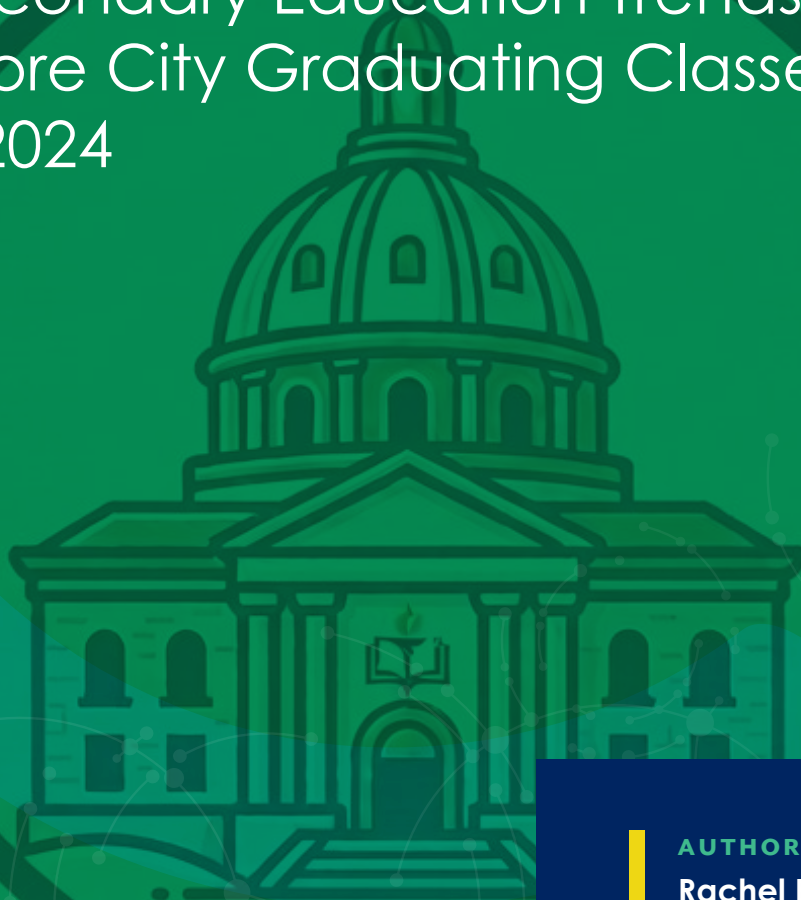


After High School:

Postsecondary Education Trends Among Baltimore City Graduating Classes of 2015–2024



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Introduction



This report provides information about the college access, enrollment, and degree completion outcomes for 10 consecutive cohorts of Baltimore City Schools graduates, or the classes of 2015 through 2024. It serves as a follow-up to BERC's prior report of postsecondary data for the classes of 2011–2020 and other reports published since 2011.

The report contains three main sections, along with vignettes of several City Schools alumni sharing memorable experiences about their journey into college and words of advice for students and college access providers. The three main sections feature general enrollment trends (by cohort, by high school type, type of college where students enroll, the most common college destinations); the process of applying to college (completing three or more applications, completing FAFSA, and incidence of summer melt); and finally, college degree completion within six years.

Much of the information in this report focuses on fall enrollment, i.e., the first fall after students' high school graduation date. Although some graduates with college aspirations elect to take a gap year to work, travel, or consider their options, research has shown that first-fall enrollment is more strongly associated with degree completion (Bozick & Deluca, 2005; Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011). Therefore, we focus on fall enrollment as a key outcome for college-bound students.

The reader should also note that enrollment and degree completion data in this report were derived from records that City Schools receives from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). Postsecondary institutions that participate with the NSC offer four-year degrees, two-year degrees (i.e., community colleges), and certificates achieved in less than two years, such as cosmetology, pharmacy tech, bookkeeping, etc. NSC records for shorter-term certificate programs were categorized together with two-year college enrollments and two-year degree completions, as these programs are typically offered at two-year colleges.

BALTIMORE CONTEXT

Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) includes approximately 30 high schools, and the characteristics of each school's graduates vary systematically according to its admissions policies, curricular areas of focus, and resource availability, which depend on school size, management type, and leader priorities. To reflect some of this variation, we have categorized high schools into six mutually exclusive types:

Entrance Criteria

Four high schools with college-preparatory curricula that require minimum composite scores for admission via the districtwide lottery.



- **Baltimore City College**
- **Baltimore Polytechnic Institute**
- **Dunbar High School**
- **Western High School (all girls school)**

Screening

Four screening schools participate in the districtwide lottery but also have special admission requirements, such as interviews, writing samples, artist portfolios or auditions.



- **Baltimore Design School**
- **Baltimore School for the Arts**
- **Bard High School Early College**
- **National Academy Foundation**

Selective Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Three high schools select all students into a CTE program, and for all graduating cohorts in the current report, minimum composite scores were required for admission via the districtwide lottery.¹



- **Carver Vocational-Technical High School**
- **Edmondson-Westside High School**
- **Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical High School**

¹ The three CTE high schools dropped entrance requirements beginning in 2021-22.

Traditional Lottery

12 comprehensive high schools have no admissions or screening criteria and participate in the district-wide enrollment lottery.



- **Academy for College and Career Exploration**
- **Augusta Fells Savage**
- **Benjamin Franklin High**
- **Bluford Drew Jemison STEM Academy West**
- **Digital Harbor High**
- **Forest Park High**
- **Frederick Douglass High**
- **Patterson High**
- **Reach! Partnership School**
- **Reginald F. Lewis High**
- **Renaissance Academy**
- **Vivien T. Thomas Medical Academy**

Charter Lottery

Five charter high schools have no admissions or screening criteria but hold separate, sometimes school-specific lotteries to enroll students.



- **Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women**
- **City Neighbors High**
- **ConneXions Community Based Arts School**
- **Coppin Academy**
- **Green Street Academy**

Alternative Placement

Three alternative option programs (AOPs) serve students with accelerated learning needs (e.g., over-aged, under-credited). Students are placed into AOPs by the district after some period of time during high school.



- **Achievement Academy**
- **Excel Academy**
- **Joseph C. Briscoe Academy**

Placement offers through the school choice process are generated using the Gale-Shapley Deferred Acceptance algorithm and are based on several factors, including the order in which students rank their school selections on their applications; available seats and seat-matching targets at each school; academic entrance criteria for Baltimore City College, Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Dunbar, and Western; school-based criteria for screening schools; and applicable lottery procedures for traditional and participating charter schools.

Schools with entrance criteria require a minimum composite score that is a combination of students' state assessment scores, grades, and in some cases attendance rates, from seventh grade and the initial term in eighth grade. For the student cohorts examined in this report, selective CTE high schools also required a minimum composite score for admission, albeit lower than the required score for entrance-criteria schools. Screening schools use less formal selection criteria but retain a good deal of latitude in selecting students, for instance after considering their art portfolios, auditions, writing samples, or conducting interviews.

Neither traditional district-lottery nor charter-lottery schools have composite score requirements or specialized application procedures, but chance comes into play when the number of applicants exceeds the number of available seats. Traditional high schools offer seats through the city-wide choice lottery; however, some charter schools hold separate lotteries. Achieving a desired result in the city-wide high school choice process thus requires resource-intensive decisions made by students and families, and families with less information or fewer resources in their middle school or at home may be less likely to attend entrance criteria, selective CTE, screening schools, and particular charter high schools.

The sorting of students into schools prior to ninth grade is important to keep in mind when considering outcomes after high school like attending college, since this process determines peer composition and school-level achievement once students are in high school. Research has shown that schools serving already-higher-achieving or more socioeconomically advantaged students in the aggregate tend to produce higher levels of achievement due to positive peer effects (Gottfried, 2014; Hanushek et al., 2003; Willms, 2010), and because teachers are more easily able to deliver challenging curricula (Barr & Dreeben, 1983; Raudenbush, 2008). This is not to say that non-selective schools must lower academic rigor or expectations for students, but students' prior skills, knowledge, and experiences shape the ways that teachers facilitate learning in classrooms, in terms of instructional pace, adherence to tested learning objectives, and capacity to pivot between foundational and more advanced topics.

Furthermore, high school type is associated with curricular focus and resources in many instances. Baltimore's more selective high schools have highly active alumni associations and donors, so students in those schools may have access to more abundant advanced learning opportunities (e.g., Ingenuity, International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, or honors courses) and more adult support with applying for college and financial aid (Durham, 2018; Klugman, 2012). Students in some charter-lottery schools, which are managed by external groups with different educational philosophies, may benefit from more bespoke programming, such as work-based learning or external college-access partnerships. Elsewhere, such as in the selective CTE high schools, students may have advanced learning opportunities in addition to access to career-preparation pathways. For instance, Dunbar, an entrance criteria school, as well as Carver, a CTE high school, have both offered P-Tech programs since 2016.

It is also well known that some areas of Baltimore have benefited from greater economic and political investment than others (Theodos et al., 2020), and that Baltimore's public transportation system -- necessary for a well-functioning school choice district -- is often inadequate (Schoenberg et al., 2021) and sometimes dangerous for students (Burdick-Will et al., 2019). So, to the extent that a student's home address makes attending one or another school more convenient or affects their experiences on the way home or to school, the structural geographic, racial, and socioeconomic features of the city also impact students' experiences throughout and after high school.

Differences between schools are therefore key to interpreting student outcomes, as their features determine the academic profiles of the student body, the resources available to students to plan for college, and social influences regarding whether college is a reasonable investment of money, time, and effort for a student's long-term goals. Differences across schools also exist in terms of the emphasis adults place on meeting graduation requirements, preparing for career pathways, and/or becoming competitive applicants in the college access process. As a result, several sections of this report present student outcomes disaggregated by high school type. Readers are invited to explore the College Access Digest https://baltimore-berc.org/berc_collegeaccessdatadigest_thru-class-of-2024_final/ where outcomes are presented in greater detail and are further disaggregated for individual schools or student subgroups.

Readers of this report who are interested in data sources and analytic decision or confidentiality masking rules may refer to the Appendix.

