

Geography of Opportunity Series | Brief #2

How Far Do Students Travel for College?

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The second brief in a two-part series on the geography of opportunity by TICAS senior fellow Dr. Nick Hillman.

Introduction

Most undergraduate students in the United States stay close to home – within just 17 miles – for college. This fact may be surprising given the pop culture image of students traveling far away for school, and it underscores the importance of geography in shaping college opportunity. Students stay close to home for many good reasons including caring for dependents, work responsibilities, and close ties to their families and/or communities.¹

This brief explores *how far* students travel for college and *who* travels the farthest. This information is surprisingly not well documented in the research literature, so this brief helps fill that gap and can help inform research and policy conversations. Specifically, many dominant policy frameworks today assume that students are highly mobile and “shop around” when choosing their college. This brief reshapes these frameworks and demonstrates that their assumptions only hold true for some students. High-income students and those attending private non-profit universities, a very small and privileged subset of the total student population, are the most mobile. Most students stay close to home and attend local community colleges and regional public universities, and these students account for the majority of the total undergraduate population and tend to be students of color and from lower-income families.²

This brief offers new insights into the geography of college opportunity by illustrating two very different “marketplaces” of higher education: one market where colleges compete for highly mobile students and another market where colleges draw heavily from highly localized pools of students. One financial implication of these differences is that colleges operating in national markets will have a greater advantage of attracting students – and their associated tuition dollars – than those in more localized markets. By centering geography, researchers and policymakers can not only identify potential problems but also localized solutions for improving opportunities and outcomes in higher education.

Data Source and Measures

Unless otherwise noted, all data in this brief are derived from the 2020 U.S. Department of Education’s National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (“NPSAS:20”).³ The NPSAS:20 is a nationally representative sample of undergraduates in the United States, and the following analyses limit the sample to domestic citizens who are degree-seeking undergraduates attending institutions that are not exclusively online. Exclusively online institutions are disproportionately in the for-profit sector and result in unstable estimates; as a result, this brief excludes for-profit colleges and focuses on public and private non-profit institutions.⁴

Distance is measured as the linear miles between the student’s permanent home address and the college where they are enrolled.⁵ Distance is a highly skewed variable because a large share of students travel short distances, while a small share of students travel very far. If an analysis were to only report mean distances, then it would generate highly skewed results. To avoid this problem, the following analysis focuses on medians to better represent the data and the typical student experience.

How far do students travel?

Table 1 presents mean and median distances, disaggregated by each sector. This table shows the high degree of skewness in the data where the *mean* distance for all undergraduates is 141 miles while the *median* is only 17 miles. The median is

a more useful and appropriate measure to use and, as shown in the final two columns, approximately two-thirds (69%) of students attend college within 50 miles from their permanent home address. Table 1 also sheds light into the two marketplaces where community colleges and public bachelor's/master's institutions tend to draw students locally, while public research and private non-profit institutions draw students from further away.

TABLE 1. Distance between permanent home address and college, by sector

Approximately two-thirds (69%) of all undergraduates attend college within 50 miles from their permanent home address. The median is only 17 miles, where students attending community colleges and public bachelor's/master's institutions stay closest to home, while those traveling farthest are enrolled in public research and private non-profit institutions.

	Mean distance	Median distance	% within 25 miles	% within 50 miles
Community college	54	10	79%	89%
Public Bachelor's/Master's	82	13	67%	79%
Public Research	145	39	42%	54%
Private Non-profit Bachelor's/Master's	285	58	36%	47%
Private Non-profit Research	392	75	35%	45%
Total	141	17	57%	69%

Source: NPSAS:20 <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/dejhfs>

TABLE 2. Median distance between permanent home address and college, by sector (2000-2020)

The median distance traveled for college has held relatively steady over time, increasing from 15 miles in 2000 to 17 miles in 2020. Community colleges and public bachelor's/master's institutions have had the steadiest medians over time, while public research universities and private non-profits have changed the most.

	Community college	Public BA/MA	Public Research	Private Non-profit BA/MA	Private Non-profit Research	All sectors
2000	10	18	33	31	63	15
2004	10	27	40	30	99	20
2008	12	25	40	35	60	20
2012	9	13	25	43	54	13
2016	9	12	25	36	40	13
2018	9	15	41	62	86	19
2020	10	13	39	58	75	17

