

PATHWAY TO SUCCESS:

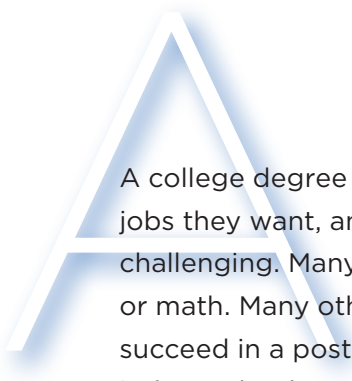
The Charles School broadens college access
for students who need it

By Ellen Belcher





The Thomas B. Fordham Institute promotes educational excellence for every child in America via quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as advocacy and charter school authorizing in Ohio. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and this publication is a joint project of the Foundation and the Institute. For further information, please visit our website at www.edexcellence.net. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.



A college degree is becoming increasingly necessary in order for young people to attain the jobs they want, and yet getting to and through college in some ways has never been more challenging. Many students are ill-prepared when they arrive, needing remediation in reading or math. Many others may lack the critical but hard to measure “soft” skills necessary to succeed in a postsecondary environment, like self-motivation, organization, ability to work independently, strong executive functioning skills, and self-awareness.

Even when students are fully prepared, the cost of college is immense. College graduates walk away, on average, with almost \$40,000 in student loan debt. For students who are the first in their families to go to college, these challenges can be daunting. The Charles School (TCS)—a charter high school offering a unique five-year program in partnership with Ohio Dominican University—provides a one-of-a-kind early college experience to students in Columbus. Students can graduate with up to 62 hours of college credit, tuition free, and earn not just a high school diploma but also an associate’s degree. For students like Chris Sumlin, profiled in this story, TCS illuminated a path to and through college that felt dimly lit at one point in his life. Sumlin, who will graduate from Morehouse College this month, told our interviewer that before he attended TCS it seemed “inconceivable” to go to college.

This is the opportunity provided by TCS and other high-quality charter options like it. Nearly three out of four TCS students are economically disadvantaged, yet the school earns an “A” for the progress of its lowest-income students and a “B” overall on value-added growth. TCS is part of the Graham Family of Schools—four charter schools in Columbus serving about 1,000 students in grades K-12. Graham schools are rooted in the “expeditionary learning” model, which emphasizes hands-on, project-based learning and deep reflection and inquiry about the learning process. This is evident upon a visit to any of the Graham schools or in conversations with their staff. They are reflective, thoughtful, and intent on improving all aspects of students’ lives—recognizing that all children, no matter their background, deserve inspiring places to learn.

TCS is one such place, and it made all the difference for Chris. May his compelling story encourage us to throw our energy and support behind any school option that is effective at closing the college-going gap and setting young people up for success.

— JAMIE DAVIES O’LEARY
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PATHWAY TO SUCCESS



Chris Sumlin enrolled at The Charles School (TCS) for one reason.

The public charter school and early college academy in northeast Columbus promised him the chance to simultaneously earn a high school diploma and an associate's degree from its partner, Ohio Dominican University—for free. The catch, from a 14-year-old's perspective, was that he would have to attend high school for five years.

"The first time I heard about The Charles School," the now 24-year-old said, "I knew I wanted to go there because they were giving away a college education."

Before he learned about TCS, going to college seemed "inconceivable." The message Chris had heard throughout elementary and middle school was to make sure he got through high school.

He and a friend enrolled together, Chris said, "simply on faith, hoping that the program was going to be what they said."

"I felt their [the administration's] sincerity," he said. But at the time the school was situated in a Baptist church and had only been open a year. "I just trusted them because there was no one who had been through the program."

The Charles School, which earned an A on its 2015-16 state report card for its 387 students' academic growth and for the number of low-achieving students who had progressed significantly, kept its end of the bargain. In 2013, Chris and Ellen Essien—the friend with whom he had enrolled in 2008—graduated with two diplomas and more than 60 credit hours each from Ohio Dominican. Ellen attends Case Western Reserve University on a full scholarship funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

This month, Chris will earn a bachelor's degree from Morehouse College, where he is majoring in Cinema, Television and Emerging Media Studies. He has a 3.3 GPA and has interned for The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon; at the FOX Television Stations Group; in talent acquisition for the Turner media company; and for the BET Awards. His dream job, he said, is to work for the Oprah Winfrey Network in California.