Part I

ENROLLING IN COLLEGE THE FALL AFTER GRADUATION

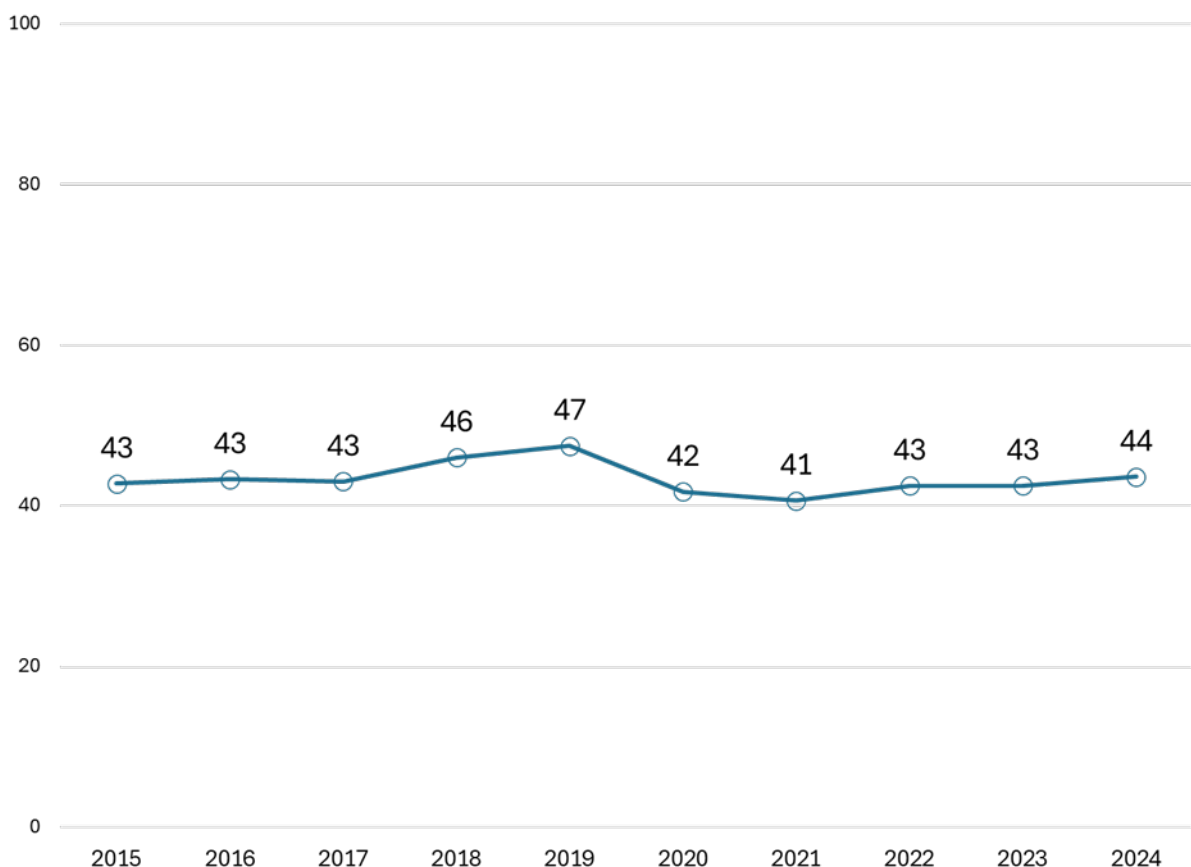
FALL COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

The percentage of Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) graduates who enrolled in college the fall immediately after high school graduation ranged from a high of 47% in 2019 to a low of 41% in 2021. These percentages correspond to the period immediately preceding and following the onset of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. The enrollment percentages increased from 2017 to 2019, then declined sharply in 2020 to 42%, and declined again in 2021 to 41% (refer to Figure 1).

These declines mirror national trends, with college enrollment nationwide decreasing from 60.5% in 2019 to 56.5% in 2020 (Causey et al., 2021). Similarly, although enrollment rates were widely expected to recover in fall 2021, national rates declined again by between 0.9 and 2.2 percentage points, depending on high school income and minority-level characteristics (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022).

Encouragingly, however, the percentage of City Schools' graduates who enrolled in college in the fall following graduation has begun to rebound. The enrollment percentage for the City Schools graduates increased from the low of 41% in 2021 to 43% in 2022 and 2023, and to 44% in 2024.

FIGURE 1. Percent of Graduates Enrolling in College the First Fall After Graduation, Classes of 2015–2024



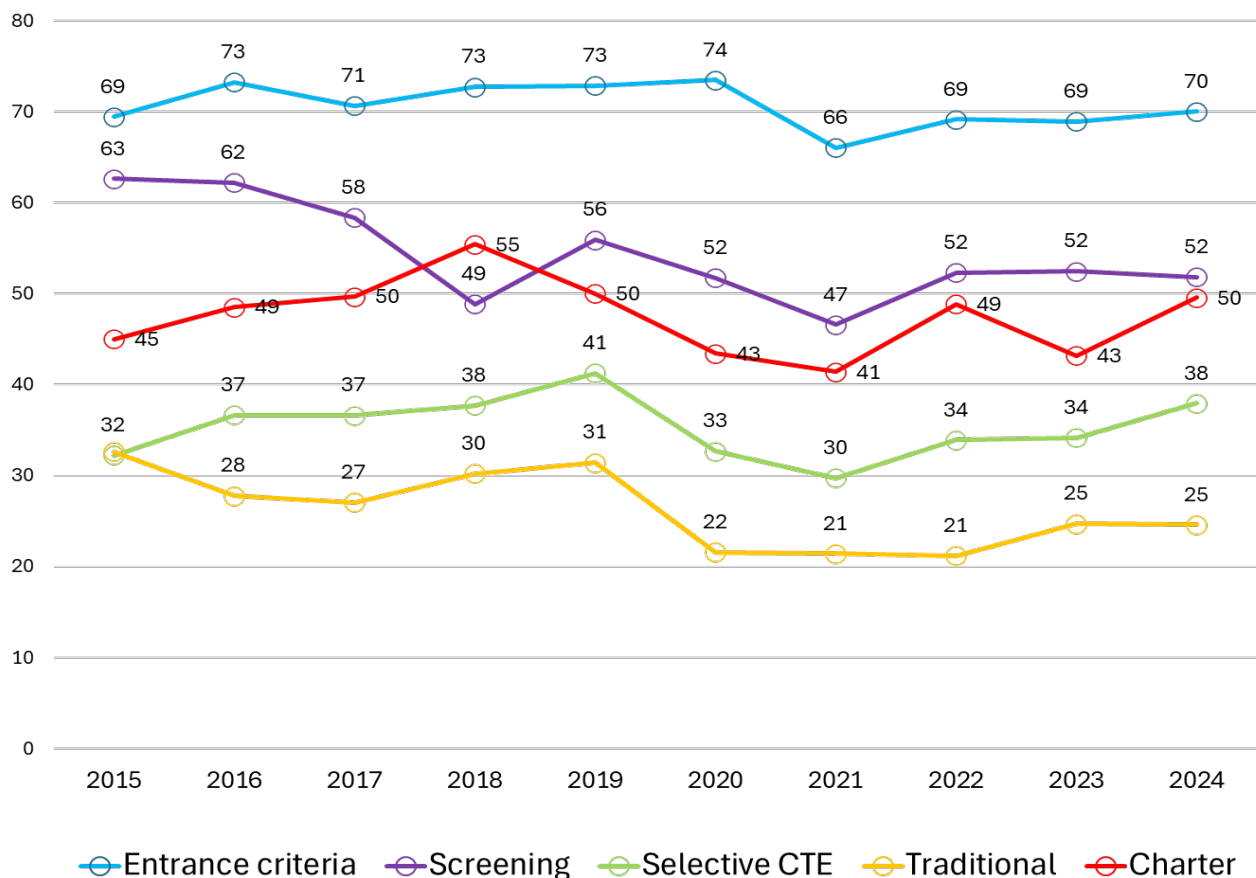
FALL ENROLLMENT BY HIGH SCHOOL TYPE

A student's preparation for college is affected by many factors, including grades, scores on standardized assessments, literacy, and soft skills. Once in middle school, a student must contemplate their choice of high school, and families must determine if that choice aligns with the goal of college admission.

City Schools offers students the chance to choose the type of high school they attend. Choices range from traditional lottery schools, charter schools and CTE centers to more selective high schools with entrance or screening criteria. There are also alternative high schools. While the type of high school a student attends is not the sole determinant of their college enrollment, it is a major factor in fall enrollment in college post-high school graduation.

In Baltimore City, the type of high school a student attends generally tracks with rates of fall enrollment in college. For instance, between 2015 and 2024, graduates from entrance-criteria high schools had the highest rate of college enrollment in the fall, consistent with prior reports on Baltimore graduates (refer to Figure 2). There was a slight uptick for graduates of screening schools between 2021 and 2024, while the rate for graduates of charter schools reveals a notable increase between 2015 and 2024. Graduates from the city's traditional and selective CTE schools have enrolled in college at increasing and decreasing rates, respectively. About 31% of the 2015 selective CTE graduates fall enrolled, increasing to 38% among the class of 2024. Conversely, the share of traditional high school graduates fall enrolling declined from 32% to 25% between 2015 and 2024.

FIGURE 2. Percent of Graduates Fall-Enrolled by High School Type, Classes of 2015-2024





Jayzanay Blessett

Jayzanay Blessett, a self-described “really curious person,” knew she wanted to go to college by the time she was in middle school – and that she would be the first person in her family to do so. Initially intending to become a dermatologist, she enrolled at a large traditional high school. Once there, Blessett discovered that her school didn’t offer some of the advanced science courses she was hoping for. “I felt restricted,” she recalls, “to the point where it was either I stay at the school where I am because of how close it is, or I would have to travel really far to go to [an entrance criteria high school] because they had those upper level STEM classes.”

Instead of changing schools, Blessett “started advocating.” She requested changes to her schedule so that she could enroll in three Advanced Placement (AP) courses that her school offered and then took another AP course online on her own. Her school had a college advisor from the CollegeBound Foundation, who connected Blessett to college tours, application help, and advice completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Even so, Blessett remembers having to figure out other things for herself. Without SAT prep classes available at school, she studied on her own with a prep book. During senior year, Blessett found out about the C.D. Mote, Jr. Incentive Awards Program, a four-year, full-tuition scholarship to the University of Maryland College Park for students from Baltimore City and other parts of Maryland. “Only like one student from my school for years had gotten it,” she explains, and it was hard to find advice on how to apply. “I ended up doing that whole application by myself.” She won the scholarship and matriculated at the university in the fall of 2025.

Her experience advocating for herself led Blessett, who eventually started a Student Government Association at her high school, to discover a passion for law. Now 19, she is majoring in philosophy, politics, and economics with plans to attend law school.