Source: NPSAS various years⁷

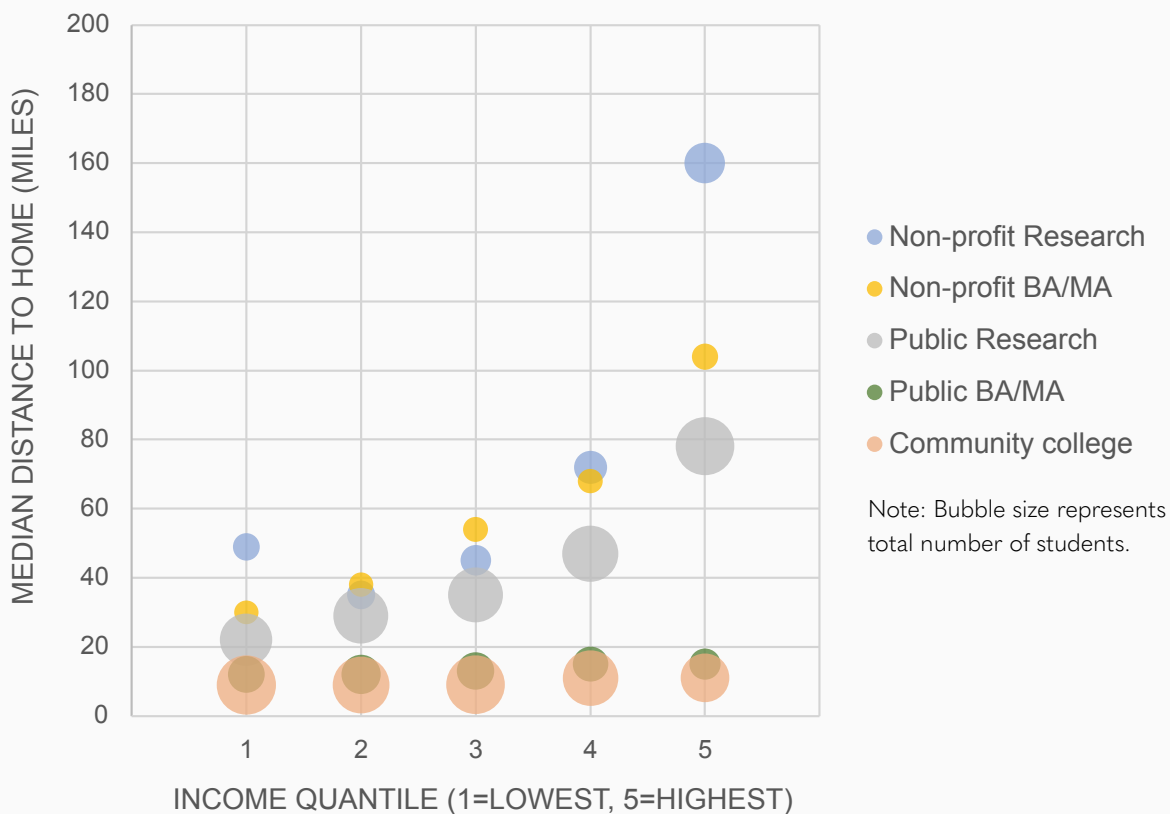
Table 2 uses multiple waves of the NPSAS survey to examine whether these distances have changed considerably over time. In general, students' median distance to home has remained stable since 2000 – slightly increasing from a median of 15 miles in 2000 to 17 miles in 2020. Across all years, community college students stay the closest to home, followed by public bachelor's/master's sectors. Similarly, private non-profit research universities have consistently had the highest medians, though they vary the most over time. Further research should explore these patterns because some economists have concluded students are more mobile today than ever before. According to this line of research, there has been a "nationalization" of the higher education market and this has been driven by the most privileged students traveling far to attend well-resourced institutions.⁶ While some markets may have become more nationalized, most remain highly localized as shown in Table 2.

Who travels the farthest?

Figures 1 and 2 below disaggregate median distance traveled by students' family incomes and by their race/ethnicity. In Figure 1, students are categorized into five income quantiles (each quantile accounts for 20 percent of students), where the first quantile includes the lowest-income students and the fifth includes the highest. Bubbles are sizes according to the number of students in each group. The first three income quantiles tend to have median distance below 60 miles, suggesting low to moderate income students – regardless of which sector of college they attend – tend to stay closest to home. Just the opposite, students from the highest two income quantiles travel the farthest, especially in the private non-profit sector.

FIGURE 1. Median distance between permanent home address and college, by income and sector

Low- to moderate-income students in the first three income quantiles tend to stay closest to home, regardless of their college sector. Students in the highest two income quantiles tend to travel farthest, particularly when attending private non-profit institutions.



