



The Demographics and Academics of College Going in Illinois

Yuqin Gong and Jennifer B. Presley

Executive Summary

State and national economic strength is increasingly dependent on an educated workforce. A high school diploma, which once allowed people to live a decent and comfortable life, is no longer sufficient. The information economy and globalization have significantly changed the relative earning power of different educational attainments. In order to help the state of Illinois assess the extent to which it is providing access to educational opportunities that lead to successful transitions to college and the workforce, the Illinois Education Research Council (IERC) is undertaking a six-year longitudinal study following the 113,660 students in the Illinois high school class of 2002. We are examining how well high school graduates are prepared for the next stages of their lives, and whether patterns of differential preparation along with background characteristics and high-school attributes are related to entry into and success in college.

Bird's Eye View of the Class of 2002

For every 1000 students in the Illinois Class of 2002, 262 were enrolled in an Illinois two-year institution their first year out of high school, while 112 were enrolled out-of-state. We can see in the table that 34% (343/1000) were not ready for college, and that 26% (262/1000) enrolled in a

two-year institution. We can also see that about half (52/112) of those enrolled out-of-state came from the most-ready group of students, and that about one quarter (52/198) of all most-ready students enrolled out-of-state, and 31% (52/167) of those who went to college that first year.

2002-2003 College Participation per 1,000 Illinois Class of 2002 Students

	College Readiness	College Enrollment Within a Year After High School Graduation		Institutional Type of First Enrollment					4-Year Competitiveness	
				Public 2-Year In-State	Public 4-Year In-State	Private In-State	Out of State	For Profit	Less	More
343	Not/Least Ready	147	enrolled in college	104	17	10	12	4	31	5
		197	not enrolled in college							
111	Minimally Ready	64	enrolled in college	40	11	6	6	1	19	3
		47	not enrolled in college							
173	Somewhat Ready	120	enrolled in college	56	33	14	15	2	45	15
		54	not enrolled in college							
175	More Ready	138	enrolled in college	42	47	21	28	1	61	33
		37	not enrolled in college							
198	Most Ready	167	enrolled in college	20	62	33	52	0	40	30
		31	not enrolled in college							
1000		635	enrolled in college	262	171	84	112	8	204	152
		365	not enrolled in college							

Note: May not total exactly due to rounding.

Introduction

In the first report in this series, *The demographics and academics of college readiness in Illinois* (Presley & Gong, 2005) we found that about one third of Illinois public high school graduates in the Class of 2002 were ready for college coursework at a four-year institution, about one third were not/least ready, and one third were somewhat ready. High school course taking, high school quality and student demographic characteristics all contribute to the different levels of college readiness. This report, the second one in the series, addresses college participation in the first academic year after high school graduation (AY2002-2003).

The vast majority of the Class of 2002 aspire to complete at least a bachelor's degree.

It is commonly assumed that many of those entering postsecondary education through the two-year institutional portal do not aspire to complete a baccalaureate. The educational expectations of the Class of 2002 largely dispel this assumption, at least for traditional-age students. The vast majority (87%) of the Class of 2002 aspire to complete at least a bachelor's degree, with only slight differences by family income, race/ethnicity and region. While there are more differences by college readiness, nearly three quarters (72%) of the not/least-ready students expect to earn at least a bachelor's degree, as do nearly all (99%) of most-ready students. More than three quarters of those who did not even enroll in college in their first year after high school still expected to complete a bachelor's degree at some point.

Question 1: Who went to college in the year immediately following high-school graduation?

While readiness for college matters somewhat, almost half of the not/least ready students enrolled immediately in postsecondary education.

Overall, 60% of the Class of 2002 went straight to college in Fall 2002, and another 4% started in

Spring 2003. The different college-going rates for students from different family income levels and racial/ethnic groups are largely related to different levels of college-readiness as these students complete high school. We also found, however, that less well-prepared students from higher-income families are more likely to continue, while Latino and Native American students are generally somewhat less likely to continue immediately into college.

While readiness is clearly related to continuation to college, it is significant to note that almost half of the students in the not/least-ready category did indeed go on to college in their first year after high school. On the other hand, it is also intriguing to note there are between 16% and 21% of well-prepared (more/most ready) students not continuing immediately into college. In later reports, we will be able to test whether they enrolled after a “gap” year—a phenomenon that is becoming quite commonplace in the transition from high school to college.

Question 2: Who went to four-year institutions and who went to two-year institutions?

Readiness for college matters a lot.

School preparation (i.e., the college-readiness measure) has an even stronger association with students' likelihood of enrolling in four-year vs. two-year colleges than it does with overall postsecondary participation. Differences in college readiness largely account for different enrollment patterns among major racial/ethnic groups. However, regional differences remain even after we took other factors into consideration—including student readiness and family income. Not/least-ready Chicago Public School (CPS) students are more likely to enroll in a four-year institution, while students from the Southeast are more likely to start in the two-year sector, including 35% of the most-ready students.