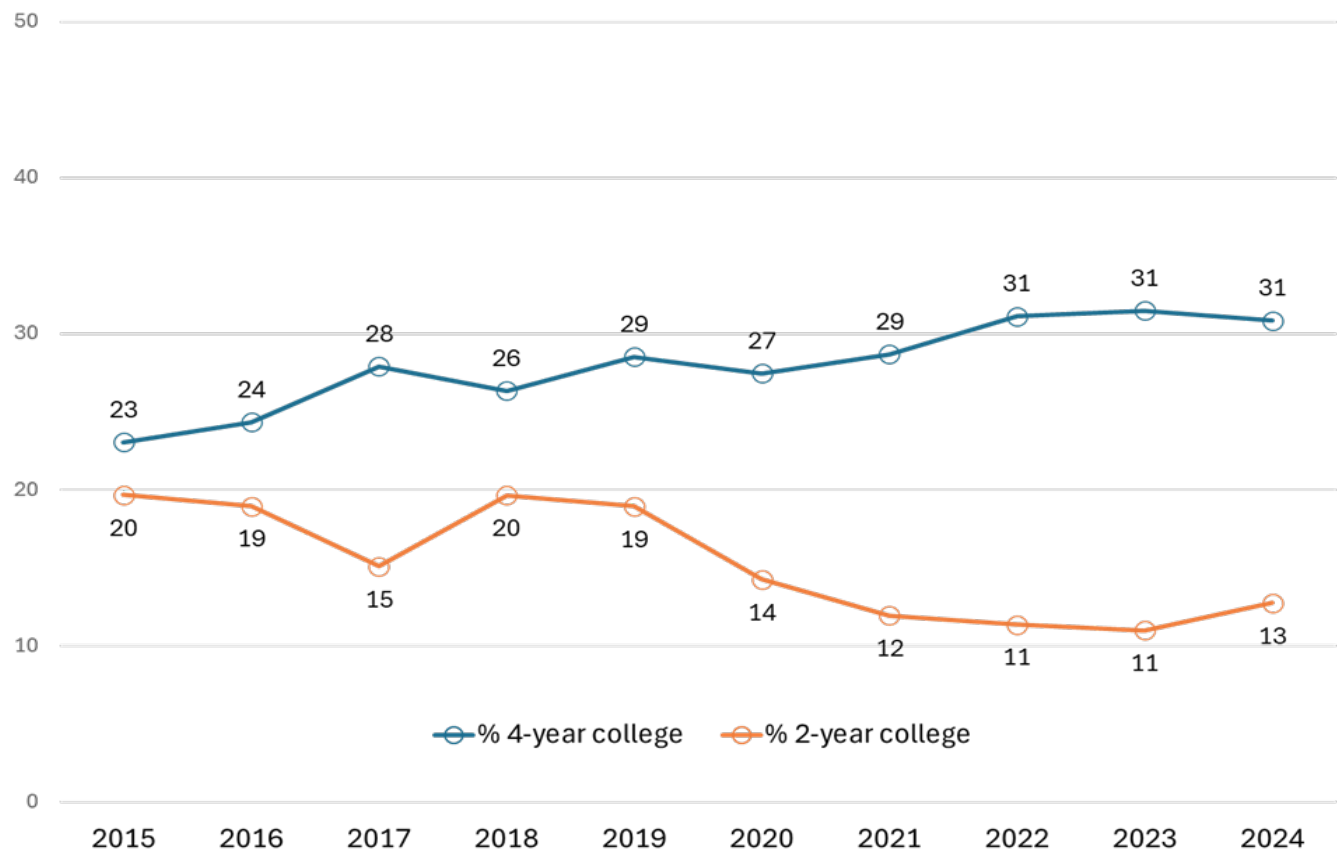
Jayzanay Blessett’s Advice:

“I truly did not understand the impact of the SAT score until my junior year. I wish I had known this is important if you want to get into these big schools, top schools, and how to study for it.”

TYPE OF FALL COLLEGE

From 2011 to 2014, City Schools graduates were more likely to enroll in two-year degree- or certificate-granting institutions than in four-year institutions (Durham et al., 2023). However, since 2015 the pattern has reversed, with more graduates enrolling in four-year than two-year colleges or technical programs. As shown in Figure 3, from 2015 to 2024, two-year college enrollment declined from 20% of graduates to 13%. Conversely, four-year college enrollments increased from 23% to 31% over this same period. Interestingly, the apparent impact of COVID was more pronounced for two-year college enrollment than for four-year college enrollment. While two-year college enrollment declined 5 percentage points from 2019 to 2020, four-year college enrollment decreased by only 2 points. In addition, the decline in two-year college enrollment continued for the next three years, while four-year college enrollments rebounded in 2021 to 29%, increased again the following year (2022) to 31%, and held steady in 2023 and 2024. It should be noted that the declines in two-year college enrollment did not begin in 2020, though the COVID pandemic may have accelerated it. The pattern reversal began in 2015, and understanding the reasons for this shift requires further study.

FIGURE 3. Percent of Graduates Fall-Enrolling in Four-Year or Two-Year Colleges, Classes of 2015–2024





Feyishayo Sogunro

Feyishayo Sogunro, 18, graduated from an entrance criteria high school in 2024. From there, she enrolled at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), where she is majoring in biochemistry and molecular biology, with the goal of becoming a neuroscience researcher. “I’m very fascinated with the brain and the degenerative diseases about it,” she explains. “The brain is a mystery and scientists have been unshrouding that mystery. I want to be part of the people who do.”

College had been Sogunro’s goal since middle school. How to afford it was another matter. She recalled watching a video during a high school class about a woman who had graduated from college with student loans. “She was struggling financially because even

though she had a job, it wasn’t a job that paid too much,” Sogunro says. “It just felt like she was digging herself into a deeper hole she couldn’t get out of . . . I did not want to be like that.” Sogunro made up her mind to enroll in a two-year college after high school.

Guidance from the CollegeBound Foundation advisor at her school helped present additional options. Sogunro’s advisor told her about the Maryland College Aid Processing System (MDCAPS), an online portal that enables students to apply for scholarships, grants, and loans from the Maryland Higher Education Commission. Sogunro also credits the CollegeBound Foundation for offering both students and their caregivers help completing the FAFSA, and for arranging campus tours. Thanks to the guidance and financial aid she received, Sogunro started her studies at UMBC in the fall of 2024.

Feyishayo Sogunro’s Advice:

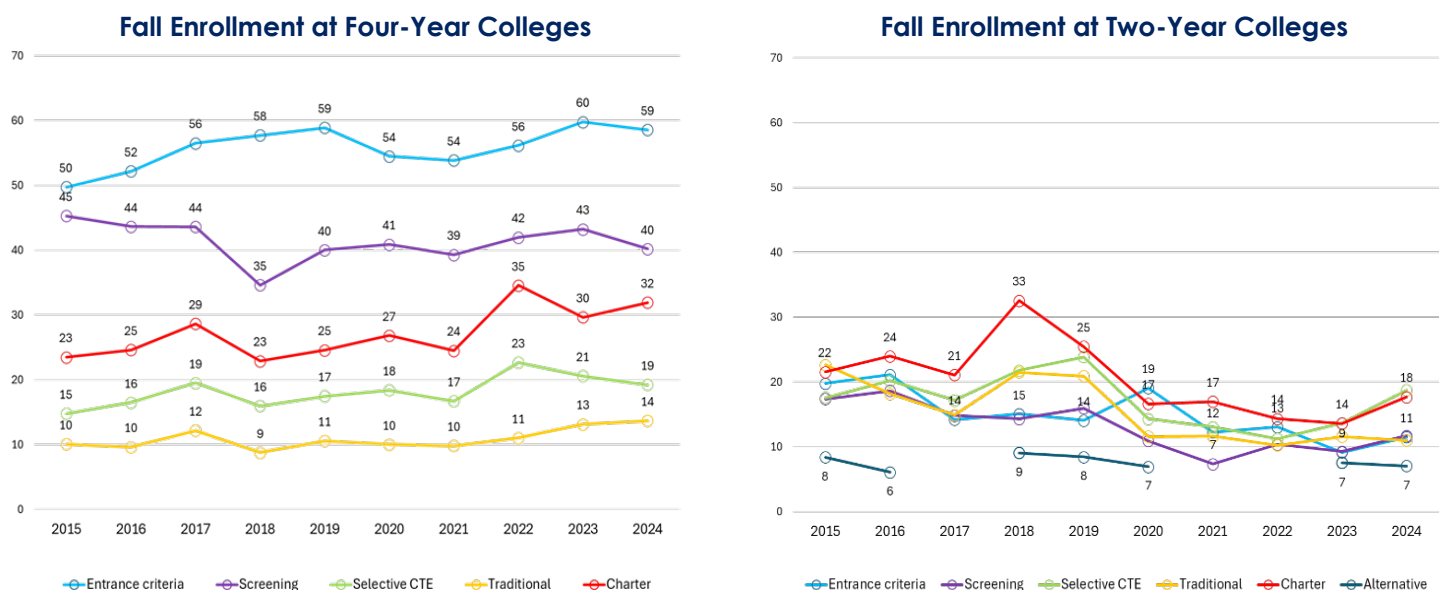
“The gravity of how much college would cost – I’ll say that’s something that I didn’t know.”

TYPE OF FALL COLLEGE AND HIGH SCHOOL TYPE

Similar to rates of college enrollment overall, a pattern appears in the data between the type of high school and the type of college into which students fall enroll. In Figure 4, rates of enrollment in two-year and four-year colleges by high school type are compared. Graduates from high schools with the most stringent entrance criteria were the most likely to enroll in four-year colleges. Next, with a significantly lower rate of enrollment were students from high schools with screening criteria. Graduates of charter schools ranked third among students who fall enrolled in four-year colleges, and trailing their peers are students from selective CTE and traditional high schools.

A different, less clear pattern emerges for high school graduates fall-enrolled in two-year colleges. In most years, there are no substantial differences in two-year college enrollment rates among five of the six school types. Graduates of traditional and selective CTE high schools have similar enrollment rates in both two- and four-year colleges.

