

EMBARGOED UNTIL:

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Six-year colleges? New research reveals actual bachelor's degree completion time
Most college grads expected their degree within four years, but got them within six years

CHICAGO—A study released today points to important differences between the four-year and six-year completion rates for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) graduates who received bachelor's degrees.

“Across the board, the four-year completion rates were much lower than six-year rates—at all colleges, and for all high school types, student achievement levels, and students' race/ethnicity and gender,” said Jenny Nagaoka, report author and deputy director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. “We need more awareness about this reality, and we need college leaders committed to changing this reality. We need more students graduating in the four years they expect their degree to take.”

The study investigated four-year and six-year college completion trends for 2004–14 CPS graduates, as well as patterns of bachelor's degree completion across student characteristics and institutions for 2012–14 CPS graduates who made an immediate transition to a bachelor's-degree-granting institution after graduating from high school. It was a joint UChicago Consortium and To&Through Project research study.

As students and families consider the cost and overall value of college, the four-year and six-year completion rates could guide decisions on where to apply and enroll.

“It's most common for reported institutional graduation rates to be six-year rates. And these rates do matter—more than half of Black CPS graduates who earned bachelor's degrees took more than four years to do so,” said Shelby Mahaffie, report author and research analyst at the UChicago Consortium and the To&Through Project. “But colleges with similar six-year graduation rates can have very different four-year rates. If four-year rates were more widely available, students could make more strategic decisions, including realistic plans for time and cost to earn a degree.”

Researchers used data about 2014 CPS graduates who immediately enrolled in a bachelor's-degree-granting institution and found:

- Fewer than one-third of CPS graduates completed a bachelor's degree within four years (30%) but 51% of CPS graduates completed within six years (51%; see Figure 1).
 - The national four-year completion rate for 2014 college enrollees was 47%; the six-year rate was 64%.
- Most CPS college graduates took more than 8 terms to complete a bachelor's degree
 - 67% of students needed one or two extra terms (completing in 9 or 10 terms);
 - 12% of students took 11 or 12 terms.
- Four-year completion rates were lower than six-year rates...
 - **At all colleges attended** by CPS graduates
 - Notably, the *difference* between the four-year and six-year completion rates varied greatly by college

- **Across all high school types in CPS**, including selective enrollment high schools (SEHSs)
 - Even SEHS graduates had six-year completion rates that were as much as 30 percentage points higher than four-year completion rates
- **For all student achievement levels**
 - Even students with strong academic qualifications (GPAs between 3.5 and 4.0 and ACT scores over 24) had large differences between their four-year and six-year completion rates, around 22 percentage points
- **For all student groups by race/ethnicity and gender**
 - The differences between the four-year rates and six-year rates were generally similar (about 20-30 percentage points) across student groups.

Research details: [The Four Years Fallacy: Four-Year vs. Six-Year Bachelor's Degree Completion Rates](#) by Jenny Nagaoka, Shelby Mahaffie, Alexandra Usher, and Amy Arneson analyzed patterns of bachelor's degree completion, via three questions:

1. How many immediate college enrollees completed a bachelor's degree within four vs. six years?
2. For bachelor's degree completers who took longer than four years, how many terms were they enrolled before completing their degree?
3. How different were four-year and six-year bachelor's degree completion rates...
 - a. By college attended?
 - b. By high school attended?
 - c. By student characteristics?

Release event: [details & registration here](#)

Join the To&Through Project and UChicago Consortium on **Dec 5th, 2023 at 2:00pm CT** for the release of the new research brief *The Four Years Fallacy: Four-Year vs. Six-Year Bachelor's Degree Completion Rates*, and accompanying Student Stories.

Presenters will be joined by a panel of experts for a discussion on the current efforts and opportunities to support more CPS college enrollees in 4-year degree completion. Panelists will include:

- Dr. Barrington Price, Vice President of Student Success and Engagement at Dominican University;
- Brian Harris, Director of College Pathways at Chicago Public Schools; and
- Current CPS alumni navigating their own college pathways.

About the To&Through Project

In collaboration with educators, policymakers, and communities, the [To&Through Project](#) strives to create equitable education outcomes for Chicago Public Schools students by helping educators use data for inquiry and impact. The To&Through Project is located at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute in the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice.

About the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research

With the goal of supporting stronger and more equitable educational outcomes for students, the [UChicago Consortium](#) conducts research of high technical quality that informs and assesses policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). We seek to expand communication among researchers, policymakers, practitioners, families, and communities as we support the search for solutions to the challenges of school improvement. The UChicago Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action and practice but does not advocate for particular policies or programs. Rather, we help to build capacity for school improvement by identifying what matters most for student success, creating critical indicators to chart progress, and conducting theory-driven evaluation to identify how programs and policies are working.