

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Who's Making It:

The Academic Achievement of Recent Boston Public School Graduates
in the Early College Years

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About the Boston Higher Education Partnership

The Boston Higher Education Partnership (BHEP) is a consortium of 30 colleges and universities and the Boston Public Schools (BPS), working together to increase postsecondary readiness, access, and success for Boston students. In collaboration with individual schools and school district leaders, member institutions offer a wide range of activities including academic enrichment, tutoring, mentoring, and college awareness to help students prepare and plan for college, future careers, and civic engagement. They also provide millions of financial aid dollars to make college affordable for BPS graduates, offer professional development for BPS teachers and principals, and undertake research to inform teaching and improve student learning outcomes. For more information about BHEP, contact Ann Coles, Interim Executive Director, at 617-778-7195 x111 or anncoles@accessboston.org.

About TERI

TERI (The Education Resources Institute) is a nonprofit organization based in Boston that is dedicated to promoting access to education for students of all ages and backgrounds. TERI is a national leader in helping low-income individuals, and those who are the first generation in their families to realize their college dreams. TERI fulfills its mission by informing educational policy, managing direct service programs, and supporting student loan programs.

UNDERSTANDING BOSTON is a series of forums, educational events and research sponsored by the Boston Foundation to provide information and insight into issues affecting Boston, its neighborhoods and the region. By working in collaboration with a wide range of partners, the Boston Foundation provides opportunities for people to come together to explore challenges facing our constantly changing community and to develop an informed civic agenda.

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In the 21st century, the United States needs many more college-educated workers to sustain its leadership in the global economy. Equally important, individuals need postsecondary credentials to secure work that pays a living wage and to maintain a high quality of life. Given these needs, ensuring the postsecondary success of all students has become a critical national priority. Yet, while many agree on the importance of college success for all, we are a long way from achieving that goal. Today, about 43% of Americans who enroll in college obtain a degree (Horn et al. 2004, *College Persistence on the Rise? Changes in the Five Year Degree Completion and Postsecondary Persistence Rates Between 1994-2000*). For graduates of the Boston Public Schools (BPS), the outlook is more discouraging. The Boston Private Industry Council's (PIC) recent study of BPS graduates from the Class of 2000 found that only 35.5% of those who enrolled in college over a seven-year time frame had graduated and another 14% were still enrolled with no degree (Boston Private Industry Council 2008, *Getting to the Finish Line: College Enrollment and Graduation; A Seven Year Longitudinal Study of the Boston Public Schools Class of 2000*). Knowing initial enrollment and degree completion rates is a critical first step in understanding the college success of BPS graduates. The next step is to learn more about what happens after students begin college by exploring factors contributing to degree advancement.

Over the past three years, the Boston Higher Education Partnership (BHEP) has undertaken two studies investigating what happens during the early college careers of BPS graduates. In 2006, the BHEP completed a study, "From College Access to College Success," examining the transition from high school to college for BPS graduates from the Classes of 2003, 2004, and 2005 who began college full-time in the fall of 2005. This study found many BPS graduates struggling in their first year of college, especially those at two-year colleges. More than

two-thirds of graduates attending community colleges took developmental courses and, on average, withdrew from or failed over 30% of all the credits they attempted in the first year. In focus groups, students reported difficulties with course work, especially math. The BPS graduates at four-year colleges generally reported feeling better prepared, but even so they withdrew from or failed 25% of the credits they attempted.

The 2006 report raised many questions. Which BPS students would persist in college through the second year and how would they perform academically? How many would be on track to graduate within a reasonable time frame? What would happen to those taking developmental classes as they progressed? What variation would there be between types of institutions?

This BHEP study, undertaken with support from the Boston Foundation and TERI, explores these questions through an in-depth look at the first two years of college. It provides insight into what happened to BPS graduates along the route to a college degree and why only 35% completed degrees after seven years. By considering various categories of persistence, college selectivity, and indicators of academic preparation prior to college, this research develops a picture of how BPS graduates were succeeding (or not) during their first two years of college.

To better understand the first stages of college, the study addresses the following questions: Among BPS graduates who enrolled in the fall of 2005, who was still attending the same college two years later? Of those who persisted, how were they progressing and performing academically? How did the *way* they persisted (full-time or part-time; continuously or intermittently) affect their academic progress and performance? What difference did the selectivity of the college make in measures of students' academic success? What difference did the individual college make? What role did academic

preparation prior to college play? How might contextual factors have influenced the academic success of BPS graduates?