FIGURE 4. Percent of Graduates Enrolling in Four-Year or Two-Year Colleges by High School Type, Class of 2015–2024



MOST POPULAR FALL COLLEGE DESTINATIONS

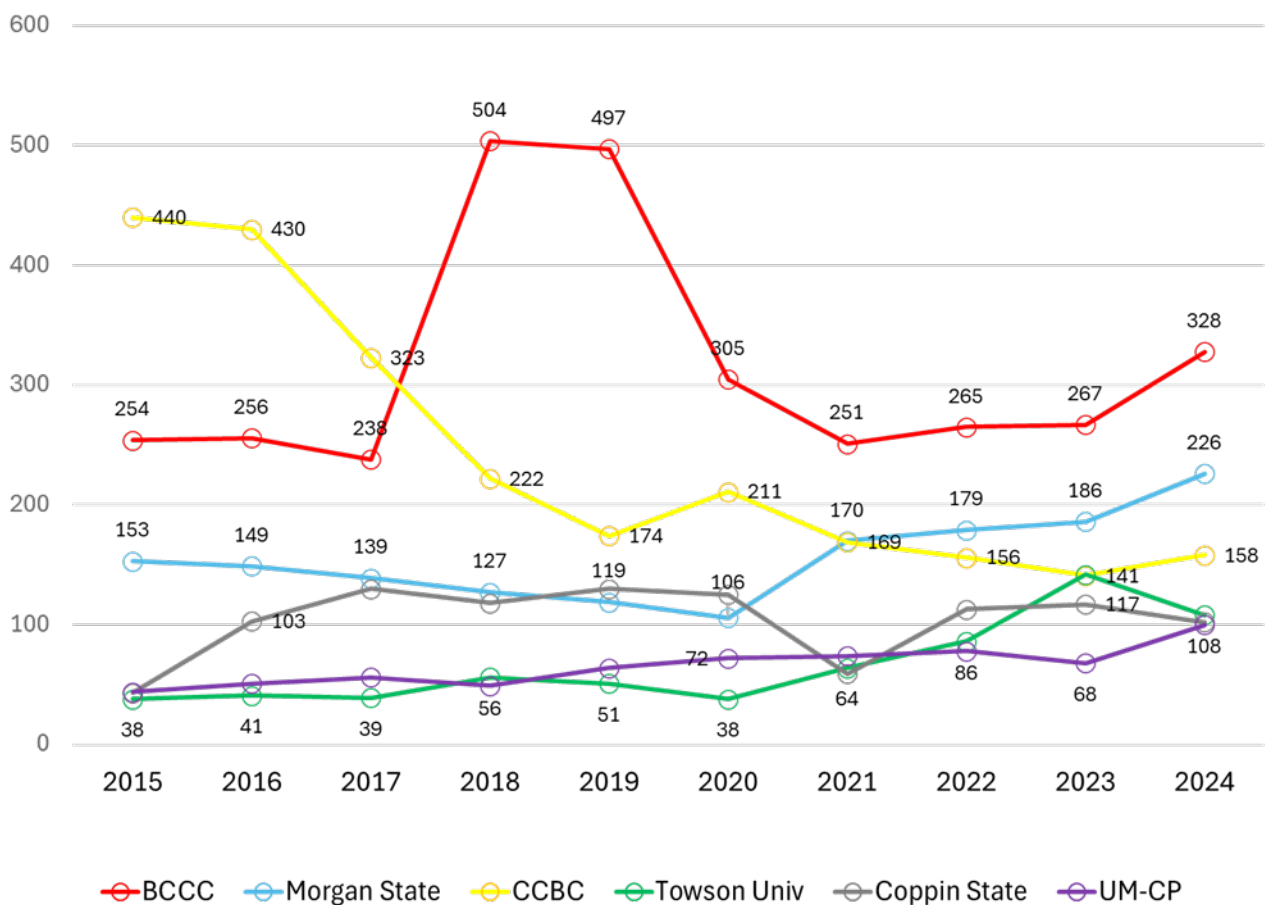
From 2011 to 2017, the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) was the most popular destination for City Schools graduates who enrolled in college the following fall (Durham et al., 2023). However, in 2018, the number of students enrolling at Baltimore City Community College (BCCC) increased dramatically while enrollment at CCBC declined (refer to Figure 5). That was the same year as the launch of the Baltimore Mayor's Scholars Program, a "last-dollar" scholarship for Baltimore students enrolling at BCCC to cover costs not met by federal and/or state aid.

As noted previously, however, following the onset of the COVID pandemic, the percentage of City Schools students enrolling in two-year colleges declined dramatically. As shown in Figure 5, the number of fall enrollees at BCCC decreased from 497 in 2019 to 305 in 2020. BCCC enrollments from City Schools declined again in 2021, to 251 students, but increased somewhat over the next three years, reaching 328 in 2024. In contrast, the number of graduates enrolling at the CCBC continued to decline until 2023. Overall, the number of City Schools graduates fall enrolling at CCBC has declined from 726 in 2012 (Durham et al., 2023) to 440 in 2015, and to 158 in 2024 (Figure 5).

Corresponding with the trend of increasing percentages of City Schools graduates enrolling at four-year colleges between 2015 to 2024 the number of fall enrollments has increased at Morgan State University, Towson University, and the University of Maryland at College Park. Enrollments at Morgan State University declined from 153 in 2015 to 106 in 2020 (i.e., during COVID) but have since increased steadily to 226 among the class of 2024. Fall enrollments at Towson University increased from 38 students in 2015 to 86 students in 2022, soaring to 142 students in 2023, and then declining to 108 students in 2024. Enrollment of City Schools graduates at the University of Maryland – College Park increased from 44 students in 2015 to 100 students in 2024.

Table 4 in the companion Data Digest https://baltimore-berc.org/berc_collegeaccessdatadigest_thru-class-of-2024_final/ presents a detailed breakdown of fall enrollment counts at the top 30 postsecondary destinations for City Schools graduates between 2015 and 2024.

FIGURE 5. Number of Fall Enrollees at Top Six Fall-Enrollment Destinations, Classes of 2015-2024





Oluwadarasimi Gabriela Ajayi

Oluwadarasimi Gabriela Ajayi was a junior at an entrance criteria high school when she went on a tour of different Ivy League college campuses. “My perspective was very widened by that,” she remembers. The visits “helped me to think about where I could see myself in the world.” It was more than a question of grades. Visiting campuses encouraged Ajayi to ask more detailed questions about the college experience she was looking for. “Do I want to be in a school with greenery? Do I want to be in a school where I can walk out and see people playing sports in the main yard?” she thought, after a stop at Brown University.

College was a goal for Ajayi's family, which is originally from Nigeria, and two older siblings have recently completed undergraduate degrees. “It was a dream of my mom's,” Ajayi explains. “My mom knew that I was a bright kid . . . and that college was somewhere in my future.” Now 19, Ajayi is in her third year as a public health major at Towson University. She credits her school counselor, teachers, and a CollegeBound Foundation's College Access Program Specialist (CAPS) at her high school who helped her apply for college and financial aid. But a chance encounter during senior year with an alumna of her high school made a difference, too. The alumna stopped by to say hello to Ajayi's teacher and ended up talking to some of the students about her experiences in college. “Bringing in students helps so much,” she says. Hearing from alumni who are in college is “very helpful literally so that we can see ourselves capable of doing that, too.”

It's a lesson that Ajayi is paying forward as a volunteer at two Baltimore City schools as part of a class this semester. “I am so, so happy to be a part of something like this because I know that the students . . . benefit from seeing great scholars in their community come and talk to them and teaching them something new or opening their eyes to something new right there in the comfort of their school.”

Oluwadarasimi Gabriela Ajayi's Advice:

“I want to encourage young scholars going into high school to prioritize keeping their freshman year GPA above a 3.0 because that will propel them forward and keep their grades above water when and if they slip. Keeping a GPA above 3.0 requires students to prioritize schedule management. Students can do well in honors-level classes for a similar preparatory effect given by enrolling in an AP level class! Schedule management will indirectly keep that 3.0 GPA above water, trust me!”

PART 2

THE PROCESS OF ACCESSING COLLEGE

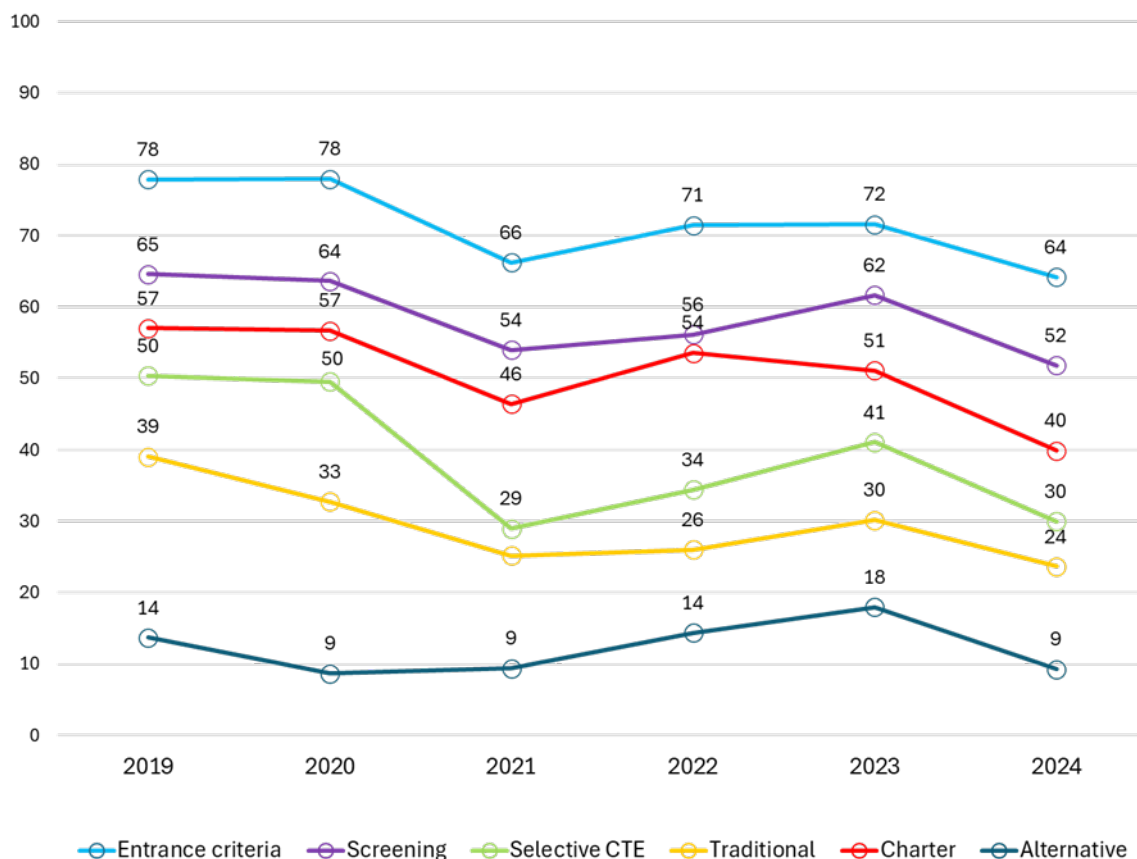
APPLYING FOR FINANCIAL AID

Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is an important step in the college admissions process, particularly for low-income students. To be considered for federal and state financial aid, as well as many scholarships, a student must complete a FAFSA. The information in the FAFSA is used to generate an aid summary that informs the student and institutions they list about the amount of attendance costs the family is expected to contribute. For families of lesser means, completing the FAFSA helps determine the types and amounts of financial aid available to the student. For many families in Baltimore City, affordability determines whether going to college is feasible.