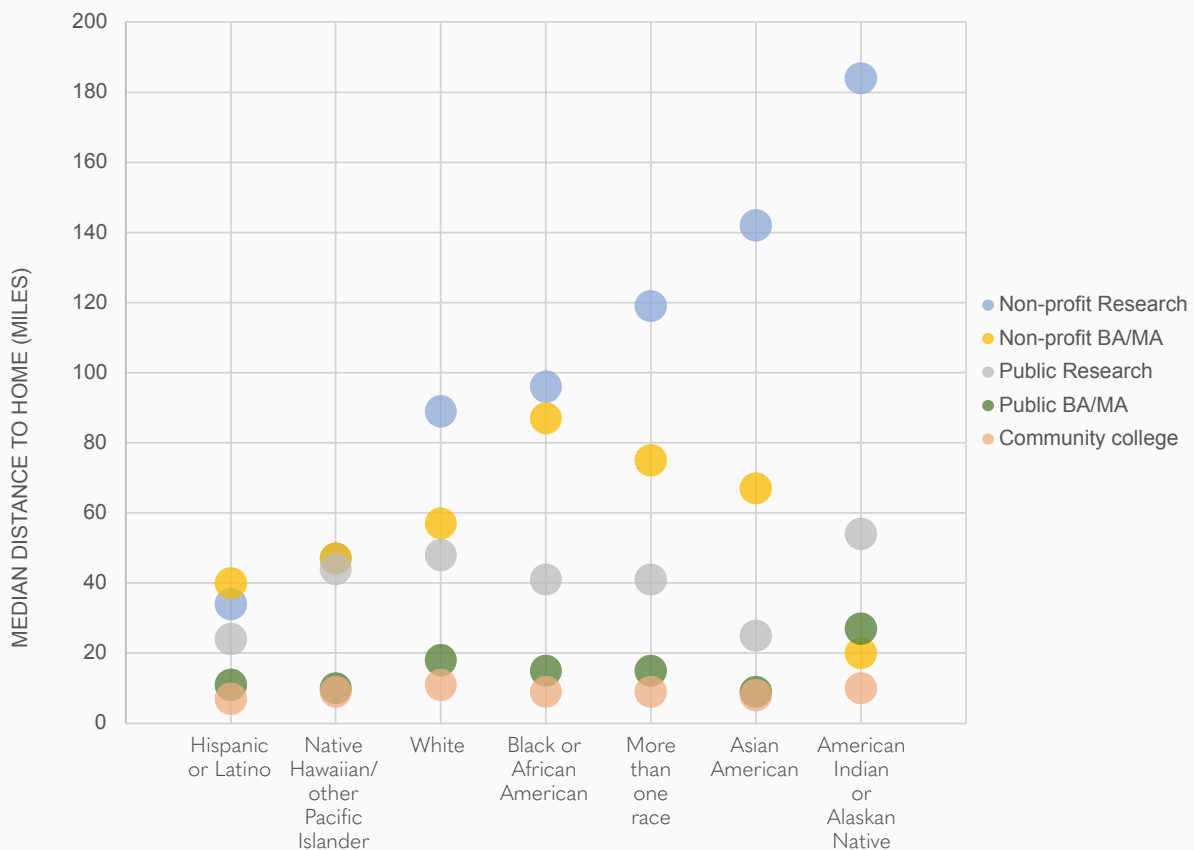
Source: NPSAS:20 <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/tqtehd>

Figure 1 helps see how the two marketplaces draw considerably different student populations and can reinforce inequality. The notion that students travel far for college may be true for high-income students attending private non-profit universities, but not for the majority of students who are either from lower-income families or attend community colleges or public bachelor's/master's institutions. Similarly, students attending community colleges and public bachelor's/master's institutions are likely to stay closest to home across all five income quantiles. Helping students “shop around” for colleges will likely have the greater impact for upper-income students and those interested in attending private non-profit colleges. While lower-income students will likely stay closer to home for various reasons worthy of further research.

Figure 2 focuses on the relationship between distance and students' race/ethnicity and, due to having a larger sample size, uses 2018 rather than 2020 NPSAS data.⁹ Similar to the previous figure, Figure 2 plots median distance for each sector; however, the horizontal axis uses the federal race/ethnicity variable for disaggregation purposes.¹⁰ Like Figure 1, students travel farthest to attend private non-profit institutions, and this finding is particularly true for students who are Black, Asian American, Native American, or multi-racial. Several of these private non-profit institutions are Minority-Serving Institutions: Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). Alternatively, students who are Hispanic/Latino and Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander tend to stay closest to home, regardless of the sector where they attend.¹¹

FIGURE 2. Median distance between permanent home address and college, by race/ethnicity and sector

Students who travel farthest tend to enroll in private non-profit institutions, and this finding is particularly true for students who are Black, Asian American, Native American, or multi-racial. Students who are Hispanic/Latino or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander tend to stay closest to home.



Source: NPSAS:18-AC <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/isjghk>

Summary of Findings

This brief shows how far from home students travel for college. Distance is a powerful force, where students stay close to home (typically less than 17 miles) when attending college. This is likely because college students balance working full-time, caring for dependents, and have important family/community ties that make it undesirable to uproot and go to college far away.¹² Median distances have not changed considerably among community college and public bachelor's/master's institutions, suggesting these sectors serve local markets that many private non-profit institutions – and even public research universities – do not. Additionally, students from upper-income families and those seeking to attend private non-profit institutions tend to travel farthest. Further research could explore the relationship between geography and enrollment in culturally affirming and racially distinct institutions such as HBCUs, AANAPISIs, and TCUs.