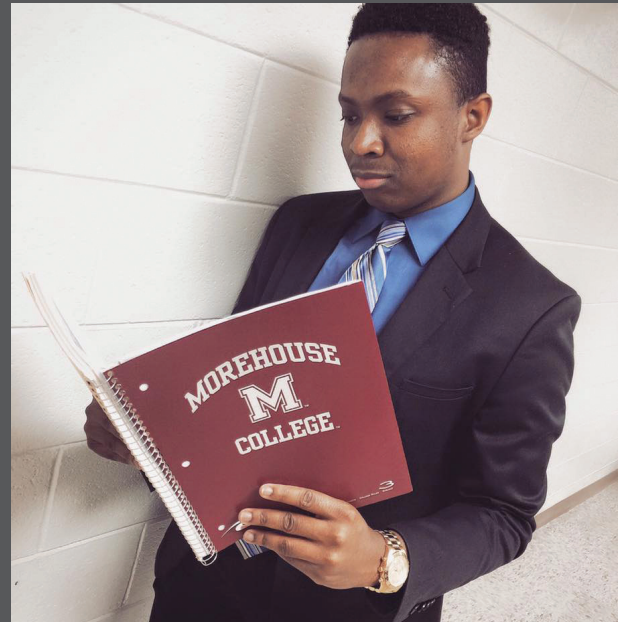
When he walked across the commencement stage four years ago, Chris was one of 14 students out of 41 in his graduating class to earn two diplomas. Though TCS students are predominantly minority, he was the only African-American male to complete the requirements for an associate's degree, a fact that both saddened Chris and influenced his decision to attend Morehouse, the prestigious all-male historically black college.

Besides being a rigorous academic journey, making it through TCS and Ohio Dominican was emotionally bittersweet.

"I felt The Charles School was giving us the opportunity," Chris said. "I was disappointed in my race. We have a lot of work to do as African-American men. That has really inspired me. I thought that if I can get through this program, there should be more people who could do this."

Ed Ingman, who taught Chris biology and physical science at TCS, remembers Chris as a positive, driven student who knew how to connect with people.

When the TCS faculty invited Chris back in 2016 to speak at an awards ceremony, Ingman said Chris had the entire student body in the palm of his hand, even though it was the last day of school and the



ceremony ran long. When Chris invited students to ask him questions, Ingman said he momentarily blanched, fearing that with so many restless teenagers in the Ohio Dominican auditorium, Sumlin might not be able to manage conversation in a crowd. “But they [the students] were asking great questions, they were listening to each other, and it was totally perfect. ... It was because of Chris and the way he conducts himself.”

Ingman, who left TCS to participate in a principal training fellowship, added that even as an underclassman, Chris was the “best impromptu hall monitor” ever.

When the former TCS teacher heard somebody in the hallway who shouldn’t be there and he heard Chris’ voice, Ingman said, “I’d just sit back down at my desk and think, ‘Chris has got this.’”

While he quickly grew to become “Mr. TCS,” in the words of former teacher Erin Johnson, Chris’ success at the school was not certain.

Mike Beard, now a TCS principal, said he remembers a conversation with Chris early in his freshman year.

“He was not real sure whether he had made the right choice,” Beard said. “He was really questioning what he was doing there.”

Jamaal Ridley, who was a year ahead of Chris, has similar memories. The two students met for the first time on a field trip to the Columbus Police Academy during Chris’ freshman year. Ridley recalls Chris “not speaking to anyone.”

“Knowing the Chris I knew back then, I wouldn’t have known who he has become. ... I’m just so proud of him,” said Ridley, who graduated from Ohio University in industrial and systems engineering.

Though Ridley left The Charles School for a Columbus Public School during his fourth year because he didn’t want to attend a fifth year of high school, he remembers TCS as a place “where kids didn’t feel they had to fit in.”

“Everybody didn’t fit the stereotypes that you believe about the races,” said Ridley, who is African-American.” Students like Chris, he said, “were able to come out of their shells” and to develop their potential and talents.

When Chris was choosing where to go for his bachelor’s degree, a TCS teacher suggested Morehouse. The prestige factor excited him; the price of over \$40,000 before grants and loans—scared him. Chris’ family struggles financially, and other universities, including Ohio Dominican, were offering especially generous financial aid packages.

Ingman believes Chris had a “grand vision” for his future,” and he “knew that Atlanta was a big piece of that.”

Bob Wilson, who was Chris’ history teacher and gave Chris the suitcase he carried when he left for Morehouse, said, Chris “hates it when people tell him he can’t do something” and that Morehouse was his “dream” school because it is “the Harvard of HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities).”