Figure 6 details FAFSA completion rates for 12th grade students, by high school type, for the graduating classes of 2019 through 2024. The rates fluctuated between school types. High schools with entrance criteria had the highest completion rate (ranging between 64% and 78%), followed by screening schools (54% to 65%), charter high schools (46% to 56%), selective CTE schools (29% to 50%), and alternative placement schools (9% to 18%).

FAFSA completion rates noticeably declined among all school types between 2023 and 2024, likely reflecting major revisions that were made to the FAFSA application process with passage of the FAFSA Simplification Act in 2022. In the long term, these revisions will likely prove beneficial: The Simplification Act changed the financial needs analysis formula, eliminated the need for families to manually enter income information, increased to 20 the number of institutions a student could list, and shortened the form from around 100 questions to fewer than 50, among other changes (Federal Student Aid, n.d.) However, a challenging rollout during the 2023-24 application year led to families, schools, and institutions experiencing substantial difficulties, one of which was delayed family access to the application for nearly three months, as well as delays in families receiving award letters from institutions (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2024).

FIGURE 6. Percent of Seniors Completing FAFSA, Classes of 2019–2024





Ka'Shya Robertson

Like many young people, Ka'Shya Robertson knew she wanted to go to college by the time she was in middle school. Many of the supports that helped this first-generation college student reach that goal came from her middle-school years, too.

Robertson, now 21 and a social work major at McDaniel College, enrolled at an entrance criteria high school. Her middle school, KIPP Baltimore, kept in touch throughout those years, and Robertson participated in a program it offered during the summer before twelfth grade that helped with choosing colleges and writing the application essay. “They were constantly updating and reaching out,” Robertson says of the KIPP staff, “offering opportunities, letting us know that we had them in our corner.”

As a middle schooler, Robertson had also joined Squashwise, an after-school sports program that had its own college advising program, including scholarship information and financial aid nights. “So I had both of those resources,” she notes. “If I couldn’t make it to one, I could go to another.”

Once Robertson received acceptance letters from every college she applied to, her Squashwise coach helped her make sense of different financial aid offers. With an amount still left to finance at McDaniel, Robertson picked up the phone. “I kept calling McDaniel and asking . . . if they were able to get me more funding,” she describes, “and ultimately I was able to afford [it], and that’s what made my final decision.” Advocating for more financial aid was “scary,” as Robertson puts it, but her support system – from her coach to her mom – was “big on advocating for ourselves . . . you have to just be willing to ask.”

Ka'Shya Robertson's Advice:

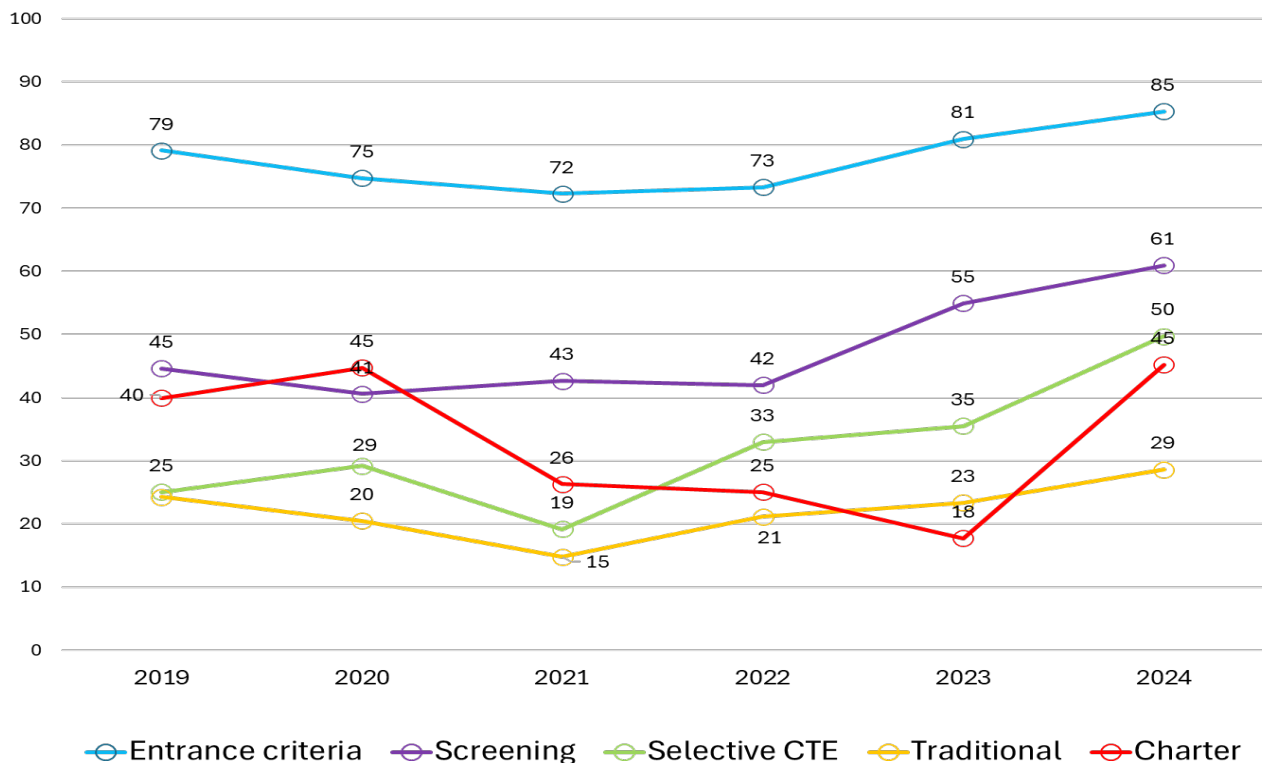
“I would just say that [getting to college is] a lot of ups and downs. It’s not a linear road. It’s a squiggle, basically. It’s not consistent all the time, and sometimes you have to be OK with the inconsistency.”

COLLEGE APPLICATIONS

One of the ways high school graduates seek to gain an advantage in the college application process is by completing applications for multiple institutions. The College Board advises high school juniors to have a list of 5 to 10 colleges that they have researched or visited that align with their academic and social interests, financial need, and career objectives. This guidance advises students to consider three types of colleges: 1) “target” schools at which a reasonable chance of admission exists; 2) “safety” schools where the chance of rejection is low; and 3) “reach” schools that are more selective and where a student may or may not be accepted due to high demand.

Across high school types, noticeably more graduates in the classes of 2022 through 2024 completed three or more college applications than graduates in the classes of 2019 and 2020. There was a 12 percentage point increase among students in high schools with entrance criteria and 19 percentage point rise among those in high schools with screening criteria. The percentage of charter school students completing three or more college applications fluctuated a good deal over the six-year period (18% to 45%). There were sharp increases in students meeting this threshold in selective CTE (35% to 50%) and traditional high schools (23% to 29%) between 2023 and 2024.

FIGURE 7. Percent of Graduates Completing Three-or-More College Applications by High School Type, Classes of 2019–2024





Trinia Holt

Trinia Holt's path to becoming a health science student at Coppin State University began when her mother had a heart transplant. "The health care professionals really helped her and gave her a lot of hope," she remembers. "They showed her care. They showed her hospitality, they were really kind people, and that is something that I just genuinely wanted to give back to people and families."

With her mind set on college since elementary school, Holt graduated from an entrance criteria high school in 2023. As a first-generation college-bound student, Holt looked to her school's college advising office, which was staffed with several advisors, for support. "My advisors, they were on it," she says. "I sat in the advisors' office multiple times during the day, even when I was on lunch. They just made sure I was prepared for everything, honestly."

Originally planning to attend a private HBCU, the price tag encouraged Holt to look elsewhere. During a campus tour of Coppin, "I knew right then and there that this is someplace that I needed to be. And I know that my presence is going to be felt and I'm going to be seen on this campus," Holt recalls.

Trinia Holt's Advice:

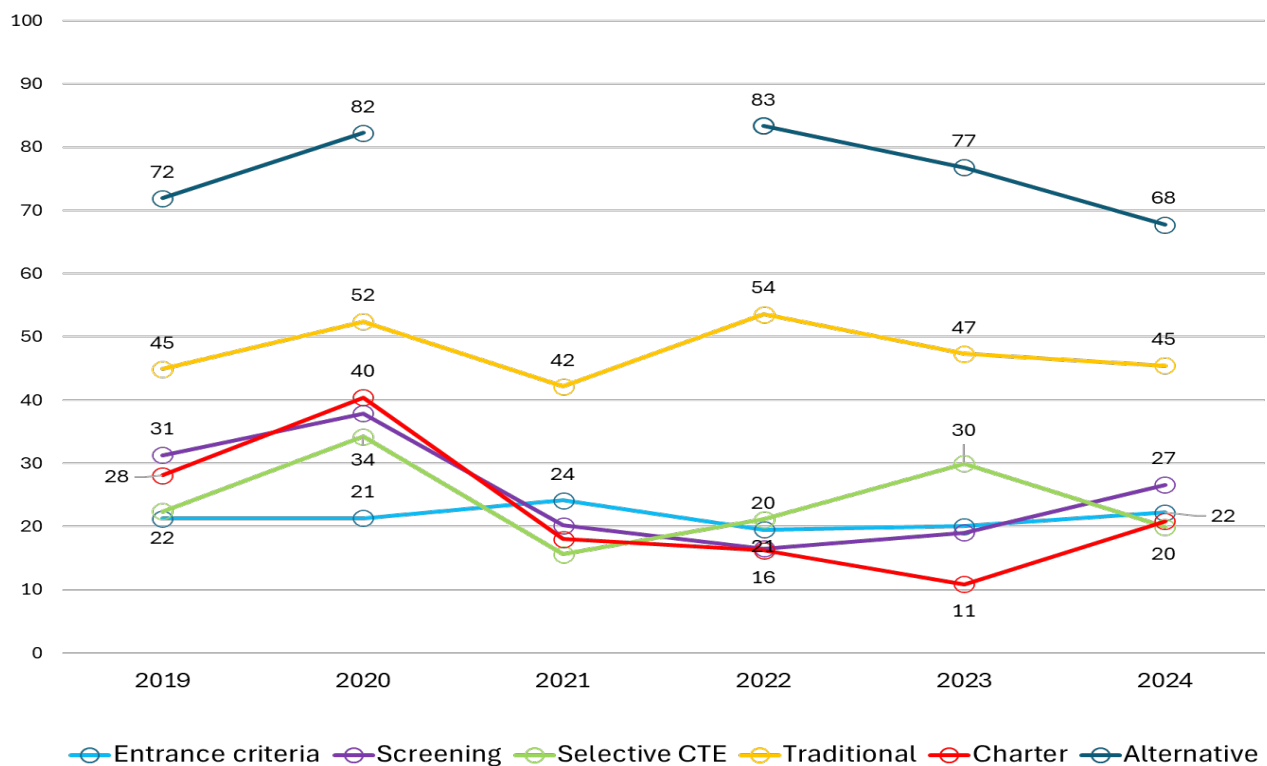
"This is a pivotal moment in people's lives. Take it with grace and also be a little prideful with it. This is big, not everyone gets the opportunity to finish with a diploma. Not everyone gets the opportunity to go to college... So if you made it this far, keep going, keep going, and keep going [because] it's only up from here."

