



## Graduate or Bust

'Tis the season of “best” lists, including “best colleges.” There are a myriad of statistics about colleges that are used to determine the rankings: number of students who apply and percentage who are accepted, number of majors, student professor ratios, average GPA and standardized test scores, and many more. There is, however, a striking omission: where is graduation rate? The absence of this metric in the rankings creates a misperception that is arguably the most urgent problem facing American education today. All students who attend college do not graduate from college (60% of entering Freshmen graduate from college). More important, the percentage of students who don't graduate varies significantly across race and socio-economic status. In fact, there is a 40 percentage point college graduation gap between students from the lowest and highest quartiles of family wealth (9% vs. 77%) who graduate, and white men who enter college graduate at twice the rate of black men who enter college (66% vs 33%). At a time when many businesses have identified a “diverse talent pipeline” as a priority, and income inequality is growing, the number of minority youth who are attending and not graduating from college is most disturbing.

Over the past decade, a number of admirable programs have emerged to support minority students through high school graduation and their admission to college. Recognizing the difficult transition between high school and college, researchers and support providers have focused on students' return to college sophomore year as the line in the sand that measures college success. This measure of the percentage of students making it into the second year of college is called “persistence” and is often the last outcome that is measured and reported about an underserved student's journey through college. The assumption is that having made it to sophomore year, the major hurdles lie behind the student and it will be clear sailing to the finish line.

This assumption, unfortunately, is incorrect. Low-income, minority college students tend to be destroyed by landmines that wouldn't even scratch a more privileged, middle-class student. In the US, we adhere to the belief that anyone who is smart enough and works hard enough can graduate from college. That is a myth. Both intelligence and hard work are necessary, but to ignore the many other factors that impose significant barriers to college graduation is to unfairly blame the victim. Navigating college without a safety net is treacherous and, in the absence of a support system providing information about alternatives, students tend to choose the only path they see – drop out and go home. Graduation statistics bear this out. While most white students who persist also graduate, the same cannot be said for low-income and minority students.

In our enthusiasm to report good news about high persistence rates, we have lost track of the real goal, the only goal, college *graduation*. And, in celebrating our persistence success, we are ignoring our failure; that despite increased college enrollment, we have not increased college graduation rates among low-income and minority youth.

Let's be clear about the **outcomes to date**. College graduation outcomes for underserved students are significantly worse than college graduation outcomes for the general population. Underserved students



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are graduating at much lower rates than their “majority” peers. We are failing our underserved students, as measured by their graduation rates, and we must do more. Today,

9%	of low-income students	vs	77%	of high-income students	graduate from college
41%	of Black students	vs	63%	of White students	graduate from college
53%	of Hispanic students	vs	63%	of White students	graduate from college
16%	of people who are disabled	vs	37%	of non-disabled people	over age 25, have graduated from college
34%	of disabled students	vs	60%	of all students, nationally	graduate from college

Source: NCES and BLS

Support programs and funders who provide funding for the support programs must know whether their efforts are effective. We must reset our goals and expectations to focus exclusively on graduation. A student who doesn't graduate hasn't achieved their goal and we, the community of support, haven't achieved our goal either if the students we support aren't graduating. This is not merely a philosophical logic equation. When students go to college and don't graduate, their lives are worse than had they not gone at all. Over the last decade, by increasing enrollment rates without increasing graduation rates, we have increased the number of students whose lives we have ruined. We, the community of support, cannot bury our heads in the sand. The only way to ensure we are not harming students is to measure success at the end, at graduation, and use the data to figure out how to help underserved students graduate.

Let's be clear about the **impact**. The impact of going to college and NOT graduating is worse than not going at all. Therefore, our “success” in college access and our “success” in college persistence is harming students unless we figure out how to ensure they graduate.

Prior to going to college, high school graduates do not have loans. They don't owe anyone anything. Once they're in college, they have loans that become due once they are no longer in school. The theory goes that it's ok to take on so much debt because one's job opportunities and earning potential with a college degree is much higher than what is available to high school graduates. However, students who go to college and don't graduate now have debt and no increased earning potential. Based on current data, this is what that will look like for 20,267 Chicago Public School students who graduated from high school in 2015.

Forty-four percent (44%) of the students who graduated from Chicago Public Schools high school in 2015 will go on to college. Of the 8917 students who went to college, 43% (3834 students) will graduate. However, 57% (5083 students) will drop out sometime during their college years and not graduate. On average, college students personally borrow \$7000 a year in loans. That means, estimating very conservatively, 5083 drop-out students owe a combined total of close to \$36 million dollars (\$35,581,000). In addition, to make matters worse, 3202 of the students (63%) will default on their loans which impacts their credit rating and their future economic stability.



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Because we sent them to college and didn't help them graduate, over 5000 CPS students are carrying over \$35 Million dollars in loans they are probably unable to repay. That amount doesn't include interest and also doesn't include the amount of loans others in their family may have taken on their behalf. (i.e. Parent Plus loans). And we do this every year.

The impact of going to college, taking out loans, and then not graduating has the effect of making underserved students' lives worse than had they not gone to college at all. It also has the effect of beating down an already jobless, violent, poor, beaten-down community even more. This is not what anyone intended. The torture will continue however, unless we look at our current college graduation policies and practices honestly and change what must be changed.

As a society, we must do more to ensure underserved students who attend college, graduate. We must change our attitudes, our metrics and our funding for underserved students.

Our **attitudes** must shift from an education frame to an employment frame. Using an education frame, every additional year of education is better, is more success, is something to celebrate. Using an education frame, each additional post-high school year is better than just a high school diploma. An employment frame is binary. A job applicant either has a Bachelor's Degree or does not have a Bachelor's degree. Applicants with Bachelor's degrees are eligible for jobs that those without the degree are not eligible for. For most jobs, "some college" is the same as "no college" and disqualifies the applicant. An employment frame corresponds to the college graduation goal. An education frame enables us to celebrate persistence; this is harmful and should be stopped.

Our **metrics** must focus on graduation, not persistence. We must know who is and is not graduating and use the data to learn how to help those who struggle. We must not project graduation rates, we must know them. In addition, we must add a graduation rate metric to the college accreditation process. Until we value graduation rates by using them for accreditation, colleges won't dedicate the necessary attention or resources to ensuring students graduate.

We must **fund** those organizations that are uniquely dedicated to college graduation, help students throughout all their college years and report their graduation outcomes. Finally, we must ensure that college degrees are conferred on merit, not zip code, and create a financial aid system that enables students from all socio-economic classes to attend and graduate from college.

All students deserve an equal opportunity to earn a college degree and pursue a meaningful life, regardless of the zip code they were born into. To ensure they have this opportunity, we must advocate for change and focus our research, our support activities, and our funding on one goal only: college graduation. To do anything else is to knowingly harm our kids.