



# DETROIT STUDENTS' COLLEGE PATHWAYS AND OUTCOMES

## KEY FINDINGS:

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1. College enrollment among Detroit high school graduates declined between 2010 and 2018, yet full-time and 4-year enrollment increased.
2. Detroit enrollees are representative of the Detroit student population. The city's demographic makeup has changed over the past decade, and this is reflected in who is going to college.
3. The majority of Detroit high school graduates are not college-ready.
4. Most college enrollees from Detroit are not "on-track" to graduate after one year, and few eventually earn a degree.
5. Detroit high schools offer a wide range of college-supportive resources. Areas for growth related to college-going norms include increased parent outreach, more consistent long-term data tracking, and counseling students about college match.
6. Academic preparation is only one barrier to college success. Students report financial concerns, lack of transportation, and family responsibilities as equally large obstacles to postsecondary success.

# INTRODUCTION

As one of the surest paths to economic stability, higher education has the potential to play an equalizing role in society. However, access to college remains strikingly unequal. Low-income and racial minority students face obstacles which make them less likely to adequately prepare for, attend, and complete college (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Engle & Tinto, 2008). These young people have the greatest need for, yet the least access to, college counseling, community support, and college-educated role models (Avery, Howell, & Page, 2014; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Roderick et al., 2008). Prior research demonstrates the important role high schools play in shaping students' college opportunities (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hill, 2008). In particular, students need access to counseling resources and college-going norms (Robinson & Roksa, 2016; Roderick et al., 2008). Once students enroll in college, a further challenge is ensuring that they are successful and ultimately graduate with a degree.

This policy brief reports findings from research partnerships between the Youth Policy Lab, the Detroit Regional Chamber, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), the Detroit College Action Network (DCAN), and MDRC. We describe the landscape of college pathways and outcomes for Detroit high school graduates including current rates of college enrollment, persistence, and completion, both overall and within student subgroups. Additionally, we explore college planning/preparation resources and norms available in Detroit high schools. Finally, we report on the results of a survey of Detroit Promise Path scholarship recipients that sheds light on the factors that inhibit Detroit students from succeeding in college.

Specifically, we address the following research questions:

1. Among recent Detroit high school graduates, what are the rates of enrollment at 2-year vs. 4-year institutions, year-to-year persistence, and graduation?
2. What college preparation resources and norms are available across Detroit high schools? Which are linked to higher college enrollment rates?
3. What are the main barriers to Detroit students succeeding in, and graduating from, college?

To answer these questions, we combine data from three sources. First, we use administrative data on student demographics and college attendance from the Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC) to explore recent Detroit graduates' college enrollment and success. Second, we analyze survey responses from high school guidance counselors and college support personnel to ascertain the college-going resources and norms within Detroit high schools. Finally, to understand the main factors impeding Detroit students from college success, we explore survey responses from participants in the Detroit Promise Path college coaching program. More information on the data sources and analytical methods we use is in Appendix A.

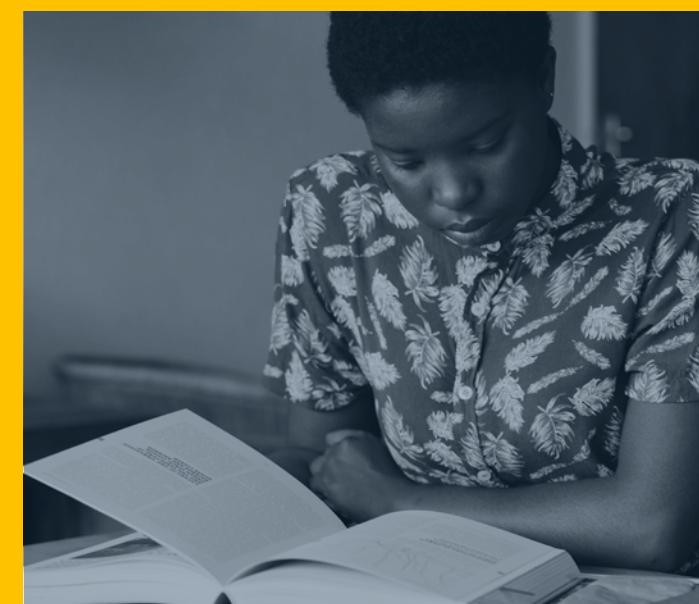
**" Only 17% of young people ages 25-34 from Detroit hold a bachelor's degree. "**

## Higher Education Attainment in Detroit

Higher education attainment in Detroit is best understood in the context of the long historical processes and racist policies and structures that have reshaped the city since World War II. First, the city has experienced a long economic and population decline as automotive manufacturing companies moved out of the city taking with them workers and jobs. This led to a cycle of business closures, which perpetuated the economic and population decline (Boyle, 2001; Sugrue, 2014). Second, while White Detroiters moved into the Detroit suburbs to take advantage of new job opportunities and to escape racial tensions, Black Detroiters were effectively barred from doing so by racist policies such as those governing home loans (e.g. redlining), and due to resistance by White Detroiters. This has resulted in a highly racially segregated greater Detroit area, with poor Black Detroiters concentrated in the city, and wealthier White Detroiters in the suburbs (Darden et al, 1987). Finally, as the economic and tax base of the city eroded, the city disinvested in public institutions. These trends were exacerbated with the Great Recession, which saw the City of Detroit file for bankruptcy, a takeover of some schools in the Detroit Public Schools system, and spikes in unemployment (peaking at 24.9% in 2009), poverty, and home foreclosures amongst Detroit residents (Sugrue, 2014).

