

# 4 Year vs. 6 year college grad rates discussion

Recommended audience: 11th and 12th grade students  
From The To&Through Project

Purpose	<p>Although the vast majority of students who are interested in a 4-year college expect to graduate within 4 years, the reality is that many CPS students take more than 4 years to complete a bachelor's degree. And yet most of the rates published on college searchtools communicate 6-year rates, not 4-year rates.</p> <p>We hope this lesson and conversation will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Provide some strategies students can use to be proactive in navigating colleges and universities to graduating within 4 years (if that is their goal).</li><li>● Help reduce the shame/stigma students may feel by naming how common it is for students to take longer than 4 years to graduate and acknowledging this is often due to barriers set up by postsecondary institutions. And within this, name how important it is to consider planning for taking longer than 4 years in their planning.</li></ul>
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Students will understand there is a disconnect between expected time to college graduation and actual time to graduation and make connections to what that means for their own pathway.</li><li>● Students will walk away with some strategies that can help them graduate in less time.</li></ul>
Key Takeaways for Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The majority of students going to college expect to graduate in 4 years, however only 30% of CPS graduates completed a bachelor's degree within 4 years, while 51% of CPS graduates completed a bachelor's degree within 6 years.</li><li>● If you do want to graduate within 4 years, be proactive in working with your academic advisor in making a plan with the classes you take and the path towards your degree. And it is important to consider the possibility of taking more than 4 years to graduate in your financial planning and decision making because it is very common.</li></ul>
Content Standard/ Alignment	<p><b>C.c. 1. Postsecondary Affordability– Pathway Costs.</b> Quantify the “sticker price” and “net price” with consideration to the net cost of a degree depending on how long it takes to graduate.</p>
Supplies/ Materials Needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <a href="#">4 year/6 year grad rates slides/presentation</a></li><li>● <a href="#">4 year/6 year grad rates Worksheet</a></li><li>● <b>Student Stories (see Teacher Prep for descriptions)</b></li></ul>

This conversation is most relevant for students who are interested in attending a 4-year/Bachelor's degree granting institution. You can differentiate this lesson for students interested in 2-year, certificate, or other NEXT Pathways by having them spend time exploring typical time to completion for their unique pathway and connecting that to cost.

Note: If this is a conversation that is particularly engaging or relevant for your students, you might consider breaking it up into 2 days— 1 day for looking at the data and strategies and 1 day for discussing the Student Stories.

**Choose which 2 (or more) Student Stories** you think will resonate most with your students.

This lesson plan as written highlights Marshai and Nicole, but you can adjust based on your students' community/neighborhood, demographics, and interests as well as the time you have available.

- **Nicole:** Nicole is a Mexican-American first-generation college graduate from the Back of the Yards neighborhood. Since she was little, her heart was set on entering the world of science and becoming a doctor. She attended a public bachelor's degree granting institution in Chicago and graduated in six years in 2021. She is currently a counselor at a non-profit organization in Chicago, focusing on supporting people through their mental health journey.
- **Marshai:** Marshai is a Black first-generation college student and grew up on the west side of Chicago. She graduated from her neighborhood high school in Roseland in 2020 and now attends a historically Black college in Arkansas. She is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree in industrial technology and is set to graduate on a 4.5 year track. Marshai hopes to one day build a football field for her high school.
- **Roxanne:** Roxanne grew up on the southeast side of Chicago and proudly identifies as a Peruvian trans woman. She graduated from her neighborhood high school and was a part of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program. Roxanne is the first in her family to graduate high school and college. She took a 5 year track to graduate with her bachelors at Chicago public institution in 2022. Currently, Roxanne works remotely as a customer service representative.
- **Ilyas:** Ilyas is Ethiopian and grew up in Rogers Parks. He graduated from his neighborhood high school in 2018 and enrolled in an associate degree program at a private university. After receiving his associate's degree, he is now enrolled at an Illinois public institution pursuing his bachelor's degree. Currently Ilyas is attaining his bachelor's on a 6+ year academic track, and is graduating in winter of 2024, majoring in sports management. He is excited to later pursue his master's. Ilyas is also proud to serve as the president of a Black Service fraternity on campus.
- **Allan:** Allan is a Black first generation college student who grew up in Morgan Park. He graduated from CPS magnet high school in the Mount Greenwood neighborhood in 2015. He later attended a private bachelor-granting college in the south side of Chicago on a full ride scholarship. He loves creating and spent a lot of his free time in undergrad in a studio. He majored in Critical Race and