As Chris sees it, Wilson sealed his acceptance at Morehouse. Initially put on a wait list, he received his notice of admission after Wilson sent a letter of recommendation noting that Chris had already earned an associate’s degree.

“He’s told me on numerous occasions that he’s going pay for my kids’ college,” Wilson said laughing. Chris contends that one day he’ll be rich, and Wilson is not inclined to doubt him.

Sara Duke, an English teacher and Chris' college adviser at TCS, also helped get Chris to Morehouse. She suggested he start a GoFundMe campaign for the more than \$500 deposit he needed to reserve his spot at the college. In less than a week, the cash was in hand, including a donation from Duke's mother.

And there have been other benefactors.

When Chris spoke at a 2015 United Negro College Fund fundraising event in Columbus, Democratic Congresswoman Joyce Beatty was so touched by his remarks and the support he had received from the UNCF, she wrote him a personal check.

Duke said Chris' fifth year at TCS, when all of his classes were at Ohio Dominican, gave him the maturity and experience he needed to succeed at Morehouse.

"It was really important for him in terms of his confidence and his readiness—knowing that he could do it on his own," Duke said.

At Ohio Dominican, which has been TCS's partner from the high school's inception, Chris was well known.

"People [on campus] knew him," said Wilson, who now teaches at Columbus' Bishop Ready High School. "They [faculty] would rarely ask me about specific students. [But] his name came up. ... He did not keep his head down and mouth shut. They were impressed with him, and they liked him."

Chris said his classes at Ohio Dominican were demanding — "I was reading Aristotle and Plato" — and that professors did not give TCS students special breaks. In some situations, they didn't know which students were from TCS.

Not all students are willing to commit to staying an extra year in high school and a change in policy enables them to now graduate after four years at TCS. Because of this, the school is penalized on the state report card for failing to graduate a sufficient percentage in four years. The state standard is a one-size-fits-all benchmark that the school never set out to meet.

Part of the explanation for students declining to stay for five years, is that under Ohio's College Credit

Plus program, they can take colleges courses at no cost during the traditional four years of high school with less input and oversight from their schools than was standard under the former Post Secondary Enrollment Option.



When Chris was attending TCS and the Post Secondary Enrollment Option was the law, the school didn't allow students to begin taking classes at Ohio Dominican until their junior year, and they first had to successfully complete a college-level composition class at the high school. TCS's prescribed course path spelled out that students would take one college class the first semester of their third year, and that the number would increase each semester until their fifth year, when ideally all of their classes would be on the Ohio Dominican campus, just a 10-minute walk away.

This year, only about 10% to 15% of students are specifically working toward an associate's degree from Ohio Dominican. That's a drop from about a third when Chris attended. But another 30 students are taking classes at Columbus State University through College Credit Plus. On average, TCS students graduate with 30 college credit hours.

Allie Konet, TCS's coordinator of early college programs, said the school is trying to make its early college focus and College Credit Plus "co-exist." "We're not trying to push students through to an associate degree program," she said, "but to have a successful (early) college experience" while they still have the support of TCS.

Duke, Chris' former TCS college adviser, said the school's philosophy matches its students' needs.

"Here (at TCS) we have a saying that a lot of our students come from a family of cheerleaders," Duke said, "but they don't have a lot of coaches in their lives. They get tons of love and support at home," but their parents don't have experience filling out financial aid documents or college applications or teaching time management in a college environment.

It's support like that from the "St. Charles community," Chris said, that made the difference for him.

Konet, however, begs to differ.

"I'd love to say we did it ... but he's worked really hard to get where he is."

THE CHARLES SCHOOL

Home District: Columbus

Enrollment: 387

Grades Served: 9-12 (plus fifth year to earn associate's degree)

School Principals: Yolanda Perez & Mike Beard

Mission: The mission of the school is to prepare students for life-long learning, commitment to community and informed citizenship by immersing them in real-world, active learning as well as rigorous academics.