As a result of these historical processes and structures, Detroit has near the highest rate of concentrated poverty among the top 25 metro areas in the US by population, with 38% of all residents living in poverty (Brookings Institution, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Concentrated poverty makes it more difficult for people to be upwardly mobile: Detroit is one of the least economically mobile cities for children, ranking 46th out of the 50 largest U.S. commuting zones (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). In other words, children who are born poor in Detroit are very likely to remain poor throughout their lives.

Educational attainment offers a path out of poverty, yet rates of higher education among Detroit residents are low. Only 17% of young people ages 25-34 hold a bachelor's degree, half the national average of 35% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Rates of college education are particularly low among poor and minority students. For instance, among Black and Latina/o youth from Detroit, just 12% and 4% hold a bachelor's degree or higher, respectively, well below the national average for those groups of 21% and 16% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

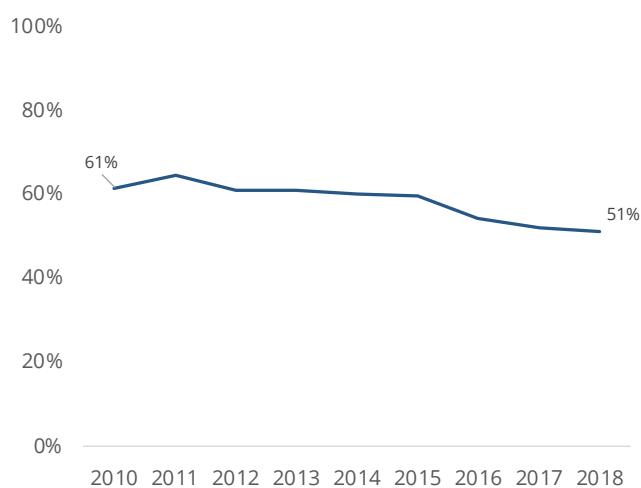


# FINDINGS

**FINDING 1:** College enrollment among Detroit high school graduates declined between 2010 and 2018, yet full-time and 4-year enrollment increased.

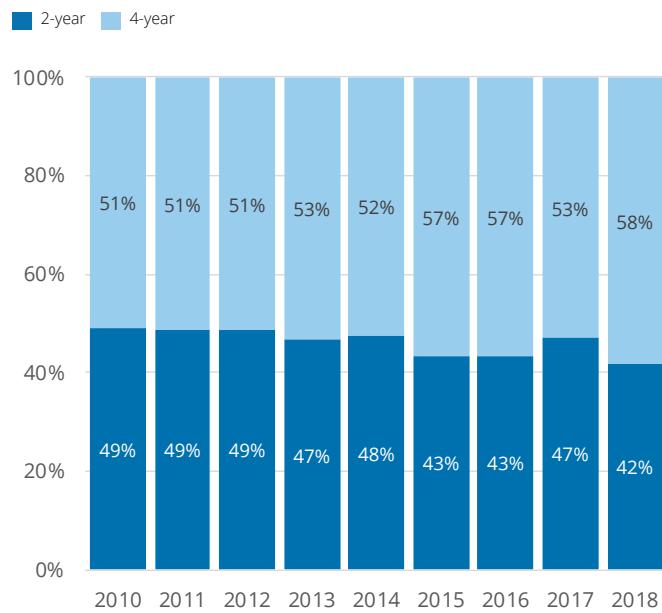
The overall number of Detroit students enrolling in college declined from around 5,000 to 3,000 students between 2010 and 2018. While this reflects to some degree the declining school population in the city of Detroit, the share of graduates enrolling in college has nonetheless decreased from 61% in 2010, to 51% in 2018 (Figure 1).

