

Exploring the Choice Sets and Decision-Making Processes of Texas Community College Students Intending to Transfer to Four-Year Institutions

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Community colleges have received renewed attention from policymakers and advocates seeking to increase college attendance and completion rates. However, community colleges have a complex role in fostering student completion and success. Community colleges play an important “democratizing” role by providing open access to postsecondary education for historically disadvantaged students. Yet critics argue that they also “divert” students from higher education, in part due to their high attrition rates and their complex structures, which make it difficult for students to navigate course, degree, and transfer requirements. While community colleges have multiple institutional goals, and serve a broad range of non-traditional students, a key, ongoing aim of community colleges is to facilitate transfer to four-year institutions.

A number of studies over the past two decades have examined transfers from two- to four-year institutions, focusing on either the factors that predict student transfer to a four-year college or the effects of attending community college on four-year college completion rates and outcomes. However, despite the large number of studies examining high school students’ initial choices of postsecondary institutions, and students’ decisions about whether to attend community colleges in the first place, there has been almost no research examining how community college students choose among four-year institutions. To date, no study has explored the *actual* schools that transfer students select from; instead, economists have typically inferred choice sets by assuming that students consider all available options, sometimes within a given geographic radius. Given that community college students represent a different population than average high school students—less academically prepared, more likely to come from historically disadvantaged groups, and more financially and geographically constrained—it is essential to understand not only the actual set of four-year institutions that prospective transfer students select from, but also *how* students go about making those choices, their decision-making processes.

This study will examine where community college students in Texas—focusing on those who are first-generation college-goers, low-income, or students of color—decide to pursue postsecondary education. In particular, I will examine their “choice sets,” or the list of institutions they are selecting from, the process by which institutions enter and exit their choice sets, and the factors that influence their eventual enrollment in four-year institutions. I will examine how low-income, first-generation community college students of color in Texas navigate the institutional context, the “choice architecture” of courses, majors, and transfer requirements, including bureaucratic hurdles and potential overload of choices. I will also explore the roles that their social networks and ties to community, staff, and other students play in the decision-making process. To complement the in-depth qualitative analyses, I will analyze a comprehensive longitudinal data set tracking all students in Texas to examine the choices transfer students make on a larger scale. While the close-in qualitative approach reveals mechanisms and processes, the large-scale data analysis yields a representative model of community college transfer students’ decision-making across the state.

Understanding students’ choice processes, the factors (e.g., geographical location, financial support, quality) that matter to them and the personal and institutional barriers they face, helps to explain the mechanisms by which community college students do—or do not—transfer to four-year institutions, and may inform programs and policies that help low-income, first-generation students in particular to successfully apply and transfer to high-quality four-year institutions. This project will generate white papers and peer-reviewed publications to inform these policy discussions.