

Demographic and Academic Characteristics Associated with College Readiness and Early College Success in the Republic of the Marshall Islands

In the Republic of the Marshall Islands, college readiness and early college success are major concerns. More than 75 percent of a recent cohort of incoming students at the College of the Marshall Islands placed into developmental courses, which suggests that students might not be academically prepared to take postsecondary coursework. A lack of research on predictors of college readiness and early college success for Marshallese students makes it difficult to develop and implement targeted interventions. This study examined academic preparation characteristics and the college readiness and early college success of students who graduated from Republic of the Marshall Islands public high schools and enrolled at the College of the Marshall Islands between 2015 and 2017. It also examined the relationships between student demographic and preparation characteristics and college readiness and early college success. College readiness and early college success were defined as achieving all three of the following indicators: placing into only credit-bearing math and English courses, earning all credits attempted during the first year of college, and persisting to a second year of college. About 3 percent of students met all three indicators; 5 percent placed into only credit-bearing math and English courses at the College of the Marshall Islands, 19 percent earned all credits attempted during their first year of college, and 53 percent persisted to a second year of college. Several student characteristics were related to college readiness and early college success. Female students were less likely than male students to persist to a second year of college. Students with a higher cumulative high school grade point average were more likely than other students to earn all credits attempted during their first year of college and to persist to a second year of college.

Why this study?

Education stakeholders in the Republic of the Marshall Islands are concerned about the apparent low levels of college readiness and early college success among high school graduates who attend the College of the Marshall Islands. In 2016, 84 percent of first-time College of the Marshall Islands students placed into developmental math courses, and 77 percent placed into developmental English courses rather than into only credit-bearing math and English courses.¹ These findings have raised concerns in the Republic of the Marshall Islands because enrolling in developmental courses can indicate that students are academically unprepared for college. This study responds to a need expressed by the Republic of the Marshall Islands Ministry of Education and the College of the Marshall Islands to understand the extent to which student demographic and academic preparation characteristics are related to college readiness and early college success in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. A better understanding of how these factors relate to college readiness and early college success among recent high school graduates could inform policies and practices affecting students earlier in the pipeline to college and contribute to future academic and vocational success.

1. Vila, C. T. (2016). *CMI degrees awarded and graduates 2011–2016*. College of the Marshall Islands. <https://www.cmi.edu/aboutcmi/institutional-research/institutional-research-reports/>.

What was studied and how?

The study examined college readiness and early college success among students who graduated from Republic of the Marshall Islands public high schools between spring 2015 and spring 2017 and enrolled at the College of the Marshall Islands for the first time between fall 2015 and fall 2017. The study addressed three research questions:

1. What were the academic preparation characteristics of students?
2. What percentage of students demonstrated college readiness and early college success, as shown by the indicators of college readiness and early college success examined for this study?
3. How did students' demographic and academic characteristics predict their success in earning all attempted credits and persisting to a second year of college, after other characteristics were controlled for?

The Republic of the Marshall Islands Ministry of Education and College of the Marshall Islands provided demographic and academic preparation data for students who graduated from Republic of the Marshall Islands public high schools in spring 2015 through spring 2017 and enrolled as first-time, degree-seeking students at the College of the Marshall Islands between fall 2015 and fall 2017 ($n = 482$). To preserve the study's sample size, the study team used multiple imputation procedures to impute missing data.

Findings

This section provides an overview of key findings from the study's analyses.

More than half of high school graduates had a cumulative grade point average of 3.00 or higher, and most students met or exceeded 30 percent or more of the math and English benchmarks on the grade 10 Marshall Islands Standards Assessment Test

About 55 percent of 2015–17 high school graduates who enrolled in the College of the Marshall Islands had a cumulative high school grade point average of 3.00–4.00, and about 43 percent had a grade point average of 2.00–2.99. The Marshall Islands Standards Assessment Test performance scores indicate the percentage of benchmarks in which a student is proficient (meeting grade-level expectations) or advanced (exceeding grade-level expectations). About 57 percent of students met or exceeded 30 percent or more of the benchmarks in math, and about 97 percent met or exceeded 30 percent or more of the benchmarks in English.

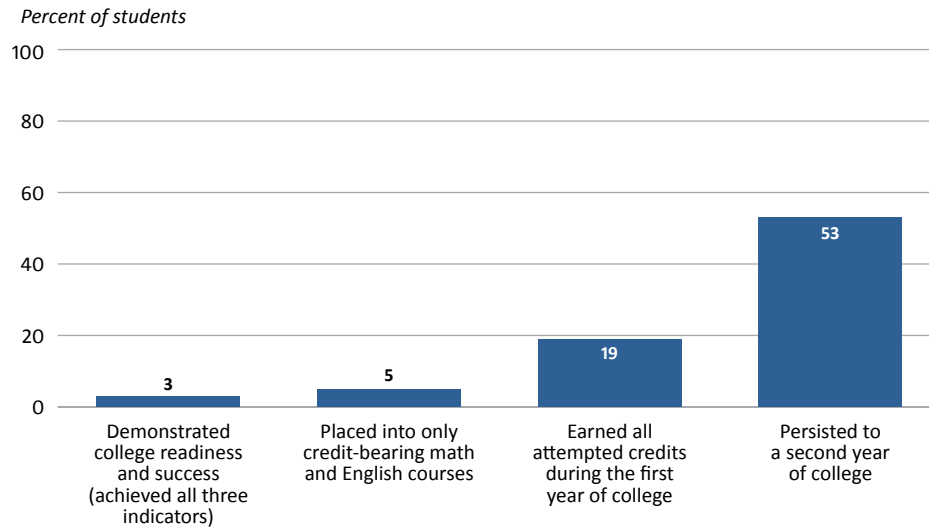
Only 3 percent of first-time students in the 2015–17 entering cohorts at the College of the Marshall Islands achieved all three indicators of college readiness and early college success