The Study Design

In order to explore these questions, the study examined three types of academic outcomes: persistence (recurrent enrollment); progress (accumulated academic credits); and performance (cumulative grade point average)—and developed measures for each. All three types of outcomes are necessary to earn a degree: a student must persist—enroll in a sufficient number of semesters; progress—earn at least the minimum number of credits to graduate; and perform—maintain at least the minimum grade point average required for graduation. While students must also fulfill other requirements specific to their institution, for the early college career, these three measures provide a reasonably full picture of students' academic achievements.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to explore the college persistence, progress, and performance of BPS graduates participating in the study. The quantitative analysis built on the database of students' college transcripts compiled for BHEP's first report. The number of participating colleges and universities increased from 10 to 23 with an accompanying increase in the number of BPS graduates from 465 to 946. Students had graduated from the BPS in 2003, 2004, or 2005 and began college for the first time full-time in the fall of 2005. The transcript data extended through four semesters (Fall 2005 to Spring 2007) and included enrollment information for a fifth (Fall 2007). Participating colleges supplied the data directly to the BHEP, stripped of identifying student information. No data was provided on student transfers. All reported findings are statistically significant to at least the .05 level.

Colleges were divided into four "selectivity groups:" four-year more selective; four-year medium selective; four-year less selective; and two-year colleges. The groups were based on the primary type of degree they conferred (bachelor's or associate's) and, for four-year colleges, the institution's median combined SAT score.

The qualitative data came from several sources, including: 1) individual or group interviews with 24 faculty and staff who worked with BPS graduates as well as other first generation students at colleges or a nonprofit

organization; and 2) seven focus groups with recent BPS graduates in their second year of college. These interviews focused on factors that support or hinder the college success of BPS graduates and other first generation college students. In addition, an "institutional profile" encompassing various institutional attributes was developed for each participating college. Information for the profiles was gathered from the colleges' own web sites as well as on-line national databases.

Limitations of the Study

The study has several limitations. The transcripts provide information only from students' early college careers (the first five semesters). Thus, we have no information on graduation rates and, at most, know only whether students were successful (or not) through their second year of college. In addition, the study has data only from the institutions at which students initially enrolled. It is not known if a student transferred to another institution. Finally, the qualitative data must be interpreted with caution because of the very small number of faculty and students interviewed. The people interviewed were not randomly selected, but were identified through the study's college liaisons and there is no way of knowing how representative their views were.

The Lives of Boston Public School Graduates

It is important to consider the context of these young people's lives. Based on the qualitative interviews of this study along with national research findings on first generation and low-income students, we know that many recent BPS graduates attending college faced numerous challenges, encompassing multiple financial and family obligations as well as feelings of alienation from the campus environment. Their lives were often more complicated and carried greater responsibilities than the average 20 year old college student from a middle-income family. Consequently, at times, what appeared to be an academic challenge may in fact have been a lack of time or energy created by non-academic responsibilities or circumstances. While this study cannot directly connect the analysis of student's academic records to contextual factors, it is important to keep them in mind when drawing implications from the quantitative findings.

Key Quantitative Findings

Based on analysis of the transcript data, the study’s key quantitative findings are:

Finding One

Students who had a more rigorous high school preparation or who attended colleges with higher academic admission requirements were more likely to be academically successful in college. At the same time, there is evidence that the intention to persist in college remained high for less prepared students or those who attended less selective institutions.

Exam school graduates had much higher rates of persistence, progress, and performance than their counterparts who graduated from comprehensive or Pilot high schools. Seventy-one percent of exam school graduates continuously enrolled full-time over five semesters compared to 41% of non-exam school graduates. Of these students who continuously enrolled full-time, 64% of exam school graduates were earning credits at a rate that put them on track to graduate in 100% (four/two years) of expected program time compared to 34% of non-exam school graduates.

Students who attended more or medium selective four-year colleges were more likely to persist and to do so full-time than students attending colleges

with less stringent admission requirements. Students at four-year more selective colleges were almost four times more likely and those at medium selective colleges more than twice as likely to continuously enroll full-time than students at two-year colleges.