*Figure 1 – Detroit high school graduates college enrollment*

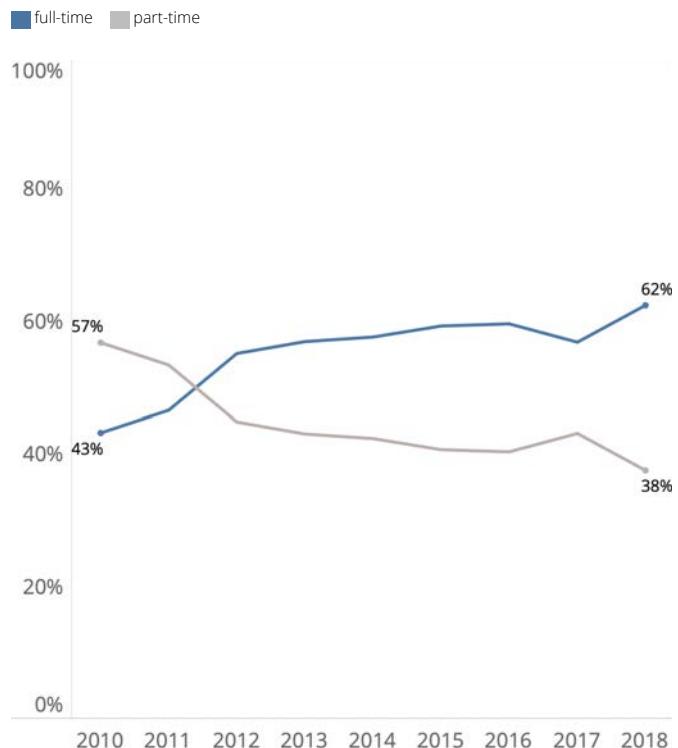


Although overall enrollment has declined, we find that a greater share of those students who do attend college enroll in 4-year institutions (Figure 2). In 2010, 51% of new Detroit college enrollees attended 4-year institutions, compared to 58% in 2018. Full-time enrollment (as opposed to enrolling part-time) has also increased (Figure 3). Sixty-two percent of the 2018 cohort were enrolled full-time in their first year of college, compared to only 43% for the 2010 cohort (Figure 3).

*Figure 2 – The share of 4-year enrollment has increased over time*



*Figure 3 – The proportion of graduates enrolling full-time has increased*

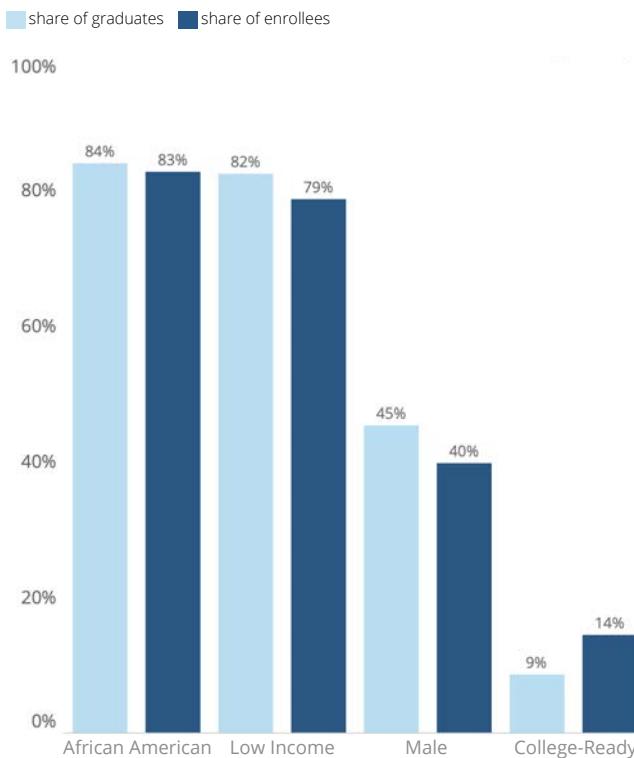


**FINDING 2:** Detroit enrollees are representative of the Detroit student population. The city's demographic makeup has changed over the past decade, and this is reflected in who is going to college.

We compare the background characteristics of students from Detroit who enrolled in postsecondary institutions to those of high school graduates to see if college enrollees are representative of the broader student population in Detroit. In most respects, we find that the two groups are similar. Male students comprised 45% of high school graduates, and 40% of enrollees. Among high school graduates, 82% were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, compared to 79% of enrollees. Eighty-four percent of high school graduates were Black, compared to 83% of enrollees (Figure 4).

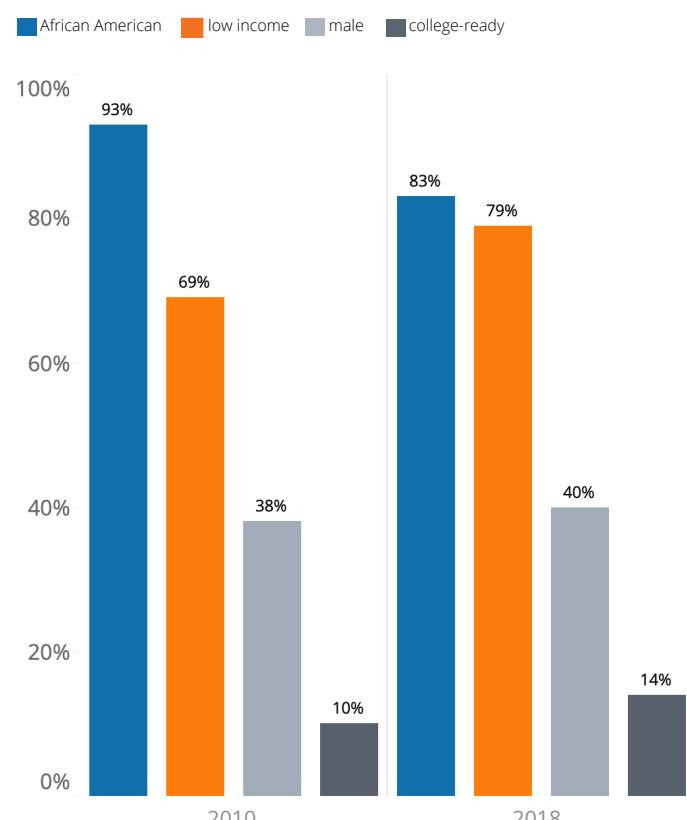
We also considered Detroit students' college-readiness as assessed by their performance on standardized tests. We find that whereas only 9% of all 2018 high school graduates earned college-ready test scores, 14% of enrollees were "college-ready."

