 Terms	Continuous 4 Terms (T&T Status Quo)	Enrollment in Third Semester (new definition)	Enrollment in Fourth Semester	Enrollment in Third or Fourth Semester (most similar to CPS)
Asian Female	67	66%	60%	72%	75%	81%
Asian Male	101	80%	66%	80%	67%	81%
Black Female	421	38%	30%	43%	39%	49%
Black Male	316	42%	32%	46%	35%	47%
Latina Female	1187	59%	50%	64%	58%	68%
Latino Male	1100	50%	41%	54%	49%	59%
White Female	121	73%	64%	75%	69%	78%
White Male	155	65%	55%	70%	66%	75%

Appendix B: About our Data

Our sample for the immediate enrollment analysis comprised CPS graduates from the graduating classes of 2005 to 2021, and our persistence analysis comprised CPS graduates from the graduating classes of 2005 to 2019. The source of all data on college enrollments and completions is the NSC. Data from NSC has several key limitations, including 1) post-secondary institutions can opt out of reporting data to NSC, 2) individual students can exercise their rights under FERPA to block the use of their enrollment and completion records for research purposes, and 3) records are matched to CPS students through an imperfect matching algorithm. For more information about the limitations of NSC data, see our previous brief entitled *Tracking Two-Year College Outcomes: Comparing National Student Clearinghouse and Illinois Community College Board as Sources of Two-Year College Data*.⁶

⁶ Nagaoka & Mahaffie (2020).

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the many people who contributed to this report. We would like to thank the staff at Chicago Public Schools, particularly the Office of School Counseling and Postsecondary Advising, for their insight and support of this work. This report benefited from an instrumental early discussion with the practitioners in the To&Through Postsecondary Working Group. In addition, we thank Elaine Allensworth, Jessica Tansey, Bronwyn McDaniel, Chen An, Alex Seeskin, and Dominique McKoy for thorough and thoughtful feedback on our drafts, Jessica Puller for careful editing, and Meril Antony for a detailed technical review.

This report was supported by Crown Family Philanthropies; we appreciate their support and collaboration on the To&Through Project. We acknowledge the Consortium Investor Council that funds critical work at the UChicago Consortium and whose members include: Brinson Foundation, CME Group Foundation, Crown Family Philanthropies, Lloyd A. Fry Foundation, Joyce Foundation, Lewis-Sebring Family Foundation, Mayer & Morris Kaplan Family Foundation, Robert R. McCormick Foundation, McDougal Family Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation, Spencer Foundation, Steans Family Foundation, Square One Foundation, The Chicago Public Education Fund, the Vivo Foundation, and two anonymous foundations.

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Jenny Nagaoka is the Deputy Director of the UChicago Consortium, where she has conducted research for over 25 years. Her research interests focus on policy and practice in urban education reform, particularly using data to connect research and practice and examining the school environments and instructional practices that promote college readiness and success. She has co-authored numerous journal articles and reports, including studies of college readiness, noncognitive factors, the transition from high school to post-secondary education, and authentic intellectual instruction. She is a Senior Advisor to the To&Through Project, a project that provides educators, policymakers, and families with research, data, and training on the milestones that matter most for college success. She is the lead author of *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework*, which draws on research and practice evidence to build a coherent framework of the foundational factors for young adult success, and investigates their development from early childhood through young adulthood and how they can be supported through developmental experiences and relationships.

Alexandra Usher is an Associate Director of the To&Through Project and a Senior Research Analyst at the UChicago Consortium. Alexandra leads the research and data processes that inform the To&Through Project, which aims to increase the percentage of Chicago Public School students who graduate from high school and earn a college degree, and to share the learning from Chicago with education stakeholders across the country. Prior to this role, Alexandra led data strategy for the AUSL network of schools and spent time at Chicago Public Schools and the Center on Education Policy. She is an Education Pioneers and Fulbright alumna.