Differences between college selectivity groups were smaller when applying a broad definition of persistence that included part-time students who continuously enrolled and those who enrolled intermittently. In particular, applying this broad definition of persistence resulted in two-year colleges’ persistence rate increasing threefold and the gap between two-year colleges and four-year more selective colleges being cut in half. (Chart 1)

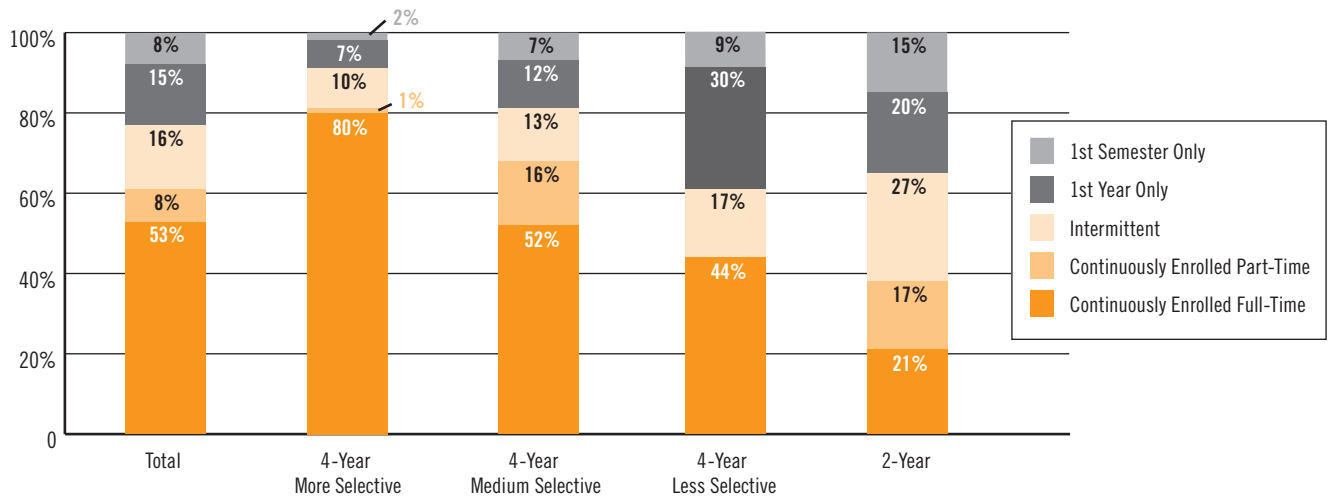
Finding Two

How a student chose to persist at college—continuously or intermittently, full-time or part-time—made a difference in their academic success no matter what type of college they attended.

Consistent persistence was critical to students’ academic progress and performance:

Students who continuously enrolled and were always full-time were particularly likely to be performing and persisting at satisfactory rates, regardless of which type of college they attended.

CHART 1
Persistence Categories by College Selectivity Group



For example, two-year college students who enrolled full-time every semester were almost twice as likely to have reached satisfactory achievement levels as students at more selective colleges who had “stopped out” (temporarily withdrew from college).

Students who continuously enrolled but did so occasionally part-time, while not doing as well as their full-time counterparts, had higher levels of academic achievement than those who stopped out. For instance, students who enrolled intermittently at more selective colleges were three times more likely to have low GPAs than students at two-year colleges who enrolled every semester but were sometimes part-time.

Finding Three

Institutional characteristics, policies, or practices seemed to have influenced students’ academic success:

Within each college selectivity group, there were substantial differences between colleges on most measures of academic success. Every selectivity group included one or two colleges where students did far better on almost every measure of success than students at other institutions in that group. Most strikingly there was one four-year less selective college and one two-year college where students’ rates of progress and performance were at least equal to the average rates at medium selective schools. Moreover, each college selectivity group usually had one or two colleges whose students did far worse on almost every measure than other institutions in that group. These findings suggest that what happened during college, once a student enrolled in a particular college, may have played a major role in a student’s academic success or failure.

Finding Four

There were two findings with unclear implications:

When students who persisted did not reach a satisfactory level of academic achievement, it was more likely to be associated with earning insufficient credits than with low grades. Students were much more likely to be behind in credit accumulation than to have a grade point average below graduation requirements. The difference between students

at four-year less selective and two-year colleges on these measures implied that variation in institutional policies and practices may influence the rate at which students accumulate credits.