SUMMER MELT

Each year, many students who receive an acceptance to college do not enroll that next fall, a phenomenon known as ‘summer melt.’ Summer melt can occur for many reasons, and among them are financial aid gaps, changes of heart about leaving home for college, or changes in personal circumstances (e.g., family emergencies or wanting to maintain fulltime employment). Sometimes, seemingly simple tasks like finding transport to a faraway college campus or inability to pay registration fees can derail a student’s plans. We illustrate the extent of summer melt among City Schools graduates by high school type for the classes of 2019 through 2024 in Figure 8.

We find a few notable patterns. First, the rate of summer melt ticked up across virtually all high school types in 2020, no doubt due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, it appears that graduates of entrance criteria, screening high schools, and charter high schools experienced the lowest levels of summer melt generally, ranging between 11% and 31% of those accepted to at least one college. Graduates of traditional and alternative schools, however, displayed comparatively higher rates of summer melt, which ranged between 42% to 54% at traditional schools and between 68% to 83% at alternative schools. Further research is needed to explore whether summer melt is more likely among students planning to attend different types of college, as completing the steps to enroll in four-year colleges is generally more cumbersome than doing so at two-year colleges or training institutes.

FIGURE 8. Percent of Graduates Accepted to College Who Did Not Fall-Enroll (Summer Melt) by High School Type, Classes of 2015-2024



Note. Summer melt data for alternative schools are suppressed for the class of 2021 due to cell masking requirements.

Part 3

POSTSECONDARY DEGREES

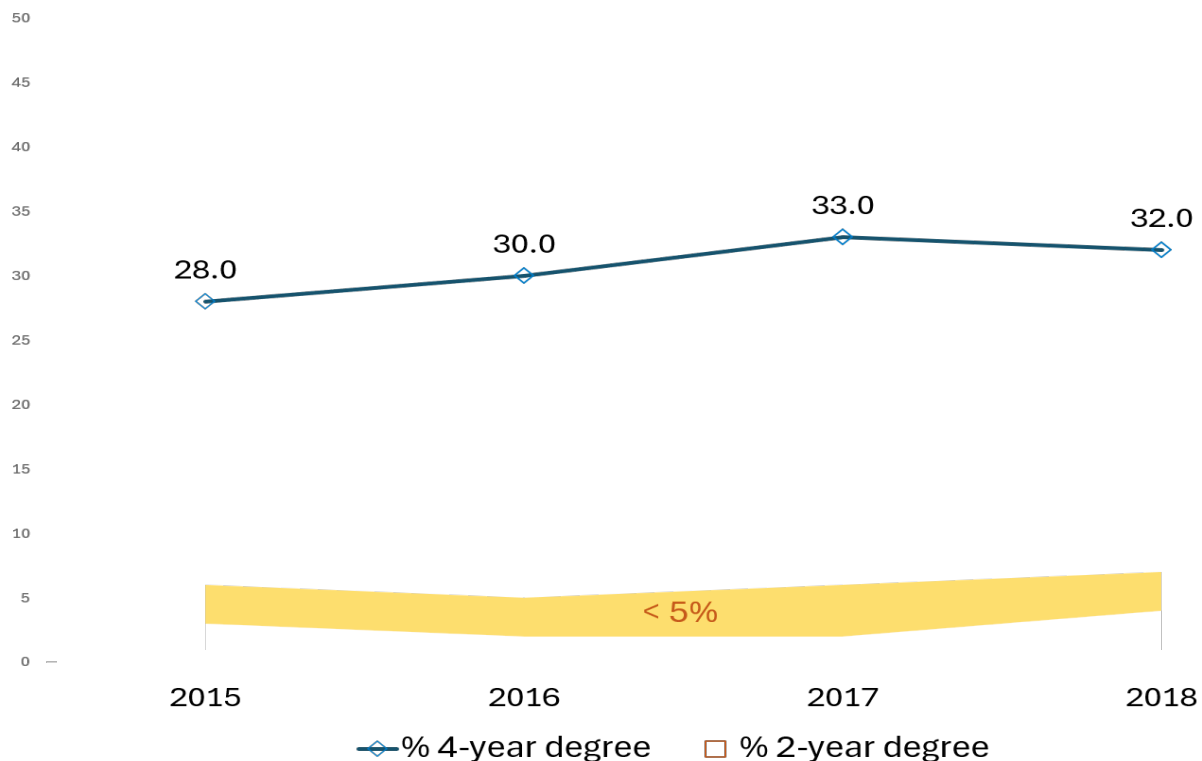
COLLEGE DEGREE COMPLETION

Figures 9-12 summarize the six-year degree completion rates for the fall 2015-2018 enrollment cohorts – i.e., City Schools graduates who enrolled in college in the fall immediately after high school graduation. Some students change from two-year programs to four-year colleges, while others make the opposite transition. Many students change schools, and students frequently take time off or need more time to graduate from college. Given these varied circumstances, the data allow us to track college enrollment and persistence over time and report whether students earned a credential within six years, regardless of where they began college or where the degree was earned. Because City Schools' confidentiality policy requires suppression of small sample values, some results are presented as ranges and broad patterns rather than precise percentages.

Figure 9 shows the percentage of City Schools graduates who enrolled in college in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 who completed either a two-year or four-year degree within six years. Here, the cohorts include all fall enrollees – i.e., two-year and four-year college enrollees combined. (The cohort data are disaggregated by fall college type in Figures 10-12.)

About one-third of graduates who enrolled in college the first fall after high school completed four-year degrees within six years, with the rate ranging from 28% (class of 2015) to 33% (class of 2017). A relatively low percentage – 5% or less – completed two-year programs or shorter-term, college-credit bearing certificates. Overall, about 37% of City Schools graduates from the classes of 2015 through 2018 who enrolled in college have completed either a two-year or four-year degree.

FIGURE 9. Percent of Fall Enrollees Completing Two-Year or Four-Year Degrees within Six Years, Classes of 2015-2018



To provide a more detailed analysis, Figures 10 and 11 present disaggregated data for City Schools graduates who fall-enrolled in four-year (Figure 10) and two-year (Figure 11) colleges.

Figure 10 presents the six-year degree completion rate for City Schools graduates who began their studies at a four-year college. Approximately half of the graduates from the classes of 2015 to 2018 who fall enrolled at a bachelor's degree granting institution completed a four-year degree, while a small percentage (< 5%) completed a two-year degree or shorter-term certificate program over a six-year period. The percentage of four-year college enrollees who graduated from a four-year college within six years increased from 48% for the cohort entering college in 2015 to 51% for the 2018 cohort (refer to Figure 10).

FIGURE 10. Percent of Four-Year College Fall Enrollees Completing Four-Year or Two-Year Degrees Within Six Years, Classes of 2015-2018