**Figure 4- Demographic profile of Detroit high school graduates and enrollees, 2018 cohort**



We find increases in the share of low income, college-ready and male enrollees between 2010 and 2018 (Figure 5). Conversely, we find that the share of Black enrollees declined by 10 percentage points over the same period. These changes are largely in line with the broader demographic changes in the city of Detroit.

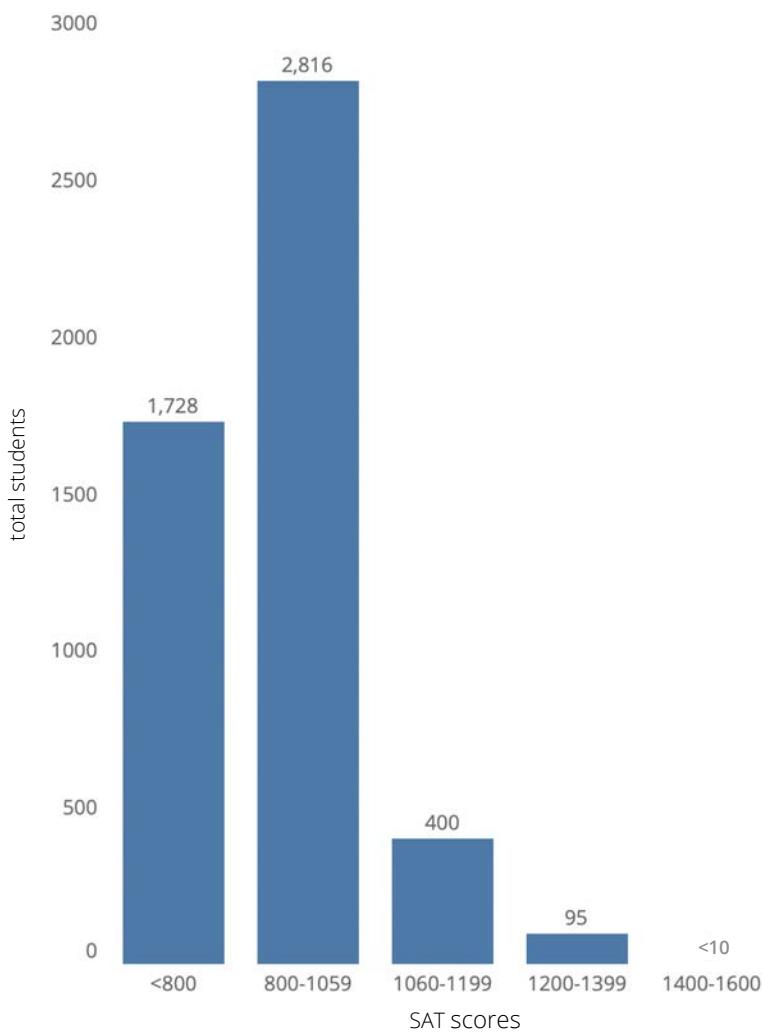
**Figure 5- Trends in Detroit enrollees' sociodemographic background**



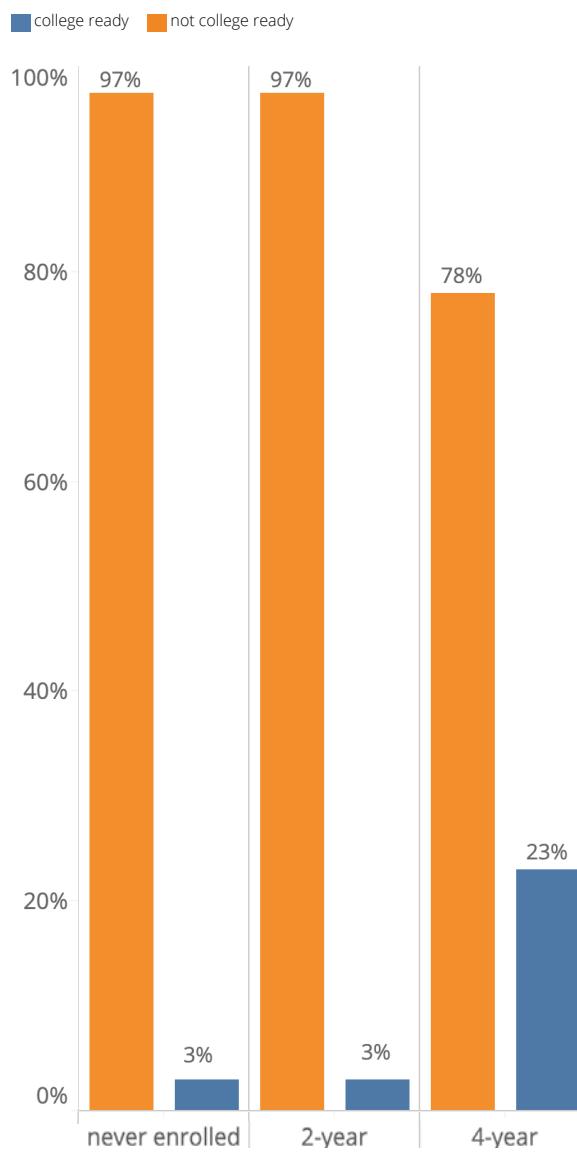
**FINDING 3:** The majority of Detroit high school graduates are not college-ready.