Many students persisted to a second year even if they did not initially place into only credit-bearing courses or earn all the credits they attempted during their first year at the College of the Marshall Islands. Only 5 percent of students placed into only credit-bearing math and English courses at the College of the Marshall Islands, 19 percent earned all attempted credits during the first year, and 53 percent persisted to a second year (figure 1).

Students with a higher cumulative high school grade point average were more likely than other students to earn all credits attempted during the first year of college and to persist to a second year, after other student characteristics were accounted for

Students who had a higher cumulative high school grade point average were more likely than other students to earn all credits attempted during their first year at the College of the Marshall Islands and to persist to a

Figure 1. The percentage of students in the 2015–17 entering cohorts at the College of the Marshall Islands who demonstrated college readiness and early college success varied by indicator



Note: Across students in all high school graduation cohorts (n = 482), 14 students demonstrated college readiness and early college success (by achieving all three indicators), 24 students placed into only credit-bearing courses, 90 students earned all attempted credits, and 254 students persisted to a second year. The indicators of college readiness and early college success (except for meeting all three indicators) are not mutually exclusive categories.

Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the College of the Marshall Islands.

second year of college. The differences between the average cumulative grade point average of students who achieved these indicators and students who did not were major.² Students with a cumulative high school grade point average of 4.00 had a 48 percent probability of earning all attempted credits and a 71 percent probability of persisting to a second year of college. The probability of achieving these indicators decreased as cumulative high school grade point average decreased.

Students who graduated from Laura High School were more likely than graduates of other high schools to earn all credits attempted during their first year at the College of the Marshall Islands

Graduates of Laura High School, one of the five high schools on the islands, were more likely than students who graduated from other schools to earn all credits attempted during their first year at the College of the Marshall Islands, after other student demographic and academic preparation characteristics were controlled for. The difference was major, with the Laura High School graduates having a 34 percent probability compared with an 8–20 percent probability among graduates of the four other high schools in the study.

Male students were more likely than female students to persist to a second year of college

Female students had a 44 percent probability of persisting to a second year of college, whereas male students had a 58 percent probability, after other student demographic and academic preparation characteristics were controlled for. This difference by gender was major.

2. Group differences were considered major if they were significant and corresponded to a difference of at least 10 percentile points in magnitude. They were considered minor if they were significant but corresponded to a difference of less than 10 percentile points.

Implications

This is the first study of college readiness and early college success among students who graduated from public high schools in the Republic of the Marshall Islands and enrolled for the first time in the College of the Marshall Islands. The study findings provide stakeholders with information about these students, an important first step in identifying graduating high school students who are most likely and those who are least likely to be college ready. This study also has implications for policies and practices currently in place or under consideration for supporting academic success among this population.

The findings suggest the importance of monitoring student grade point average and providing additional supports that help students perform at a high level during high school. Such measures could help educators in public high schools identify students who might be at risk of being unprepared for college coursework. Providing targeted support to these students could help ensure that they are academically prepared for college.

The study findings also point to the importance of learning more about academic preparation in individual public high schools in the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The public high schools included in the study varied by enrollment, student–teacher ratio, geographic location, and accreditation level. Understanding whether practices for academic preparation and student support differ across high schools could inform efforts to boost college readiness and success among students while they are in high school.

The findings also have implications for future research. Learning more about why female students are less likely than male students to persist to a second year of college could inform efforts to support them and help ensure that they are college ready when they graduate from high school. Future research might also examine potential modifications to the system that the College of Marshall Islands uses to determine student course placement. The Republic of the Marshall Islands Public School System and the College of the Marshall Islands are aware that some students have difficulty placing into credit-bearing courses and, accordingly, are supporting initiatives addressing this issue. For example, beginning in the 2017/18 academic year, the college began incorporating multiple measures of academic performance to place more students in credit-bearing courses. If the apparent difficulties in placing into only credit-bearing courses that were found in this study persist, stakeholders could consider additional student supports and modifications to the current placement system.

This exploratory study was limited by its small sample (which included only three cohorts of students), its descriptive nature, the lack of data on all student characteristics of interest, and the small number of students who demonstrated college readiness and early college success. In some cases the small number of students demonstrating certain characteristics of interest likely limited the extent to which the analyses could detect relationships between those characteristics and outcomes of interest. In addition, it was not feasible to examine predictors of placing into only credit-bearing math and English courses.

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