

OF 100 CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOL FRESHMEN, SIX WILL GET A COLLEGE DEGREE

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Of every 100 freshmen entering a Chicago public high school, only about six will earn a bachelor's degree by the time they're in their mid-20s, according to a first-of-its-kind study released Thursday by the Consortium on Chicago School Research.

The prospects are even worse for African-American and Latino male freshmen, who only have about a 3 percent chance of obtaining a bachelor's degree by the time they're 25.

The study, which tracked Chicago high school students who graduated in 1998 and 1999, also found that making it to college doesn't ensure success: Of the city public school students who went to a four-year college, only about 35 percent earned a bachelor's degree within six years, compared with 64 percent nationally.

Researchers say they're not exactly sure why Chicago schools alumni graduate from college in such low numbers, but that poor preparation during high school and too few resources at the college level contribute to the problem.

"Just focusing on getting kids to survive in high school isn't going to be enough," said study co-author Elaine Allensworth, a researcher at the consortium, a group that works closely with Chicago Public Schools. "This report raises a lot of issues that the colleges need to struggle with."

Schools chief Arne Duncan said the grim statistics in the report and the variation in college rates among city high schools are no surprise--they are what is driving massive private investment in high school reform.

"When students here are unprepared for college or the world of work, they are condemned to social failure," he said. "We're doing everything we can to dramatically change the high school experience for our teenagers."

Among other findings:

- Students who graduated from high school with a grade-point average below 3.0 were unlikely to graduate within six years, lacking the study skills that contribute to college success. Only about 16 percent of students with a high school GPA between 2.1 and 2.5 graduated during that time, compared with 63 percent of students who had a 3.6 GPA or better.
- African-American and Latino students from Chicago high schools have the lowest graduation rates--lower than the national average for those groups and lower than their white and Asian peers from Chicago. Just 22 percent of African-American males who began at a four-year college graduated within six years.

Chicago high school graduate Nigel Valentine, 26, is on the 10-year plan. He graduated from Kennedy High School in 1997. After getting an associate's degree from Daley College in 2003, he is now a junior at Northeastern Illinois University. He expects to graduate next year.

"Originally, I was hoping to be out in four or five years," said Valentine, who is studying criminal justice. He says he

blames himself and a school system that didn't ensure college readiness. "It's all about preparation. The structure of the classes in high school and elementary school were not up to par."

The study also found varying degrees of success among colleges in graduating students from Chicago schools.

Of the Chicago students who start as full-time freshmen at Northeastern, only 11 percent graduate within six years.

Northeastern officials said the study is unfair to the university, which primarily serves non-traditional students, including many part-time students who take an average of 9 years to graduate. Many students are older, low-income and work while in school, said Provost Lawrence Frank.

But Frank said the study does point "to things we need to address," particularly improving the experience for freshmen. The university next fall will require that all freshmen take a small seminar class with a maximum of 24 students. Sophomores will receive more advising about course selection and major.

To be sure, there were limitations to the study. It only provided graduation rates for students who enrolled full time in a four-year college. It did not include students from alternative high schools or those eligible for special education. Researchers also did not have graduation data from every Illinois college, and DePaul University, Northern Illinois University and Robert Morris College were among those left out.

The researchers used data from the non-profit National Student Clearinghouse, a group that collects data from secondary school officials who want to track their graduates. More than 2,800 colleges participate.

Carole Snow, an executive associate provost at the University of Illinois at Chicago, said many students start college unprepared in math and writing.

The university recently opened a math learning center where students can get tutoring and work on study skills.

About 46 percent of UIC students, including Chicago public school graduates, complete college within six years.

Loyola University has one of the highest graduation rates for Chicago students. About 66 percent complete college within six years, nearly the same as the school average.

Loyola Vice Provost John Pelissero attributes that success to individualized student attention, including mandatory academic counseling. All freshmen also get a peer adviser.

The researchers said that the study could help high school guidance counselors better advise students about where to go to college.

"Our kids could be making better choices than going to U. of I. Urbana," said co-author Melissa Roderick. "That is a very significant statement on that college, and they need to be paying attention to that."

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where some of Chicago's brightest students enroll, only 42 percent graduate within six years compared with 81 percent of all students, according to the study.

Robin Kaler, spokeswoman for the Urbana campus, disputed the consortium's numbers and said the graduation rate for Chicago students is nearly 65 percent.

"It is still not acceptable to us," said Kaler, who attributed the low number to a challenging environment at U. of I. "We work hard to attract and identify students that we think can succeed. ... There is no way to predict perfectly who is going to have the most success and who isn't"

She said the university has worked on improving student advising, with several colleges now requiring it. The advisers are supposed to not only monitor a student's academic progress, but also connect them with career-focused clubs and

other services. The university also started a program last fall called "University 101," which is intended to teach students how to study, conduct research, and locate programs and services at the university.

That program came too late for Crystalynn Ortiz, 19, who started at the Urbana campus in fall 2004 after graduating from Prosser Career Academy in Chicago with a 4.5 GPA. She dropped out of U. of I. after the first year, and now attends nearby Parkland Community College.

"I wasn't prepared to go to U. of I. I got my first bad grades and then I wasn't motivated to do well," she said. "I felt really unprepared in study habits, how hard it was going to be here." Ortiz said she lives two blocks from U. of I.'s campus, and takes the bus to Parkland. Some of her friends and family members don't know she flunked out, and she hopes to do well enough to return. "For me, this is low. This is bad. I shouldn't be at Parkland. I should be at U. of I. so I am trying to get through this and get back in," she said.

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ABOUT THE STUDY

Six in 100 Chicago public high school freshmen will receive a bachelor's degree by the age of 25, according to a study that tracked 1998 and 1999 high school graduates.

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