The vast majority of high school graduates from Detroit do not achieve college-ready scores on college enrollment exams. Among high school graduates in 2018, 90% earned a score below a 1060 on the SAT, a rule-of-thumb used by Metro Detroit institutions to determine students' readiness for college (Figure 7). Further, we find that the vast majority of students who enrolled in college were under-prepared – 97% of 2-year enrollees and 78% of 4-year enrollees earned SAT scores below 1060 (Figure 6).

*Figure 6– SAT scores among Detroit high school graduates, 2018 cohort*



*Figure 7– College readiness among Detroit high school graduates and enrollees, 2018 cohort*

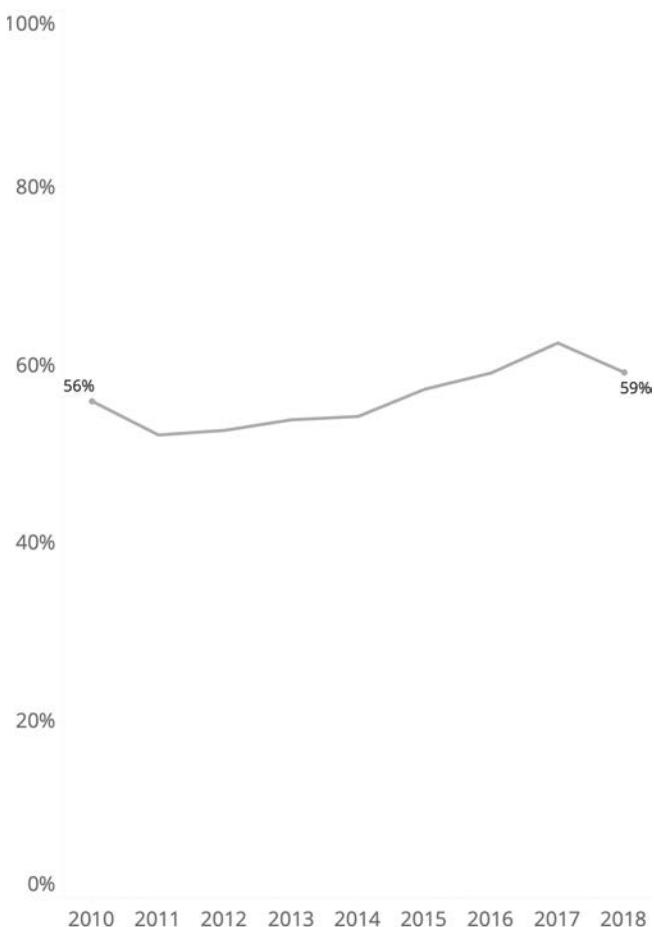


In 2018, **90% of all Detroit high school graduates** were **not college-ready**.

**FINDING 4:** Most Detroit enrollees are not on-track to graduate after one year, and few eventually earn a degree.

We find that about two-thirds (59%) of the most recent cohort of full-time Detroit enrollees earned at least twenty-four credits during their first year of college (Figure 8). Typically, students achieve full-time status if they enroll in at least 12 academic credits per semester. Thus, full-time students who pass all of their coursework would accrue at least 24 credits in a given year. Our findings indicate that many full-time Detroit enrollees are not on-track to graduate in four years, based on their first year credit accumulation.

*Figure 8- On-track credit accumulation during students' first year of college, 4-year enrollees over time, 2010-2018*