Two-year institutions, and especially private institutions, play a more important role in Illinois than many other states in providing access to postsecondary education. About 41% of the Class of 2002 who entered postsecondary education in

2002-2003 did so through an Illinois public two-year institution. But there is consistent evidence showing that those with a bachelor's degree have an advantage in the labor market over those with an associate degree. The State of Working Illinois study provides information on expected growth in Illinois. In these researchers' analysis, it is the bachelor's degree requirement that separates jobs with increasing wages from those with declining relative wages. It is clear from the large proportion of the Class of 2002 expecting to earn bachelor's degrees (87%) that recent high-school graduates understand the importance of the bachelor's degree to economic success. The longitudinal nature of this study will enable us to track whether those who start in the two-year sector eventually fulfill this expectation.

Question 3: Who went to more-competitive institutions?

Readiness for college matters most.

Academic preparation is the most powerful factor for distinguishing between those who went to more-competitive four-year institutions and those who went to less competitive ones.

However, we found that high family income and regional location have an additional impact on students' enrollment in more-competitive institutions. Given their college-readiness levels, students from the Northeast minus CPS and CPS were more likely to enroll in more-competitive institutions, especially compared to similar students from the Southwest. We also found some evidence of race-sensitive application and/or admission practices on the college destinations of students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds—especially for more-ready black and Latino students, and most-ready black, Latino and Asian students. Many black and Latino students have reached these levels of achievement despite disadvantages in their access to high quality K-12 educational opportunities. They have demonstrated strong academic potential

against the odds. Race-sensitive admission practices are important as one tool towards equalizing educational opportunities in higher education. But it is equally important to take measures to ensure that every child, regardless of race/ethnicity or family income, has equal access to quality K-12 education and has equal opportunity to be equally prepared for college, as we emphasized in the first report from this study (IERC 2005-3).

Question 4: Who went out of state for college?

More-prepared students are more likely to enroll out of state.

Illinois has for a long time been one of the major exporters of its college freshmen to other states. Indiana, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Missouri are the top destination states of Illinois' college emigrants. We are for the first time able to examine the characteristics of new high school graduates who are leaving Illinois for college, and we found that almost three quarters of those who leave Illinois for college are well prepared for college. But the brain-drain from Illinois is not due simply to students seeking more-competitive college environments out of state. One third of top students who go out of state are enrolling in less-competitive institutions.

The Teacher Quality Index and College Going

The IERC has developed a Teacher Quality Index (TQI) for Illinois' public schools as an indicator of the average academic attributes of their teachers. Having a cadre of teachers who on the average were themselves more academically successful appears to contribute to students going on to college from low-performing schools. And having a stronger cadre of teachers who were also teaching in a high-performing high school appears to contribute to an environment of higher outcomes for students' choices of where to enroll.

Concluding Comments

The IERC Longitudinal Study of the Class of 2002 reveals some important strengths and weaknesses in Illinois' education system. Our first report revealed that about one third of our public high school graduates are not ready for college, another third are somewhat ready, and only about one third are ready to move on towards earning a bachelor's degree. And yet most of them reported that they expected to earn a bachelor's degree or more eventually. There is clearly a mismatch for many between their expectations and the reality they will face as they embark on their postsecondary education. This finding is consistent with national results that found 72% of 10th graders expecting to earn at least a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2005). Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, in commenting on these national findings, said, "[W]e as a society have done an excellent job of selling the dream of attending college...but we have to make sure that we are preparing high school students to succeed once they get in the door" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In our first report we echoed this sentiment, recommending efforts to increase the academic rigor of our high schools, stronger articulation between high school and college curricula, and better information to students about the importance of working harder and choosing a more rigorous high school curriculum. But we also said that these strategies "will fail if we do not also address the educational experiences that students have prior to high school...students should not arrive in high school already 'left behind'" (Presley & Gong, 2005, p. 35). We called for school leaders, district leaders and state leaders to work in unison to crack the 'college readiness' challenge.

This second report shows that higher education is providing a second opportunity for many of our high school graduates to gain the skills and academic experiences they will need for personal

and professional success. Almost half of Illinois' not/least ready high school graduates went on immediately to college, the majority enrolling in the two-year sector. But others went straight into the four-year sector, and we will be tracking whether these different paths lead to different longer-term outcomes for these students. Continuing on into higher education also provides a new opportunity for some who had succeeded against the odds of attending weak schools to attend more-competitive universities where they will experience communities of well-prepared students and be exposed to some of the best faculty in the world. And for all, higher education provides the opportunity to begin to explore paths perhaps hitherto unconsidered.

But the U.S. system of high-school/college transition is extremely inefficient with regard to the educational costs to families and taxpayers, and to the "opportunity costs"—that is, the lost income that students face when they must spend post-high school years gaining skills they should have been given the opportunity to master by the end of high school. In many other developed countries, students generally reach or exceed at the age of 16 the benchmarks we expect of our students at the end of high school. Their postsecondary institutions can focus on specialized higher learning, knowing that the general education needs of their students have been fulfilled through the school system. In Illinois, as well as other states, high-school/college collaboratives are being established that leverage the expertise of college instructional personnel and provide serious and rigorous learning environments for underserved high school juniors and seniors. We hope that Illinois will move forward creatively, guided by what will best prepare our youth for their transition to adults who are contributing to our economy and our society.

The full report is available at <http://ierc.siue.edu/iercpublication.asp>

For further information, contact the IERC toll-free at 1-866-799-IERC (4372)
or by email at ierc@siue.edu.