Ethnic studies (CRES) and Media Arts and Design. Allan graduated in 4 years thanks to getting financial aid for a summer quarter. He currently works for the city of Chicago as part of a technology support team.

- **Karla:** Karla is a Honduran-American first-generation college student from Humboldt Park on the west side of Chicago. Her time in CPS was marked by a lot of change and transferring of schools. She faced the challenges of both the [2013 school closures](#) and a difficult high school selection process. She attended a liberal arts college in rural Indiana through a cohort model scholarship program where she got her bachelor's degree studying Sociology and Spanish with a minor in Latin and Caribbean. Karla felt heavily pressured and graduated in 4 years because of the strict full-tuition 4 year scholarship she received. She currently works at a college preparatory nonprofit.

Determine how students will submit their exit ticket (e.g. Google Classroom submission, hard copy, survey question, etc.)

Do Now  
(5 min)

Present the Do Now prompts and have students respond on their worksheet or other Do Now system (e.g. journal/notebook) [Slide 2]

- How many years do you think it takes most CPS students who go to a 4-year college or university to graduate?
- If you see yourself going to college, how many years do YOU plan to take to graduate? Why?
- If you have another pathway in mind, how long would your training or certificate take?

Take an informal poll of the class for the first question via raised hands

- How many of you thought less than 4 years?
- 4 years exactly?
- More than 4 years?
  - Feel free to break this down further (4.5 years, 5 years, 6 years?)

Activity  
(40 min)

### Exploring the data (10 mins)

1. Explain to the students that today they are going to talk about graduation rates today with a focus on 4 year vs. 6 year rates and understanding what that might mean for their pathway to and through college if that is their chosen pathway.
2. Reveal the “answer” to the Do Now data questions by showing the two data charts (these charts are also on students’ handouts)
  - a. **Nationally, most students entering college expect to graduate in 4 years or less (89.9%) [Slide 3]**
  - b. **In reality, only 30% of CPS students graduate within 4 years. 51% graduate within 6 years [Slide 4]**

Remind students that this trend is not unique to Chicago. Nationally (as of 2014), the 4-year graduation rate was 47% and the six-year graduation rate was 64%. There are a lot of barriers that postsecondary institutions have in place, particularly for first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minority

students.

3. Prompt students to engage in a turn and talk in small groups or partners to reflect on the 2 data points they've just looked at. [Slide 5]
  - a. Does this information surprise you? Why or why not?
  - b. Why do you think it takes many students longer than 4 years to graduate?

Ask for a few students to share their responses with the whole class.

Emphasize that it is common for students to take more than 4 years to graduate so if that is the case for them, it's okay and normal. AND there are also things you can do to improve your chances of graduating within 4 years which will save money and time, and we'll talk about that later. Let's take a look at 2 stories of CPS alumni and learn more about their path through college to see what we can learn from their experiences.

### Jigsaw Student Stories (22 mins)

4. It can feel a little abstract to talk about college graduation when we're not even at high school graduation yet. We're going to do a Jigsaw and read some actual CPS alumni Student Stories to help us make connections to what challenges students face when they go to college and what recommendations they have for helping students graduate earlier.

Note: See Teacher Prep note at the top of the lesson plan if you want to use more stories or different stories for your students.