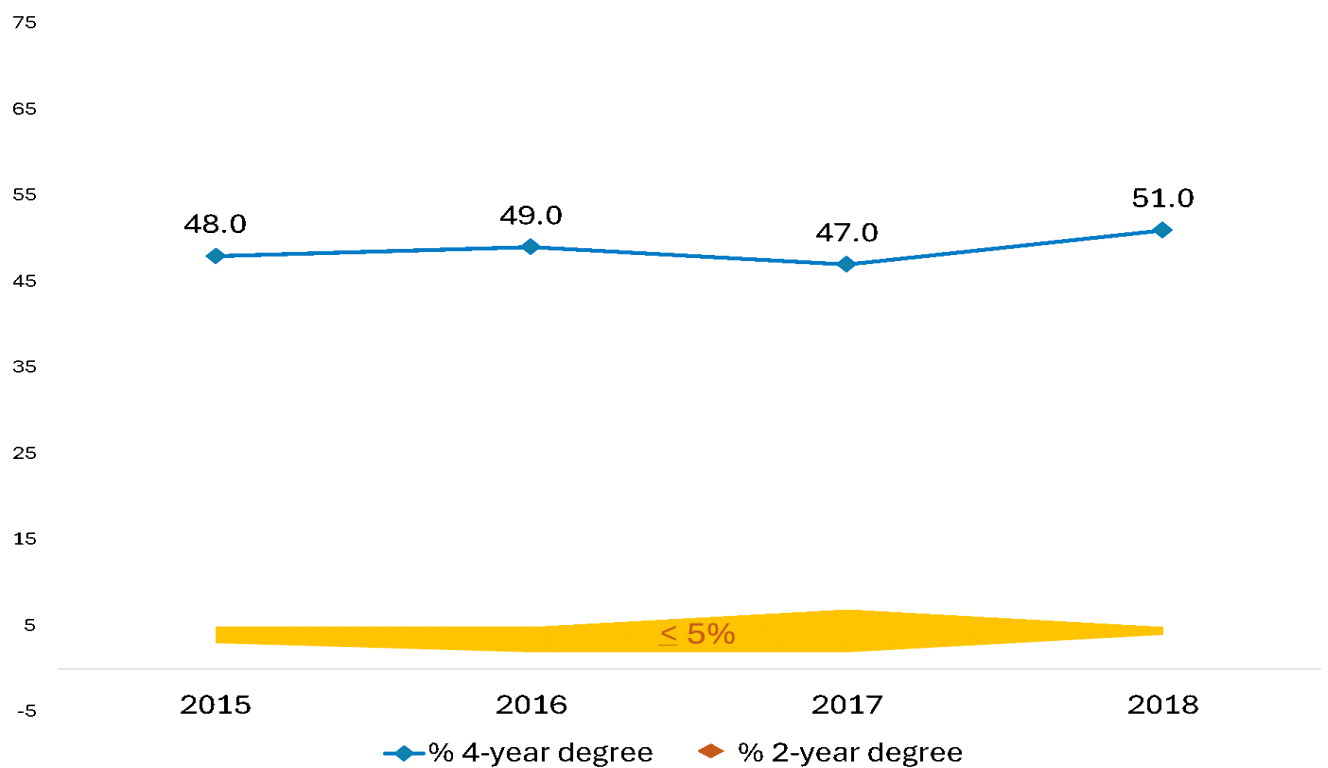
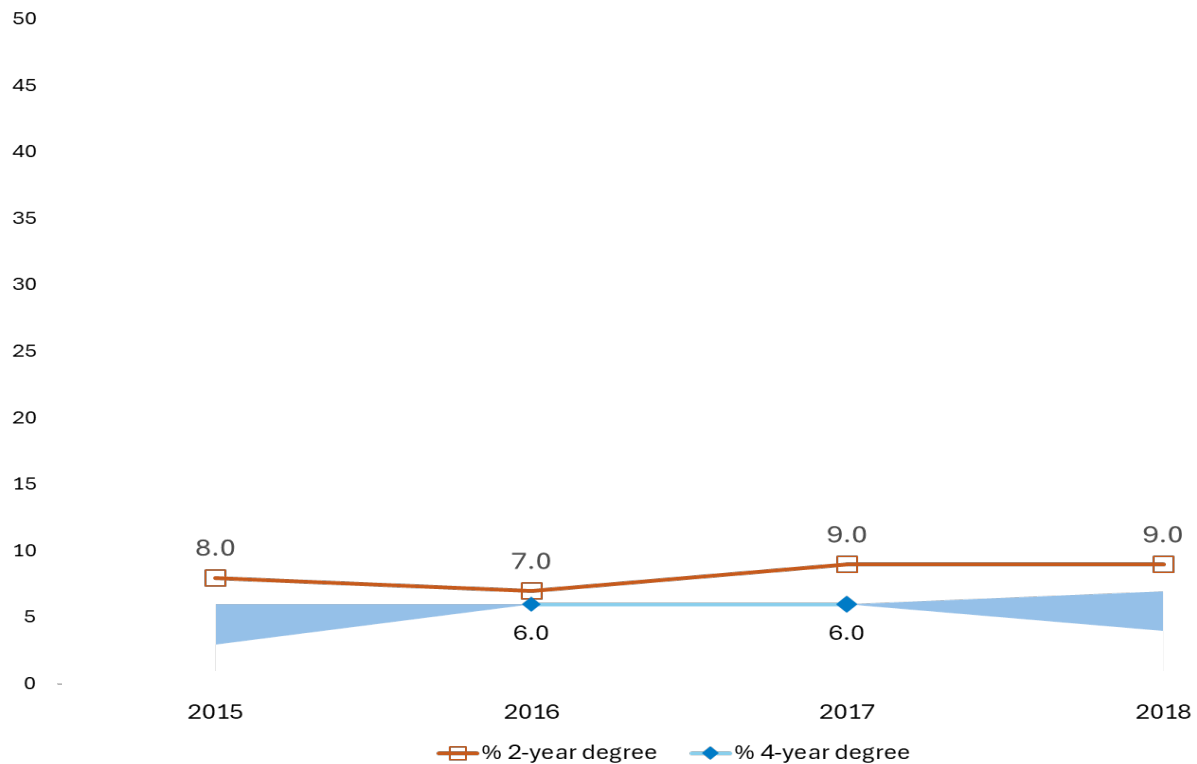


Figure 11 presents the six-year degree completion rate for graduates who enrolled in a two-year college in the fall immediately following graduation. We find that between 7% and 9% of the two-year fall enrollees from the classes of 2015 through 2018 completed a two-year degree or shorter-term certificate. A smaller share (6% or less) of two-year fall enrollees transferred and completed four-year degrees within six years of entering college (refer to Figure 11). Investigating the reasons for relatively low degree completion among two-year fall enrollees is an important area for future study.

FIGURE 11. Percent of Two-Year College Fall Enrollees Completing Two-Year or Four-Year Degrees Within Six Years, Classes of 2015-2018





Keyierra

Keyierra, 20, was in the tenth grade at an entrance criteria high school when she joined the TRIO Upward Bound program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC). In addition to tutoring and mentoring, both of which helped on the other side of the COVID-19 pandemic, Keyierra spent summers staying in the dorms on campus.

Still, she wasn't completely sure that college was the right choice for her until 11th grade. "I had been vaguely thinking about college since middle school, because that's what everyone said you're supposed to do after you graduate high school," Keyierra remembers. "But I didn't start taking it seriously until my junior year." Uncertainty about paying tuition was a factor. But "I also knew that I had other options available to me," she explains. "Since I want to go into software development, I could always do boot camps or

look directly for internships or do self-studies and start working on projects."

As Keyierra approached application season, a few things changed her mind. At a tour of Morgan State University, "I realized how lively [college] could be as well. It's not just an education, it's like a whole experience." An older sister had been the first member of Keyierra's family to graduate from college. Other family members "do work for the military. And when I started looking at military jobs," Keyierra says, "a lot of them require at minimum a bachelor's degree... At the end of the day, [college] opened up more opportunities."

A network of support helped Keyierra through the application and financial aid processes, including an English teacher who made the college essay a graded assignment, a school counselor, mentors at Upward Bound, and the nonprofit Ingenuity Project. She's now in her third year as a computer science major and mathematics minor at McDaniel College.

Keyierra's advice to adults who are supporting a young person in the college process:

"Give a listening ear and be open-minded... even if you're not that much older than us, times change a lot, even in short spans of time. So a lot of times, the advice that they can give from their time just doesn't apply anymore. And it's not even like we're trying to be stubborn [or] we're not trying to listen."

COLLEGE DEGREES COMPLETED BY FALL COLLEGE

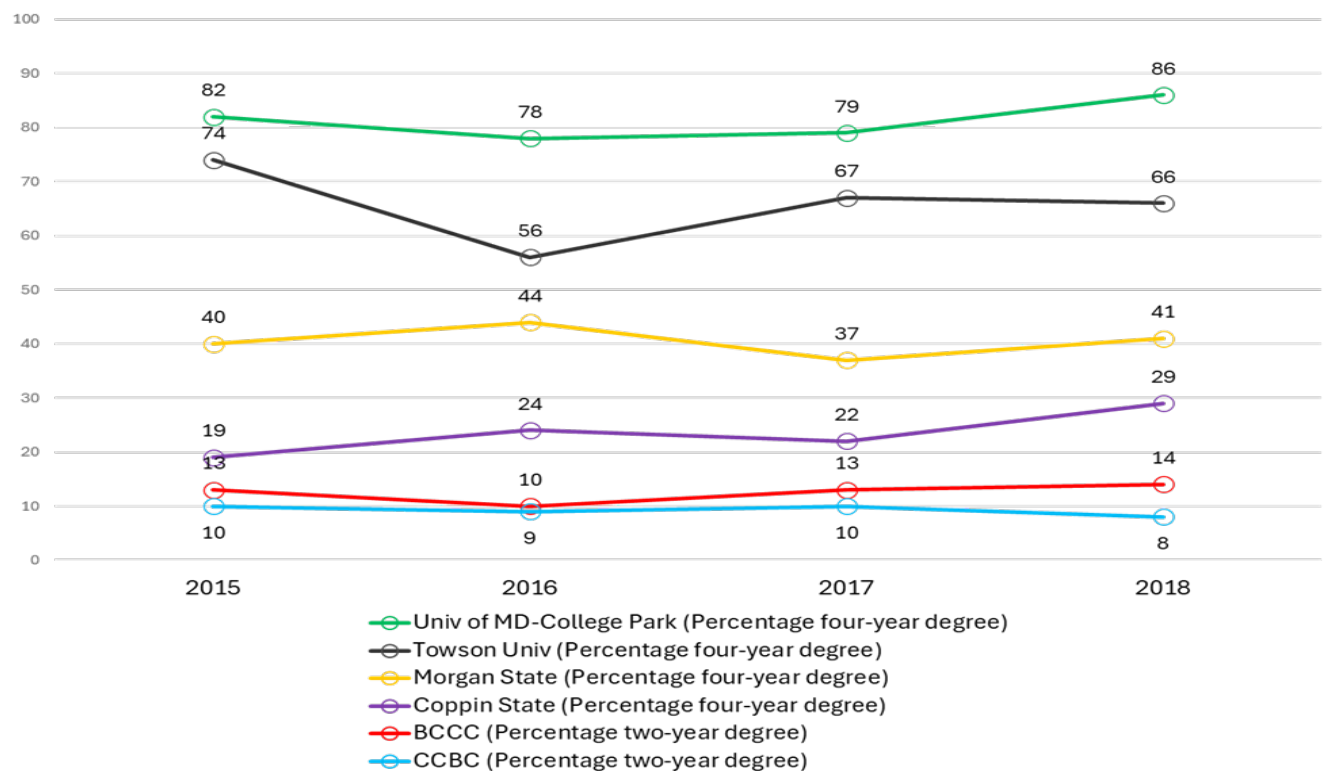
This section reports six-year degree completion rates among City Schools graduates according to the fall college where they began their studies. Figure 12 shows the six-year degree completion results for the six most popular fall-enrollment destinations presented earlier in the report – BCCC, CCBC, Morgan State, Coppin State University, Towson University, and the University of Maryland, College Park.

The results include all fall enrollees regardless of where they completed their degree. In other words, graduates are counted even if they transferred and graduated from a college different from the one in which they initially enrolled. The completion rates for students beginning at these six colleges were relatively consistent across the four graduating cohorts (2015-2018).

After six years, enrollees at the University of Maryland, College Park (UM-CP) had the highest degree completion rates. The UM-CP graduation rates ranged from a low of 78% for the 2016 cohort to 86% for the 2018 cohort. Towson University had the next highest graduation rates, followed by Morgan State and Coppin State Universities. The class of 2018 cohort six-year graduation rates for Towson, Morgan, and Coppin State Universities were 66%, 41%, and 29%, respectively.

As observed for all two-year college enrollees, the completion rates for BCCC and the CCBC were relatively low. Specifically, the two-year degree completion rates for the 2018 cohort at BCCC and CCBC were 14% and 8%, respectively.

FIGURE 12. Percent of Fall Enrollees Completing Degrees Within Six Years, by Fall College, Classes of 2015-2018



Taken together, the results for the classes of 2015 to 2018 point to a clear takeaway: immediate college enrollment does not reliably translate into degree completion within six years, and outcomes differ sharply by where students begin their college journey. Students who begin at four-year institutions are far more likely to finish a bachelor's degree, while the completion rates for students who start at two-year colleges remain comparatively low.