Conclusion

This brief aimed to highlight baseline trends and relationships to help advance new conversations around the role geography plays in shaping college opportunities. For most students, the choice of where to go to college is a highly localized decision – they will attend the college nearby and that college's "marketplace" is tied directly to local demographics. And for a relatively small share of students – typically those from higher income families and attending private non-profit institutions – the "marketplace" is less constrained by geography. Too many policy and research conversations focus on the latter group, assuming all students are equally likely to and able to travel far distances for college. For students who stay close to home for college, the major policy question is less about "shopping around" and more about ensuring they have adequate and high-quality options nearby. In many places, this may not be the case and further research and policy discussions should look closely at the location – and the level of support and resources – of the colleges serving local markets. One strategy could be to provide additional state or federal funding to colleges operating in "education deserts" or other locations where there are few alternatives nearby.¹³ Ensuring these communities have adequate resources to support students will complement the ongoing efforts to help students decide where to go to college.

End Notes

¹See for example C. Jepsen & M. Montgomery (2009). Miles to Go Before I Learn: The Effect of Travel Distance on the Mature Person's Choice of a Community College. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 65(1), 64-73 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0094119008000910>; J. Alm & J. Winters (2009). Distance and Intrastate College Student Migration. *Economics of Education Review*, 28(6), 728-738. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0094119008000910>; A. Garza & A. Fullerton (2018). Staying Close or Going Away: How Distance to College Impacts the Educational Attainment and Academic Performance of First-generation College Students. *Sociological Perspectives*, 61(1), 164-185. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0731121417711413?journalCode=spxb>

²For more context on regional public universities, see C. Orphan (2020). Not All Regional Public Universities Strive for Prestige: Examining and Strengthening Mission-Centeredness Within a Vital Sector. *New Directors for Higher Education* <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/he.20364> and the Alliance for Research on Regional College (ARRC)'s project on Identifying and Defining Regional Public Universities <https://www.regionalcolleges.org/project/identifying-and-defining-regional-public-universities>

³See <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/>

⁴All tables created for this brief are available via the National Center for Education Statistics' PowerStats tool for readers to replicate or extend these analyses.

⁵For NPSAS:2000 this uses the variable “NXDSTSCH”; NPSAS:2004 uses “HOMEDIST”; and NPSAS:2008 uses “DISTHOME” while NPSAS:2012, NPSAS:2016, NPSAS:2018-AC, and NPSAS:20 use “DISTANCE”

⁶C. Hoxby (2009) The Changing Selectivity of American Colleges. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. 23, 4, 95-118 <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.23.4.95>

⁷This analysis uses the NPSAS (rather than IPEDS) sector variable, “SECTOR9” for years 2000, 2004, and 2008 and “SECTOR10” for 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2020. For replication files and variable details, see the following for each year: NPSAS:00: <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/kqearj>; NPSAS:04: <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/exeyad>; NPSAS:08: <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/nence>; NPSAS:12: <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/cmzohg>; NPSAS:16: <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/jpzjtl>; NPSAS:18-AC: <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/fnkzme>; NPSAS:20: <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/dejhfs>

⁸Median income for each quantile are as follows: Quantile 1 (lowest income) \$11,141; Quantile 2 \$27,992; Quantile 3 \$55,795; Quantile 4 \$99,179; Quantile 5 (highest income) \$169,813.

⁹For comparison, see NPSAS:20 <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/table/dgktbm>

¹⁰To maximize sample size, Figure 2 is based on NPSAS:18-AC that produces more stable estimates. The federal definition of race/ethnicity has changed over time and does not reflect the full array of diversity within and across racial and ethnic groups in America. For a history of federal classifications, see Pew Research Center (2020) “The Changing Categories the U.S. Census Has Used to Measure Race” <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/02/25/the-changing-categories-the-u-s-has-used-to-measure-race/> and “What Census Calls Us” <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/what-census-calls-us/>

¹¹See for example Desmond, M., & Turley, R. N. L. (2009). The Role of Familism in Explaining the Hispanic-White College Application Gap. *Social Problems*, 56(2), 311–334. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2009.56.2.311> and Ovink, S. & Kalogrides, D. (2015). No Place Like Home? Familism and Latino/a-white Differences in College Pathways. *Social Science Research*, 52, 219–235 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2014.12.018>

¹²See for example N. Hillman (2016). Geography of College Opportunity: The Case of Education Deserts. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(4), 987-1321 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0002831216653204?journalCode=aera>

¹³Ibid.