For students at colleges with less stringent admission requirements, enrollment in developmental courses was not strongly associated with lower rates of persistence or academic achievement.

At four-year less selective and two-year colleges, students who enrolled in at least one developmental course and those who never enrolled in such a course were equally likely to be continuously enrolled. Moreover, of those who continuously enrolled full-time at four-year less selective colleges, both developmental and non-developmental students were equally likely to have reached satisfactory academic achievement (defined as accumulating sufficient credits and earning a satisfactory GPA). At two-year colleges, for continuously enrolled full-time students, developmental status did not affect the likelihood of earning a high GPA.

Issues Raised by Quantitative Findings

These findings raise a number of issues about the patterns of academic success among BPS graduates. The qualitative data and national research, while not offering definitive answers, can shed some light on these issues. Throughout the report, these topics are addressed by posing a question raised by the quantitative findings and offering a speculative answer. Topics discussed include: variation in enrollment patterns; academic momentum and excessive withdrawal; differences between college selectivity groups; and others.

Evidence for the Importance of College Knowledge in Student Success

The quantitative analysis revealed that the majority of students who were able to continuously enroll through the second year of college were achieving at least minimal academic standards and some reached high levels of achievement. The qualitative findings revealed one possible reason for this: those students who made it to the end of their second year had acquired considerable “college knowledge.” When asked what advice they would give to a BPS graduate entering college,

the students interviewed for this study responded with advice resembling a basic college survival course: study hard and well; manage your time efficiently; ask your professor and advisor for help; use the college's academic support services; and get to know a variety of people on campus. Many attributed their grasp of college life to summer bridge programs and first-year seminars. But the discussion of their experiences made it clear that these initial programs would not have been sufficient by themselves to carry the student through college. These students were able to put into practice the advice offered, because the staff of these programs—as well as other college faculty and staff—reached out to them and regularly offered support and advice as students' college careers progressed.

Recommendations

In light of these key findings, we offer the following:

Recommendations for Action

- Increase the use of data on postsecondary achievement disaggregated by student characteristics as the first step toward improving the persistence, progress, and performance of BPS graduates in college.
- Continue and increase investments in improving the academic preparation and college knowledge of BPS students attending non-exam schools.
- Increase the engagement of BPS graduates and other under-represented students in their college coursework and other academic experiences.
- Develop strategies for improving student success based on an understanding of the contextual issues (financial, work, family, campus climate) that affect the college participation and achievement of BPS graduates.
- Build strong partnerships among key stakeholders in higher education, the Boston Public Schools, the Mayor's Office, and community, business and philanthropy to promote and support increased college success for BPS graduates.
- Scale up effective practices and programs for improving persistence to serve all students who need such support in order to succeed in college.

Recommendations for Research

In order to better understand what high school, higher education, and community leaders can do to improve the college success of BPS graduates, research on the following topics is recommended:

- How BPS students acquire college knowledge;
- How they become academically engaged;
- How contextual factors, both on and off campus, create challenges to degree advancement; and
- How institutions can bring effective programs and practices to scale.

Conclusion

Boston can make substantial progress in improving the college completion rates of BPS graduates if we act on what we know works. Such efforts will succeed if we begin by looking at data on the college experiences of BPS graduates and identifying a small number of strategic problem areas on which to focus. These efforts should be based on what the research tells us are highly effective practices and policies for improving the college achievement of under-served students, such as increasing the engagement of students in their college coursework and reducing the challenges created by on-campus and off-campus contextual factors. Finally, these efforts will require the participation of college faculty and staff as well as BPS staff in developing action plans for needed changes and taking responsibility for implementing such plans.

For the city to meet 21st century economic and social needs, college readiness and success for all students needs to be central to the life and focus of all Boston high schools and higher education institutions enrolling BPS graduates. Achieving a goal as ambitious as “college for all” starts with strong leaders who are visibly committed to this important work—from college presidents to high school principals to board members and heads of nonprofit organizations to members of the School Committee. It means that everyone who touches the lives of Boston's public school students or their families must embrace this goal and assume responsibility for achieving it. Commitment and responsibility—combined with using knowledge gained from this research to inform decisions—is the only way to achieve the changes necessary to dramatically increase the numbers of BPS graduates completing college degrees in future years.