The institution-by-institution patterns further underscore that the starting point matters, even when students ultimately earn a degree elsewhere. These trends reinforce the importance of strengthening the bridge from high school to college success – through better preparation for first-year coursework, stronger advising and navigation supports, and clearer transfer and completion pathways – so that “access” becomes not just entry, but progress and completion.

Ultimately, these trends are more than statistics – they represent young people whose talent and determination deserve clear, supported pathways to a completed credential. Sustained advising, academic momentum supports, and transparent transfer and completion pathways can be the difference between “some college” and a completed degree. Strengthening those supports, particularly for students who begin at two-year colleges, is essential to translate enrollment into equitable degree attainment and lasting opportunity for Baltimore's communities.

Conclusion



This report updates BERC's ongoing examination of postsecondary outcomes among City Schools graduates. BERC has been reporting on City Schools graduates' postsecondary education outcomes since 2011, and that first report reached back to the class of 2006, among whom about 45% fall-enrolled in college (Durham & Olson, 2011). Rates of fall enrollment have fluctuated over time but have remained in a stable range, from 41% (class of 2020) to 49% (classes of 2008, 2009, and 2010) over the last 20 years. However, several meaningful shifts underlie this general trend.

Whereas graduates from earlier cohorts were more likely to enroll in two-year colleges than four-year institutions, the opposite is now true. Over the past decade, enrollment in four-year colleges has increased while enrollment in two-year institutions has declined. The reasons for this shift are not yet fully understood. However, the pattern predates the COVID-19 pandemic and appears to reflect broader changes in students' college choices, institutional enrollment patterns, and perhaps their perceptions of opportunities available after high school.

The data in this report also reveal meaningful differences across school contexts and insight into the ways students engage in the college access process. They illustrate that enrollment outcomes are shaped not only by academic preparation, but by a series of decisions, supports, and logistical hurdles that occur during students' final years of high school.

The findings regarding degree completion are particularly important. While approximately half of City Schools graduates who begin at four-year colleges complete a bachelor's degree within six years, completion rates remain substantially lower among students who begin their postsecondary studies at two-year institutions. This pattern has been observed nationally and continues to raise important questions about transfer pathways, academic preparation, financial barriers, and the role of institutional supports once in college. Although the current report does not address why some students persist and others do not, it reinforces the importance of examining postsecondary experiences beyond initial enrollment.

The broader context surrounding these findings has also evolved since BERC's previous reports. For much of the last two decades, educational policy discussions were dominated by a college-for-all framework that emphasized postsecondary enrollment as a primary indicator of future success. More recently, public conversations have shifted. The COVID-19 pandemic, the growth of artificial intelligence (AI), growing concerns about college affordability, changes in labor market demand, and increased attention to career-focused pathways are confounding assumptions about what successful transitions to adulthood should look like. For many students, postsecondary education remains an important path to economic mobility, but it now exists within a wider ecosystem of workforce, apprenticeship, credentialing, and career-training opportunities.

Such changing conditions raise important questions for policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders. As new district leadership takes office in 2026–27, opportunities abound to revisit district goals for preparing students to leave high school and enter adulthood.

The findings presented in this report provide information that can inform conversations about what outcomes the district hopes to achieve and how progress toward those outcomes could be measured.

Whether emphasis is placed on college enrollment, degree attainment, workforce preparation, industry credentials, or some combination thereof, schools must be deliberate about helping students plan for their future. Each student has a different mental image of where they want to go in life, which makes guidance and support challenging. Yet, with a focus on individual interests and assets, each student can be supported to identify the opportunities that will enable productive exploration and help build their confidence and independence. Resources dedicated toward this aim are crucial.

Finally, any discussion of postsecondary outcomes in Baltimore must keep equity at the forefront. The differences observed throughout this report reflect not only individual choices and aspirations, but also longstanding disparities in opportunity, resources, and access. Students attend schools that differ in admissions requirements, academic offerings, support structures, and connections to post-high school opportunities. They also navigate broader social and economic conditions that shape the opportunities available to them both before and after high school graduation. For this reason, postsecondary outcomes should be viewed not only as indicators of individual achievement, but also as measures of how effectively City Schools creates pathways to opportunity. As Baltimore continues to invest in its young people, maintaining a focus on equity and on the long-term wellbeing of the city will remain essential. The students represented in this report will become Baltimore's future workforce, civic leaders, entrepreneurs, educators, and parents. Their success is therefore not only a matter of individual importance, but a matter of collective importance for the city as a whole.

Appendix



DATA SOURCES

We used data from the Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC) archive for Baltimore City from the 2014-15 through 2023-24 school years. For the current report, relevant BERC archive components include administrative student records from City Schools, data from the National Student Clearinghouse, and Federal Student Aid.

City Schools Graduates

The data featured in this report represent Baltimore City Public Schools high school graduates only, i.e., students with an exit code indicating receipt of a regular diploma (C60) or early graduation (C70). Graduates included any student with these codes dated between September 1 and August 31 of respective school years (e.g., students awarded diplomas between September 1, 2023 and August 31, 2024 compose the class of 2024).

College Enrollment and Degree Completion

The most comprehensive data source to identify college enrollment and degree completion at colleges across the United States is the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). More than 3,700 colleges, training institutes, and universities participate with the NSC, capturing 97% of all students enrolled in public and private colleges across the United States and territories (NSC, n.d.). However, students enrolled at some small schools (specialty trade schools, arts conservatories, and seminaries) are less likely to be represented, as such institutions are less likely to participate with the NSC.

NSC data do not include information on full-time versus part-time enrollment intensity for all participating colleges, and intensity could affect time to degree completion. NSC also does not report information about whether students enroll in courses that are credit-bearing (i.e., developmental or non-developmental). To our knowledge, NSC enrollments represent only those in college-credit-bearing courses, yet we are certain this limitation applies to postsecondary enrollments in Maryland.

Fall enrollments were identified mainly from NSC data (NB., some records reflect data received directly from the Institutional Research Office at Morgan State University, which provided a patch for fall 2016 enrollments that were incomplete in the NSC data for that term). Fall enrollment status was defined by college enrollment dates reported that occurred between September 1 and December 31 following high school graduation for each respective cohort year.

College degree completions represent only those indicated in the NSC data within six years after a student's on-time fall enrollment window. Therefore, degrees are reported among fall enrollees only. Degree type (2-year degrees or 1-year certificate; 4-year degrees) are inferred from the type of institution in which the student enrolled unless otherwise specified in the NSC data.

The reader should note a few caveats when interpreting results from NSC data. One challenge is that the NSC uses data submitted by the school district to perform a matching algorithm with data it receives from participating postsecondary institutions. In general, the match utilizes student names, high school codes, and birthdates; thus, the data returned to the school district may contain errors. These errors may occur when the information a college provides for a student is different from that submitted by the school district (e.g., name spelling differences or inaccurate birthdates). College students are also permitted to place a “FERPA block” on their postsecondary data, which would result in false negatives for college enrollment. Furthermore, false positives for college enrollment may occur when, for instance, a different student with an identical name or birthdate is identified as enrolled.

Such challenges make NSC a dynamic database, even though data on the same graduates are reported to the requesting district for up to seven consecutive years. City Schools has solicited enrollment data from NSC for over 20 years, and BERC has assisted in the analysis of this data since 2009. BERC has determined that there were a relatively small number of instances where no enrollment was reported for a student in the most recent NSC file, but earlier NSC files did indicate an enrollment event. There were also instances where previously reported degrees had been excluded from the newest data release. To generate the most liberal possible estimate of enrollment and degree completion, the current analysis prioritizes a positive status (e.g., fall enrollee, degree completer = TRUE) from information received over all NSC data reports, regardless of the most recently reported status.

College Applications and Summer Melt

Data on college applications and acceptances were obtained from City Schools student-level Naviance data. Naviance is an online platform accessed by students and school staff. Students may explore data about admittance rates and entering student qualifications at different colleges and use the platform to communicate with school counselors about colleges where they want to apply. Teachers or other adults at the school may access Naviance to generate recommendation letters for student applications, while school counselors can update information about a student application's status and paperwork as it is submitted to support students with meeting various deadlines. In the current report, we utilize Naviance data to capture the number of colleges for which students complete applications, as of the last day of the respective school year. This information therefore potentially excludes application completions occurring during the summer when graduated students are no longer supported by school counselors; in these cases, reported rates of completing three or more applications would be biased downward.

Second, we use information on whether students received an acceptance from any college as of the last day of school (including community colleges indicating the student submitted all required documentation). This information is paired with fall enrollment data from NSC to identify students experiencing summer melt. Summer melt is defined as having at least one college acceptance but no college enrollment record corresponding to fall enrollment dates. To the extent that college acceptances may occur after high school graduation and are not documented in Naviance, rates of summer melt would be biased downward.

In general, the quality of Naviance data may vary depending on counselor actions, consistency of student communication with school staff, and the emphasis school leaders place on using Naviance as a college access resource.

Federal Student Aid Data

Information regarding high school seniors' completion of FAFSA applications was obtained from studentaid.gov Data Center website (<https://studentaid.gov/data-center/student/application-volume/fafsa-completion-high-school>). The online system allows the analyst to view or download school-level information regarding the number of FAFSA forms completed by a particular reporting window for specific states, localities, and high schools. The data featured in this report represent FAFSA completions as of June 30 for each graduating class year and was further filtered to only those schools within Baltimore City Public Schools. The denominators used to determine percentages completing FAFSA were separately obtained by determining the number of 12th graders enrolled at each school as of January 1 of the respective graduating year indicated in EOY Attendance files.

Data Suppression and Table Masking

Throughout this report and its accompanying data digest, some values are masked to protect student privacy using BERC data suppression rules that are in accordance with City Schools reporting requirements and policies. For some groups, percentages are banded to prevent the recovery of a percentage that is 5% or less. The reader should not assume that the middle of a banded value is the true value as any value in the band is equally likely. The reader may notice that percentages for alternative high schools are inconsistently reported as a result of masking requirements. In the Data Digest, an indication of 'no grads' or 'no seniors' this year reflects a school opening or school closing, rather than no students meeting the outcome.

Human Subjects Review

The authors obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Notre Dame of Maryland University to conduct this research, as well as from the IRB at Johns Hopkins University and to gather and report on the first-person accounts of the Baltimore City Public Schools graduates included in this report. Two local nonprofit organizations, the CollegeBound Foundation and KIPP Forward, presented the opportunity to be interviewed for the report with affiliates or alumni of their programs and then connected the authors to alumni who wished to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted after securing informed consent, which included photo releases. Interviewees had opportunities to review their portions of the report and had the option to decline participation at any time prior to publication.

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