Divide up students into partners. Half of the partner groups should read one story and the other half of the partner groups should read another story. Partners for this first part should read the same story together.

- a. **Nicole:** Nicole is a Mexican-American first-generation college graduate from the Back of the Yards neighborhood. Since she was little, her heart was set on entering the world of science and becoming a doctor. She attended a public bachelor's degree granting institution in Chicago and graduated in six years in 2021. She is currently a counselor at a non-profit organization in Chicago, focusing on supporting people through their mental health journey.
  - b. **Marshai:** Marshai is a Black first-generation college student and grew up on the west side of Chicago. She graduated from her neighborhood high school in Roseland in 2020 and now attends a historically Black college in Arkansas. She is currently pursuing her bachelor's degree in industrial technology and is set to graduate on a 4.5 year track. Marshai hopes to one day build a football field for her high school.
5. Partner reading and discussion (Jigsaw Part 1) 10 mins [Slide 6]
    - Read your assigned student story (aloud in partners or independently)
    - Discuss and write down notes in your worksheet
      - What was this student's path to graduation?
      - What barriers did they face?

- How did they navigate those barriers?
- Get ready to share a summary of your story with another group who read a different story.

6. Jigsaw groups (Jigsaw Part 2) 7 mins [Slide 7]

Help students move from groups of 2 to become a group of 4 with a partner group who read a DIFFERENT story

- Each group shares a summary of their story (what was their path to graduation, what barriers did they face, how did they navigate the barriers).
- Discuss:
  - What similarities and differences do you notice in these two student stories?
  - What do these two stories make you think about time to graduation and your own postsecondary pathway?

7. Whole group discussion:

- a. How did the students in the stories navigate the barriers they faced?
- b. What are some of the strategies you read in the stories that might have helped the students graduate within 4 years?

**Strategies (7 mins)**

8. In addition to the ideas we just talked about from the Student Stories, there are some strategies to have in mind when you start your own pathway that can help you navigate this complicated system.

Share that: Colleges and universities create a lot of barriers that make graduating within 4 years difficult for students and they need to do a better job removing these barriers. But here are some things you can do to better prepare yourself to play that game and graduate in 4 years. [Slide 8]

Colleges and universities have a lot of barriers in place that make graduating in 4 years difficult. Here are some things you can do to prepare:

- **Earn credits before college** and make sure those credits transfer (Dual Enrollment, AP exams, IB exams, etc.)
- **Make a plan with your academic advisor** and check in with them regularly before you register for classes each semester
- **Keep your grades up.** You can lose financial aid and get off track for graduation if you don't make Satisfactory Academic Progress. **Ask for help if you're struggling with your classes.**
- **Pay attention to your course load.** This varies by campus, but you generally want to try to take 15 credits each semester (even when 12 credits counts as full time)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Take classes aligned to your major requirements</b> and think about declaring your major early rather than later. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. But it's also okay to change your mind! Just know this might impact how long it takes to graduate</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Closing or Exit Slip (5 min)</p>	<p>Present the Exit Slip slide and prompt students to respond to the Exit Slip using your chosen modality (paper and pencil, Google Classroom submission, Google survey question, etc.) [Slide 9]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Direct the students to answer the exit slip questions in 1-2 sentences each: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What is the data and the stories we looked at today making you think about your own postsecondary pathway?</li> <li>○ If college is your path and you want to graduate in 4 years, what are 2 strategies could you use to make sure you're on track to do so?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Next Steps</p>	<p>Read the exit slips to help inform students' connections to their postsecondary pathways.</p> <p>If the discussion about student stories was well received by students, consider reading additional <a href="#">student stories</a> to continue to examine CPS alumni experiences with their postsecondary pathways.</p> <p>If you have students who are more interested in 2-year college or in certificate or NEXT pathways, <a href="#">this series</a> specifically focuses on students who did not initially enroll in 4-year college or transferred.</p>