



## Following the Illinois high school class of 2002: Three years into college

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### Executive Summary

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This report provides an update on the Illinois public high school class of 2002 and its progress through the higher education system. Three years after graduation, who has persisted, who has stopped out, who has transferred, and who has completed a two-year program?

By the end of Year 3 (2004-2005):

- 73% of the Class of 2002 has had at least some post-secondary education, and 48% have been enrolled for all three years.
- Of those who enrolled in the first year after high school graduation, 79% were still enrolled in some form of higher education, with 57% still at their initial institution, while 21% had transferred to a different institution.
- The overall persistence figure is even better for four-year institutions, where about 70% of first-year starters were still enrolled at their first institution, and 90% were still enrolled somewhere in higher education. For two-year full-time starters, 72% were still enrolled somewhere in Year 3.
- However, for students who stopped out, a return to higher education is unlikely the next year—only 17% of Year 2 stop-outs from two-year institutions and 23% of Year 2 stop-outs from four-year institutions returned in Year 3.
- As a result of transfers, Illinois regained about 1,750 students who initially attended out-of-state institutions. However, this gain was fully offset by a similar number of students who initially enrolled in state and had transferred out of state by Year 3.

We identify five important lessons learned from our Year 3 progress report:

#### **1) Institutional Persistence Rates Underestimate Student Success**

Our findings on persistence provide a very different—and more positive—picture of college-retention than looking at individual college persistence rates. The complicated attendance patterns of college students make it impossible to get a complete picture of the higher education system as a whole by simply examining

figures from each individual institution. The difference between institutional and system persistence emphasizes the importance of tracking students through the whole higher education system to get an accurate depiction of systemic effectiveness and student success.

## **2) College Readiness (Still) Matters**

Academic preparedness is the critical correlate to college access, and it is even more strongly related to the type of institution attended, and to continuation. Only 10% of more/most ready first-year starters were not enrolled in Year 3, compared to 41% of not/least ready first year starters.

For the 10% of the Class of 2002 who were most ready for college and had not enrolled in higher education at any time during their first three years after graduation, we found that this failure to enroll has almost no relationship to family income—12% of low-income most-ready students still had not enrolled compared to 8-9% of most-ready students from higher-income families. For less-ready students, income continues to play a strong role in college access through Year 3.

## **3) Starting Full-Time Matters**

Starting part-time is a tremendous handicap to students' college persistence, whether they start in the two-year or four-year sector. Students who started part-time are much less likely to be enrolled anywhere in Year 3. In fact, we show that full-time status trumps readiness—at two-year institutions, college-ready students who start part time are less likely to remain enrolled anywhere by Year 3 than not/least-ready students who started full time.

## **4) Where Students Start College Matters**

We found that students from the Class of 2002 benefit from gaining entrance to a more-competitive college environment, independent of their college-readiness. For example, 64% of full-time not/least ready two-year starters were enrolled in Year 3, compared to 74% of similar students who started at a non/less-competitive four-year institution, and 83% of those who started at a competitive four-year institution. Perhaps more-competitive four-year institutions can provide more help and attention to their less-ready enrollees because those students constitute a smaller component of those institutions' student bodies.

## **5) Early Transfer Is More Likely For College-Ready Two-Year Starters**

Almost half (47%) of the most-ready two-year starters had already transferred to a four-year institution by Year 3, and almost half of these transferees did so with an Illinois community college award in hand. More-ready students, whom we also consider to be "college ready," also show a strong four-year-institution transfer rate (31%). In contrast, only 9% of not/least ready two-year starters had transferred to a four-year institution by Year 3, and 47% were not enrolled anywhere (most with no program completion). We will be tracking return and completion rates over the coming three additional years.

## **Recommendations**

Several key policy variables and recommendations have begun to emerge during our first three years of tracking the Illinois public high school Class of 2002.

First, academic readiness is vital to both college access and persistence in higher education, and high schools must maintain a laser-like focus on intellectual rigor. Students, teachers, guidance counselors, and leaders in Illinois middle schools and high schools and the policy arena must have a clear and firm understanding of the knowledge and skills that are expected of college freshmen, and must work together to put forth the effort and structures needed to ensure their acquisition. College freshmen need to enter higher education ready to learn in order to make the most of the opportunity.

Secondly, attending college full-time trumps college readiness as a predictor of persistence. Teachers, counselors, financial aid advisors, and the higher education community should work together to ensure that students and their parents understand the financial aid resources that are available to them—including loans when needed—as alternatives to extensive employment while attending college.

And finally, the initial choice of college type matters. Students who start at two-year institutions need a supportive institutional and policy environment that facilitates retention and transfer to four-year institutions. Now that two-year institutions and less-selective four-year institutions are much more likely to have ACT scores for at least their traditional-age entrants (because they took the test as part of PSAE), these types of institutions should identify academically talented students upon entry to be sure that they receive strong encouragement to remain enrolled, and for the two-year sector, transfer especially to very- and most/highly competitive four-year institutions. In turn, four-year institutions must take responsibility to help community college students—especially the more than 7,000 who start college ready—make the transition to the four-year sector after having spent their first year(s) in the usually smaller, more local environment of a two-year institution. Some of these students will be living away from home for the first time while trying to negotiate a peer group that has had the opportunity to bond and become comfortable with campus life. These students deserve scholarship opportunities, assurance of course transfers and respectful academic advising, and access to residential housing.

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

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