

## **Discussion of “Distance to Opportunity: Higher Education Deserts and College Enrollment Choices”, by Riley Acton, Kalena E. Cortes, and Camila Morales**

Discussion by Zachary Bleemer

Lower-income Americans are persistently and increasingly less likely to enroll in college than their higher-testing high school peers (Bailey and Dynarski, 2011). Male children of parents from the top parental income tercile about twice as likely to go to college as children from the bottom parental income tercile, a gap that first appeared in the late 1990s and is larger than that of any period in the past 100 years other than the decades immediately following World War Two (Bleemer and Quincy, 2024). These gaps parallel enrollment gaps by race, with white and especially Asian enrollment outpacing Black and Hispanic enrollment. What explains this growing stratification on the extensive margin of college enrollment?

One set of candidate explanations may have been changes on the supply side of higher education. First, could today’s large gap in college-going by parental income be the result of the high cost of college education? Goldin and Katz (1999) show that enrollment at relatively lower-cost public universities persistently rose throughout the 20th century, rising from 25 to 70 percent by the 1970s, implying that lower-cost public enrollment is no less popular in this period of poor lower-income collegiate enrollment. While tuition costs at private and public universities have risen in recent decades, the rise in real four-year college costs (including tuition, fees, room, and board) predates the growing parental income gap in college enrollment by at least 15 years, and real average community college costs didn’t start rising until the Great Recession of the late 2000s (Bleemer and Quincy, 2024). Trends in college costs thus seem to be an unlikely explanation for lower-income students’ failure to keep up with their higher-income peers’ rising college enrollment.

A second candidate supply-side explanation is the rise of “meritocratic” admissions policies – like rising reliance on standardized tests and other measures of academic preparation and the steady phase-out of race-based affirmative action since the late 1990s – which might differentially limit college access to lower-income students (e.g. Arrow, Bowles, and Durlauf, 2000; Markovits, 2019; Bleemer, 2022, 2023). However, Hoxby (2009) shows that the distribution of university selectivity hardly shifted rightward in the 1990s and 2000s, and not at all among universities with below-median test scores; lower income students have maintained broad access to four-year public colleges and universities in recent decades. Supply-side policies appear unlikely to explain recent differential changes in college enrollment by parental income.

On the demand side, a series of studies have hypothesized that information frictions may play an important role in explaining differences in college enrollment by parental income (Hoxby and Turner, 2013; Bleemer and Zafar, 2018), though a recent large-scale information experiment conducted by the College Board found little evidence that information provision could close the observed gap (Gurantz et al., 2021). Instead, a series of studies originating with Card (1993) have hypothesized the role of a complementary demand-side explanation for the enrollment gap: differences in distances to the nearest college or university, which themselves may cause differential frictions arising from information, cost, or norms that lead lower-income students to be less likely to go to college, especially with regard to community college (see, e.g., Rouse, 1995; Mountjoy, 2019).

Acton, Cortes, and Morales (2024) joins this tradition by proposing to explain racial differences in college-going by both differences in the distribution of distance-to-college between racial groups and differences in the responsiveness of college-going to distance-to-college by racial group. The striking descriptive statistics shown in the first three panels of Figure 1 prefigure their findings: Texas’s four-year universities are much more likely be located in regions of the state with large white population shares, and the visual evidence suggests that the state’s community colleges are often relatively distant from the regions where the population shares of Black and especially Hispanic residents are highest.

The study’s centerpiece is a decomposition estimating the contributions of distance-to-college to racial

enrollment gaps. Figure 3A provides evidence that members of all races who live far from any community college are less likely to enroll at such an institution, but while most of the difference in white and higher-income two-year enrollment is replaced by higher four-year enrollment, Black and Hispanic students and lower-income students appear more likely to forego higher education altogether. Using these estimates to simulate public college enrollment responses to community college closures, the authors find suggestive evidence that certain community college closures in south Texas would lead to substantial declines in Hispanic college enrollment. The authors conclude that about 16 (8) percent of the racial (SES) gap in four-year college enrollment can be explained by distances to community college, largely due to different enrollment elasticities to distance rather than differences in average distances across racial group, but that distance explains none of the gap in overall college enrollment.

While the study's abstract highlights distance's small observational contribution to the four-year racial enrollment gap, the study's more surprising finding is that there are no meaningful differences in the average distance that Black, Hispanic, and white Texans live from public community colleges. Indeed, neither differences in distance-to-college nor differences in the elasticity of college-going to distance explain a meaningful portion of the 10 (13) percentage point gap in college-going by race (SES), at least taking the presented observational relationships as causal.

Future work could consider a number of interesting extensions of the presented results. The first would be to validate (or invalidate) the presented observational estimates of race- and SES-specific college-going elasticities to distance using quasi-experimental variation in either residential or college location. This would identify the causal race-specific relationship between college-going and distance. A number of recent studies have exploited new college openings as one viable source of such variation. For example, Lapid (2018) shows that the construction of UC Merced and three new California State University campuses led to substantial disproportionate increases in college enrollment from high schools near those campuses. Connolly (2023) documents substantial variation in the opening year of US community colleges and leverages their staggered timing to estimate the health effects of educational attainment. Most recently, Nimier-David (2023) studies the educational and local labor market effects of staggered late-20th-century expansions of a series of French universities, documenting substantial increases in collegiate human capital in the local labor market.

Future researchers could extend these designs to validate the selection-on-observables design implemented in the present study. Potential examples in the Texas context may be the many openings and closures of for-profit institutions across Texas in the 2000s and 2010s and the merger of UT Pan American and UT Brownsville in 2015.

A second potential avenue for future work would be to study the geographic determinants of college major choice in the US. There is very substantial variation in the relative labor market return to different college majors, with some majors offering a larger *causal* return (relative to a lower-paying major like elementary education) the wage difference between college-goers and non-college high school graduates (Card, 1999; Altonji, Arcidiacono, and Maurel, 2016; Kirkeboen, Leuven, and Mogstad, 2016; Bleemer and Mehta, 2022). Since the late 1990s, Black and Hispanic students have become steadily less likely to earn high-value college majors like engineering and economics, with the largest declines at selective public universities (Bleemer and Mehta, 2021, 2023). A similar gap has grown between the college majors earned by students from lower- and higher-income families Startz (2024); Bleemer and Quincy (2024). Future work could estimate parallel distance regressions to those put forward in this study focusing on engineering schools, two- and four-year nursing programs, and other high-return fields, and then employ the results to measure the contribution of distance or the distance elasticity to the existing gaps in college major attainment between groups.

Finally, the estimates provided in this study could become more policy relevant with an extension that

considers the expected effects of expansions to Texas’s community college system. Where could colleges be opened in order to maximize future enrollment in the state? Is there viable legislation or local action that could found new vocational programs or other two-year institutions? This would be especially interesting with regard to new engineering and nursing programs at existing universities. It would also be valuable to use these estimates to enhance the cost-benefit analysis of new community college construction relative to university expansion, perhaps leveraging variation between schools in their excess student capacity.

In conclusion, this study provides a useful contribution to the literatures considering the supply-side determinants of college enrollment inequities and the ramifications of constructing new or branched colleges and universities.

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