Opened: 2007

Percent Economically Disadvantaged: 73%

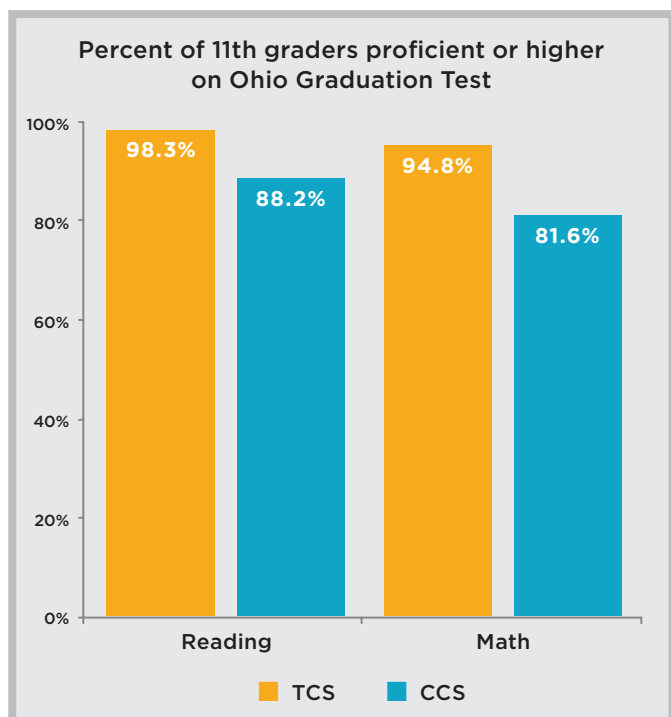
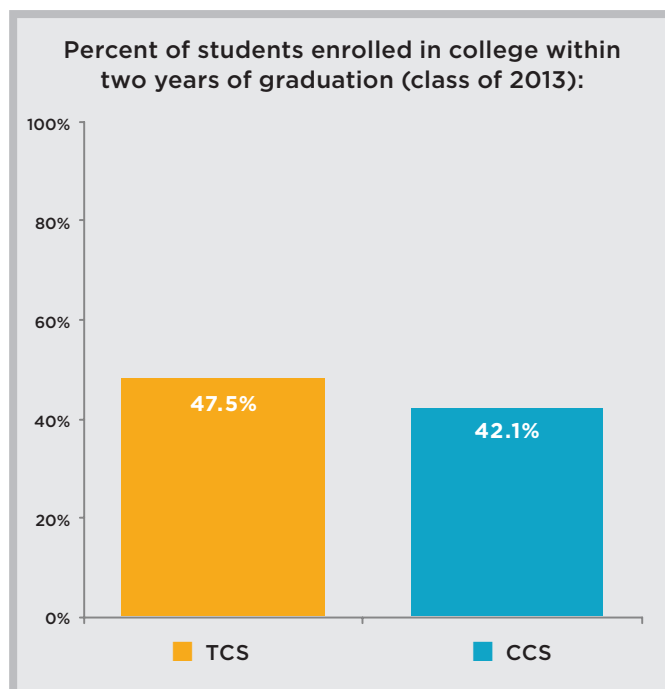
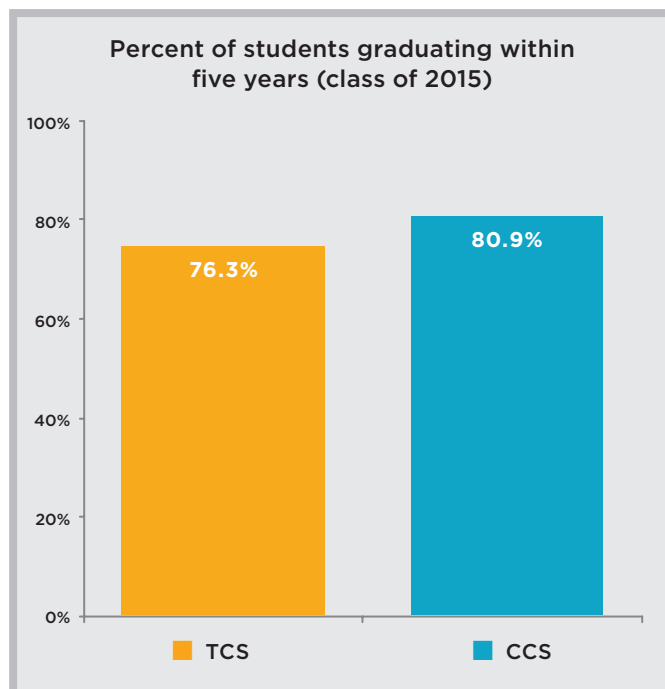
Percent Non-White: 83%

Performance Index Grade: D

Value Added Grade: B

Other Highlights:

- The first early college high school in the country to combine accelerated academic program with hands-on experiential learning
- Graduated two Gates Millennium Scholars
- Since 2010, TCS students and their families have saved more than \$4.5 million on college costs



■ TCS = The Charles School
 ■ CCS = Columbus City Schools

Performance data come from the 2015-16 interactive Local Report Card.



The Charles School at Ohio Dominican University is a five-year program offering students a high school diploma and up to 62 hours of college credit tuition free.

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