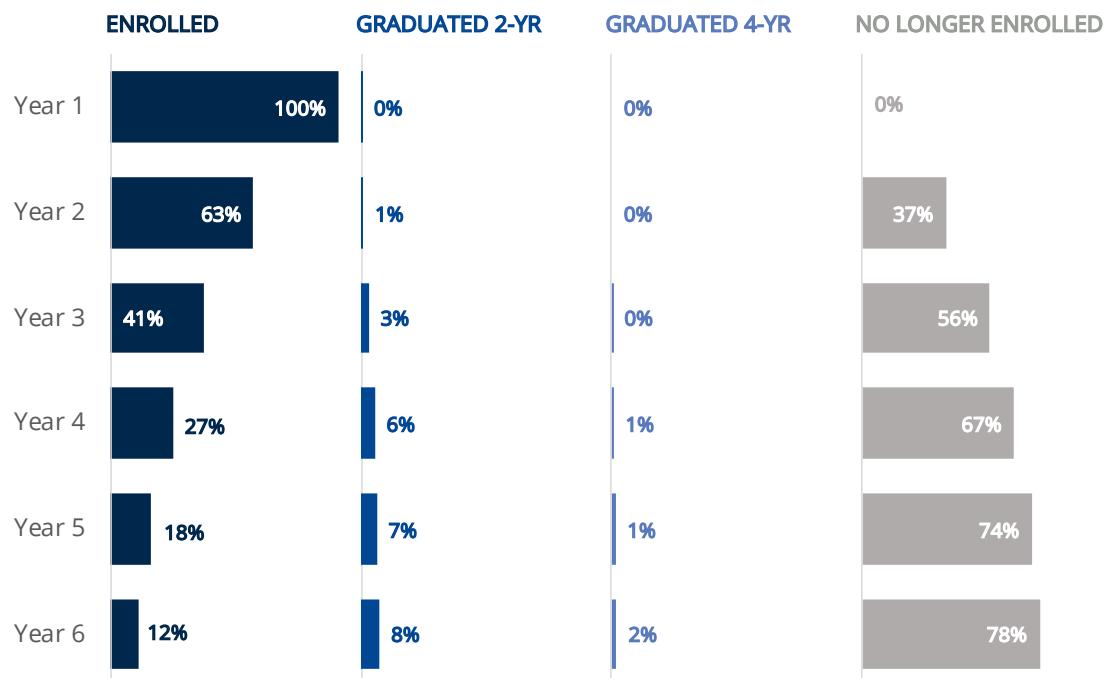
We also find that many Detroit students do not persist in college, and few eventually earn degrees. Among high school graduates in 2013 (the most recent cohort with six years of post-enrollment data available), 63% of those who initially enrolled at 2-year colleges returned in their second year (Figure 9). By the end of their second year, only 1% had earned a 2-year degree. Six years later, only 8% had earned degrees (BA or AA), while another 12% were still enrolled. Degree attainment rates of 2-year enrollees were lower for Detroit than for the state of Michigan as a whole (24% earned a degree within six years). Of note, we find that a substantial share of Detroit 2-year enrollees were still enrolled in years 4 and 5 (27% and 18%, respectively). In other words, about a fifth of students were continuing to make progress towards a degree 5 years after initially enrolling.

Compared to students who started at 2-year colleges, we find that more Detroit 4-year enrollees persisted to their second year (84%) and earned degrees (32% earned a BA within six years, with another 3% earning AA degrees and 18% still enrolled). Persistence among Detroit 4-year enrollees was similar to the statewide persistence rate. However, degree attainment rates for Detroit students were much lower (statewide, 88% of students enrolled for a second year, and 63% earned a degree within six years).

Figure 9- Persistence and graduation rates among 2-year and 4-year enrollees, 2013 cohort

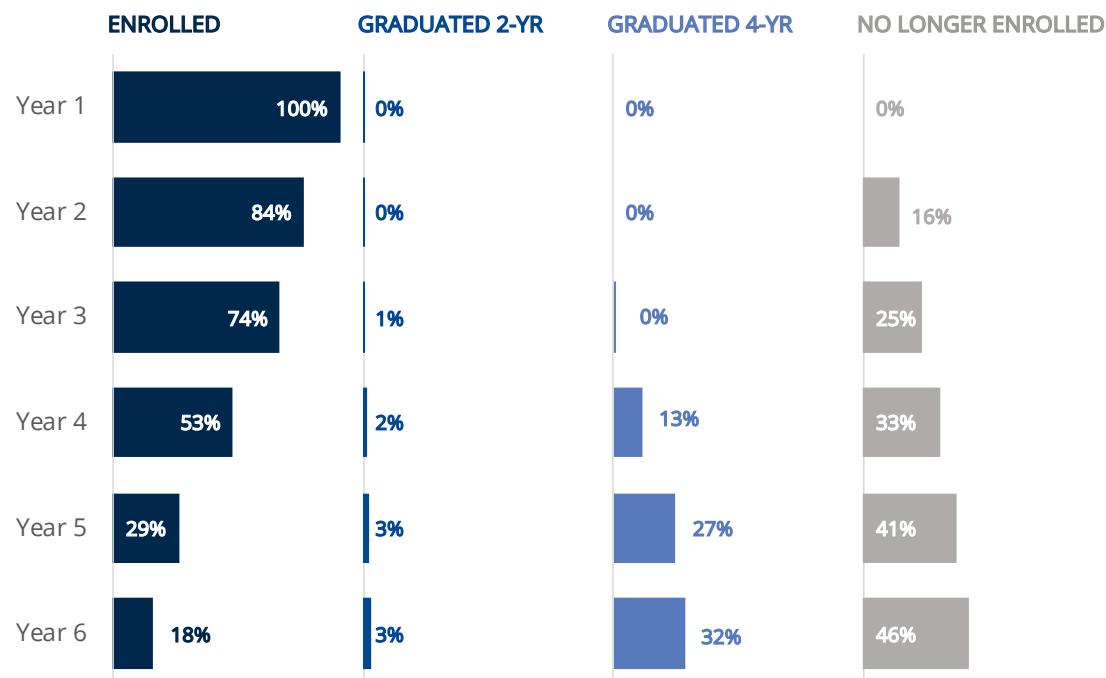
## Detroit 2-Year

2-YEAR COLLEGE GOING PATTERNS FOR THE JUNE 2013 HS GRADUATING CLASS



## Detroit 4-Year

4-YEAR COLLEGE GOING PATTERNS FOR THE JUNE 2013 HS GRADUATING CLASS



Note- Figures show cumulative graduation rates. For example, the Year 3 graduation rate includes students who graduated in the 1st, 2nd and 3 years following college enrollment

**FINDING 5:** Detroit high schools offer a wide range of college-supportive resources. Areas for growth included increased parent outreach, more consistent long-term data tracking, and counseling students about college match.

