



Graduates of Denver Public Schools: College Access and Success

April 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Denver Public Schools (DPS), the Denver Scholarship Foundation, The Piton Foundation, and the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education undertook a study to learn how DPS graduates perform in college. The report describes who enrolls in college, and who persists and earns a college certificate or degree. In addition, the research examines college entrance rates for DPS graduates who earn credit in one or more accelerated courses or programs during high school. Among those offerings are concurrent (college) enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP) classes, honors courses, and the International Baccalaureate (IB) program.

The study included about 18,000 students who graduated from DPS between 2002 and 2007. For the earliest graduating class (2002), six years of possible college enrollment data are examined. For the most recent class (2007), only one year is examined. Across the six graduating classes in the study, the largest share of DPS graduates was Hispanic (40 percent). In addition, 31 percent of the graduates were white and 23 percent were African American. More than half the graduates (60 percent) were low-income.

Local and National Data Sources

Student-level data from DPS were linked with National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) college enrollment and completion records to track postsecondary outcomes for DPS graduates. National comparisons were also conducted to understand the magnitude of the college enrollment and completion challenges that DPS graduates face. Because there is no national student sample that mirrors, exactly, the DPS students in this study, a range of comparisons are provided using: 1) The U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey and American Community Survey; 2) The U.S. Department of Education's Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) study; and 3) published data from a similar study of graduates of the Chicago Public School district. DPS is the first district in Colorado to conduct this type of research.

Key Findings

Who enrolls in college? Who persists? Who graduates?

- Among all DPS graduates from 2002 to 2007, 56 percent enrolled in college. Hispanic enrollment rates were the lowest at 39 percent, compared with 63 percent for African-American DPS graduates and 71 percent for white DPS graduates. For the earliest graduating class (2002), 62 percent entered college within six years.
- Sixty percent of DPS graduates who entered college within 12 months of graduating from high school either completed a degree or certificate or were still enrolled after six years. Overall, 39 percent had earned degrees or certificates, including 52 percent of whites, 30 percent of African Americans and 25 percent of Hispanics.
- The majority of degrees earned were bachelor's degrees; very few DPS graduates obtained associate's degrees.
- Minority and low-income DPS graduates who remained in-state enrolled in community colleges at higher rates, while a higher percentage of whites and non-low-income graduates enrolled in four-year colleges. One-third of all DPS graduates enrolled at Community College of Denver or Metro State College of Denver.

Which DPS graduates participate in accelerated courses and what are their college enrollment rates?

- Forty-three percent of all DPS graduates enrolled in accelerated programs or courses. Thirty-four percent of Hispanic and 35 percent of African-American graduates participated, compared with 58 percent of white graduates.
- Low-income DPS graduates were also underrepresented in accelerated courses and programs. Only 34 percent took advantage of the offerings, compared with 57 percent of non-low-income graduates.
- Although underrepresented in accelerated programs overall, Hispanic, African-American, and low-income DPS graduates took the greatest advantage of concurrent (college) enrollment programs.
- College enrollment rates of graduates who took accelerated courses were much higher than the enrollment rates of nonparticipants. This outcome was consistent for DPS graduates of all races/ethnicities and income groups. College enrollment rates were highest for graduates who took at least two different types of accelerated programs or courses.

How do DPS graduates' college outcomes compare with national averages or other communities?

- Overall, DPS graduates have slightly lower college enrollment rates than 18- to 24 year-olds in national data sets; they have enrollment rates similar to 18- to 24 year-olds in communities whose school districts serve a high proportion of Hispanic students. Hispanic DPS graduates enroll in college at lower rates than Hispanics nationally, while white and African-American DPS graduates enroll at higher rates than similar students nationally.
- Immediate college enrollment rates of DPS graduates were slightly lower than those of Chicago Public School graduates, overall and for all races/ethnic groups. In both districts, Hispanic graduates had the lowest college enrollment rate, with higher rates for African Americans, and the highest rates for whites.
- When compared with a national sample, far lower percentages of DPS graduates earn associate's degrees or certificates after three years (6 percent versus 23 percent).

Recommendations

1. Several findings warrant further research, including:

- **Why do DPS graduates appear to enter college at relatively low rates?** Further research is needed to understand why Hispanic and low-income DPS graduates are entering college at lower rates than other graduates, both locally and nationally.
- **Why do DPS college entrants earn fewer degrees and certificates than comparable students nationally?** More detailed examination and more years of longitudinal data would enable a better understanding of the college experiences of DPS graduates. College persistence and degree attainment also should be examined for students who enroll in accelerated courses.
- **In what ways do the costs of higher education and the availability of financial assistance affect the college entrance rates of DPS students, particularly Hispanic and low-income graduates?** Linking school district information on high school graduates with student records data from the Colorado Department of Higher Education may better enable us to study this question. Linking will be possible once all colleges in Colorado implement the State Assigned Student Identification System (SASIDs), a project that is being initiated this academic year.

2. To extend the study of college participation in Denver and in Colorado,
 - DPS should continue to track graduates into college. Other school districts in Colorado should follow the district's lead.
 - Study findings can help DPS establish baseline expectations as it introduces postsecondary performance goals for DPS high schools, and these expectations should be aligned with DPS board goals.
3. College access and success reforms to consider, based on the study's findings, include:

College Access

- DPS should examine its graduation requirements to ensure that all students have the option of completing at least one accelerated course or program.
- DPS should identify low-income and minority high school students for enrollment in multiple accelerated courses.
- DPS leadership should continue to work with its counselors and the Denver Scholarship Foundation (DSF) to improve college choice and postsecondary outcomes.
- Funders like DSF should maintain an application window in their scholarship programs to serve DPS graduates who enroll in college a year after graduating from high school.

College Success

- DPS and local colleges should enhance coordination and establish working relationships among their faculty.
- Local colleges should evaluate programs for improving low-income and minority college success.
- Colleges should take effective student success innovations to scale and seek input outside the higher education community for ideas on how to scale them up efficiently and effectively.

The full report is available on The Piton Foundation's website at: www.piton.org

For more information, contact The Piton Foundation at: 370 17th Street, Suite 5300, Denver, CO 80202-5653 303-825-6246, Fax: 303-628-3839

Sponsors



Denver Public Schools