We find that Detroit high schools provide their students with a wide range of college-oriented resources. Most schools have a dedicated staff (87%) and dedicated space (93%) devoted to college prep. Other commonly offered resources include college fairs (83%), high school-organized college campus tours (73%), college application informational sessions (73%), and assistance finding and applying for financial aid (73%). Curricular resources like college readiness classes and concurrent enrollment were less common overall. We did find, however, that these resources were more often provided by schools with higher enrollment rates. For example, 60% of schools with above-median enrollment rates offered college preparation classes, while such a class was only available in 27% of schools with below-median enrollment rates.

**TABLE 1: Summary of college-prep resources available within Detroit schools, overall and by college enrollment level**

	Overall	"Higher" Enrollment	"Lower" Enrollment
<b>Resources</b>			
Dedicated staff: college counselor	87%	80%	93%
Dedicated space: college center	93%	93%	93%
<b>School offers/assists with...</b>			
college fairs	83%	93%	73%
student visits to colleges	73%	80%	67%
college info session for students/ parents	73%	80%	67%
finding financial aid for college	73%	73%	73%
programs like Upward Bound, GEAR UP	53%	47%	60%
college readiness classes (e.g., Senior Seminar, AVID)	43%	60%	27%
dual or concurrent enrollment	60%	73%	47%

Note: Schools with "higher" enrollment are those with rates above the median (48%), and schools with "lower" rates are those below. Table summarizes measures of resources available as reported during the 2019-20 school year.

We find several possible areas of growth for Detroit schools in terms of fostering college-going norms. For instance, only about two-thirds of schools (64%) tracked data on all recent graduates' college admission, orientation attendance, and enrollment (Table 6). Only about a third (32%) tracked data on all graduates' college persistence. Parent outreach is another area for growth. While 82% of schools reported contacting 12th-grade students' parents or guardians about college prep often, far fewer reported consistently communicating with families of 9th and 10th-grade students (21%) or 11th-grade students (64%). Finally, we found that school-wide counseling about college match was a less-common practice. College "match" refers to the alignment between students' qualifications for college and the selectivity of the institutions at which they ultimately enroll (Hoxby & Avery, 2012). Schools that offer counseling about college match might, for example, help students to decide whether to attend 2-year versus 4-year schools. We found that in schools with below-median enrollment rates only about 50% reported counseling all students about match compared to 77% of schools with above-median enrollment.

TABLE 2: Summary of college-going norms in Detroit schools, overall and by college enrollment level

	Overall	"Higher" Enrollment	"Lower" Enrollment
Norms	Mean	Mean	Mean
<b>Record for all students</b>			
FAFSA, scholarship, + college prep	79%	86%	71%
Admission, orientation, + enrollment	64%	79%	50%
College persistence	32%	29%	36%
<b>Contact about college prep often...</b>			
parents of 9th/10th graders	21%	14%	29%
parents of 11th graders	39%	21%	57%
parents of 12th graders	82%	86%	79%
% counseling dept hrs on college: >50	39%	36%	43%
counsel all students about match	63%	77%	50%
college prep is counseling dept. primary goal	33%	33%	33%
college-going culture: personal norms (min=1, max=5)	4.33	4.49	4.17
college-going culture: staff norms (min=1, max=5)	3.87	4.02	3.71

Note: Schools with "higher" enrollment are those with rates above the median (48%), and schools with "lower" rates are those below. Table summarizes measures of resources available as reported during the 2019-20 school year.

**FINDING 6:** Academic preparation is only one barrier to college success. Students report financial concerns, lack of transportation, and family responsibilities as equally large obstacles to postsecondary success.

The Detroit Promise Path college coaching program provided financial support and one-on-one advising to Detroit high school graduates who attended local community colleges during the Fall of 2018 and 2019.

Survey responses and interviews with students participating in the Detroit Promise Path program reveal that while students faced academic challenges, non-academic challenges such as financial difficulties are equally significant barriers to college success. Only 54% of students reported that they have the financial resources necessary to succeed in college, compared to 85.6% who reported that they had the academic resources necessary. In interviews, the majority of participants said that they had to work while in school, leading to competing demands for their time, and making it difficult to enroll in courses full-time. Many students said that they had a number of family responsibilities, such as caring for children or supporting their families financially (Ratledge et al, 2019).

For the 88 survey respondents who were no longer enrolled in college, 52% cited the challenge of finding reliable transportation to school as one of the top barriers to continuing in college. Financial concerns also ranked highly, with students citing the need to pay rent (29.1%), pay for books, supplies, or lab fees (13.5%), and needing to spend more time at work (22.4%) as one of the main reasons they were no longer enrolled. In contrast, less than 5% of students cited not "having the skills to succeed academically" as a top reason they were no longer enrolled (Ratledge et al, 2021).

# CONCLUSIONS

As the economy has strengthened over the past decade and Detroit students have found more opportunities in the workforce, college enrollment rates have declined. In 2018, just 51% of Detroit students enrolled in college within 12 months of graduating high school. This is not for lack of effort on the part of Detroit high schools, which provide their students with a wide range of college resources. That said, areas for growth remain, including: increased parent outreach, more long-term data tracking, and counseling students about college match.

But enrolling in college is just the first step. The vast majority of Detroit college enrollees do not receive college-ready scores on the SAT or ACT, suggesting they may not have the academic skills needed to be successful in college. Indeed, few eventually earn degrees. We find that six years after enrollment, only 8% of students had earned a degree, while another 12% were still enrolled – figures markedly lower than Michigan as a whole.

However, improving academic preparation and increasing college enrollment would only partially address Detroit students' barriers to college access and success. Surveys of low-income students attending five Detroit-area community colleges suggest that financial and transportation difficulties pose the biggest challenge to college success. These problems compound the academic challenges students face.

Approaches to improving the college attainment rates of Detroit-area students must be holistic and address multiple barriers – low academic preparedness, low college enrollment, and non-academic barriers to college success. Addressing any one challenge in isolation will not lead to meaningful and sustained gains in college attainment in the Detroit area. Encouragingly, current interventions in the Detroit Metro area to boost college access and success address multiple barriers to student success. These span increased numbers of college counsellors in DPSCD schools through institutionalized positions and AdviseMI college advisers, college scholarship programs such as the Detroit Promise, and college completion coaching from MCAN and the Detroit Promise Path.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank our partners who made this work possible- Detroit Regional Chamber, Detroit College Access Network, MDRC, and the Detroit Public Schools Community District.

This analysis utilizes data obtained through a confidential data application process submitted to the Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC)/Michigan Education Research Institute (MERI). Youth Policy Lab at the University of Michigan requested data access and completed the analysis included in this report. The data are structured and maintained by the MERI-Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC). MEDC data is modified for analysis purposes using rules governed by MEDC and are not identical to those data collected and maintained by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and/or Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). Results, information and opinions solely represent the analysis, information and opinions of the author(s) and are not endorsed by, or reflect the views or positions of, grantors, MDE and CEPI or any employee thereof.

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# APPENDIX A: DATA SOURCES AND METHODS

## **Recent postsecondary trends**

For this project, we used data provided by the Michigan Education Research Initiative (MERI) that included student-level K-12 and postsecondary educational records and demographic information, as well as school-level characteristics and averages of student demographics. The sample includes all students who graduated from public or charter K-12 schools in Michigan between the 2009-10 and 2017-18 school years. In this analysis, we restricted the sample to Detroit students, defined as students assigned schools within the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD). Students in this sample attended both public and charter high schools, both in Detroit and in the Metro Detroit suburbs. In total, we observed postsecondary trends for 1,028,721 Michigan students, and a subset of 63,635 Detroit resident students.

## **College-going resources and norms – DPSCD Survey**

To describe the college-going resources and norms available within Detroit high schools, we analyzed survey responses from high school guidance counselors and college support personnel. The survey was administered in Fall 2019 in partnership with the Detroit College Access Network (DCAN) which supports high school guidance counselors and college advisors across the Metro Detroit region. In total, 75 individuals responded to the survey, representing a total of 50 schools. In this report, we concentrated on the responses from 30 schools in which the majority of students were from Detroit (i.e., 50 percent or more of the school's student population).

## **Barriers to college success and graduation – Detroit Promise Path Survey**

To understand the main factors impeding Detroit students from college success, we analyzed survey responses from participants in the Detroit Promise Path college coaching program that were collected as part of an evaluation of the program. These students graduated from a Detroit high school and attended a Detroit school for at least two years. They attended one of five community colleges in the Detroit area: Henry Ford College, Macomb Community College, Oakland Community College, Schoolcraft College, and the Wayne County Community College District. In partnership with MDRC, YPL administered the survey in the third trimester of study to all 2016 and 2017 Detroit Promise community college students who were new to college (fall 2018 and fall 2019). Students in the study were randomized between a treatment group that received the Detroit Promise scholarship with added services such as coaching, and a control group that received the Detroit Promise scholarship and the college's services as usual. Due to a low response rate from control group participants, this brief reports responses from the 339 students who received Promise Path coaching services and responded to the survey.

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**Robin Jacob** is a faculty co-director of the Youth Policy Lab and a research associate professor at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on rigorously evaluating interventions designed to improve the educational and life outcomes of youth and their families.

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Support the Youth Policy Lab's efforts to use data for good.

The University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab helps community and government agencies make better decisions by measuring what really works. We're data experts who believe that government can and must do better for the people of Michigan. We're also parents and community members who dream of a brighter future for all of our children. At the Youth Policy Lab, we're working to make that dream a reality by strengthening programs that address some of our most pressing social challenges.

We recognize that the wellbeing of youth is intricately linked to the wellbeing of families and communities, so we engage in work that impacts all age ranges. Using rigorous evaluation design and data analysis, we're working closely with our partners to build a future where public investments are based on strong evidence, so all Michiganders have a pathway to prosperity.