

Kansas higher education policies and the impact on college access: A critical policy analysis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kansas is confronted with a significant challenge: reversing the decade-long trend of declining enrollment in the state’s public higher education system. The widening gap between the state’s workforce needs and the number of students obtaining a post-secondary credential not only hinders the state’s economic growth but also limits opportunity for individual Kansans. This study examined the policies that govern the state’s public higher education system and the impact those policies have on access to higher education in Kansas. Specifically, the study investigated how policies concerning territory assignments and degree offerings for Kansas two-year community and technical colleges create power imbalances within Kansas public higher education that ultimately limit opportunity. The results of this study expose a contradiction between Kansas policymakers’ goals to increase higher education attainment and their aim to reduce duplication in academic programming, which, in turn, limits opportunities and access for broad geographic areas of the state. Furthermore, the study identified geographic disparities in access to the different sectors of higher education, including the identification of education deserts and match deserts across the state.

INTRODUCTION

A well-established objective of the Kansas Board of Regents (KBOR) (2017) is to increase the number of adult Kansans who attain a post-secondary credential to 60%. To accomplish this, the state works to grow enrollment across the public higher education system, which includes 19 community colleges, 7 technical colleges, and 6 state universities. Like many states, the Kansas two-year sector provides a path to higher education through low tuition costs and an open access mission where any student with a high school diploma is admitted. Ideally, the combination of two- and four-year higher education options supports an environment where anyone who wishes to access higher education after high school can do so, regardless of their academic or financial standing. However, the policies and legislation currently in place in Kansas may limit access to higher education, especially to an open-access community or technical college, based on geography. A main hypothesis of this study was that the legislation and policy statements actively work against the stated goals of KBOR by limiting opportunity and creating access deserts and match deserts in certain geographic areas within the state. This research is significant on many levels, including for the individual Kansan’s pursuit of economic prosperity and upward mobility. Additionally, there is significance for communities in increasing wages, economic growth, and reducing strain on the social safety net; for business and industry in meeting the demands of the labor market; and for colleges and universities in growing enrollment. The results of this study show how the existing laws and policies contribute to equity gaps and how removing structural barriers to college access can provide access to new populations of previously underserved students.

METHODS

A mixed-methods approach was employed in this study to examine the laws, regulations, and policies that have shaped the public higher education landscape in Kansas. Specifically, the study explored policies that limit the presence of comprehensive community colleges within the same county as a state university and investigated the impacts of those policies. The study used critical policy analysis as the methodological framework, which makes a key assumption that policy is made, enacted, and enforced through dynamics that tend to favor some groups over others. The qualitative phase of this study examined policy documents from the Kansas legislature, KBOR, and the United States Department of Education. A key research focus in this phase was the language, values, and goals used in Kansas higher education policy that impact the location and academic scope of community and technical colleges. The quantitative phase of the study utilized data from the United States Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics to analyze access to the different higher education sectors in Kansas by geographic distance. Using ArcGIS technology, the focus of this phase was to investigate the spatial disparities that exist in Kansas, measured by the percentage of the population with geographic access to each of the public sectors of higher education in Kansas.

The findings from this study delivered several impactful findings for higher education stakeholders in Kansas. State policymakers clearly value college access, with language supporting access to higher education, college attainment, and the impact higher education has on upward mobility featured prominently in KBOR's language, goals, and values. Despite an emphasis on this value over the last 25 years, the state has continually fallen short of its college attainment goals. While the state made progress over the five-year period ending in 2020, the state fell well short of the goal with 54.8% of the adult population holding a postsecondary credential (Kansas Board of Regents, 2020a). Several themes uncovered in this study contribute to the shortfall, including an imbalance of power within the state system, tension between the state universities and two-year colleges, state versus local control, and governance of the entire system versus coordination for certain sectors. Furthermore, the state system values systemwide efficiency and strives to limit duplication within it. In policy, this value most clearly manifests in a state statute that limits funding for courses taught by community colleges in the home county of a state university. This policy, coupled with a statutory limitation on technical colleges from offering the Associate of Arts (A.A.) and the Associate of Science (A.S.), places a potential geographic barrier for students living in counties that house a state university and whose educational goals align with a two-year open-access community college. Those counties, including Crawford, Douglas, Ellis, Lyon, Riley, Saline, Sedgwick, and Shawnee, are heavily populated and represent 36% of the state's population. The policymakers' stated value to reduce or eliminate duplication across the system mistakenly defines duplication as duplication of courses but not duplication of mission. This is important because it highlights a contradiction in state policymakers' stated value of access and increasing higher education attainment with their stated value of systemwide efficiency. These two competing values create a scenario where certain sectors of higher education are purposely limited in specific geographic areas. In their efforts to reduce duplication in the state system, state policymakers are seemingly willing to disenfranchise students who live in these areas and whose academic goals align closer with a two-year community college.

The quantitative phase identified the spatial disparities by measuring the percentage of the Kansas population with geographic access, defined as proximity within 30

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miles, to each of the public sectors of higher education in Kansas: state university, community college, and technical college. The study found that 5.8% of the state's population resides in a complete education desert, lacking geographic access to any type of public higher education within 30 miles. Conversely, 19.2% of the population reside in an education oasis, having access to all three public sectors of higher education. Considering the nuances in Kansas laws that determine service area territories and limit degree offerings for technical colleges, this study also considered the type of two-year college and the types of degrees and programs offered when determining if a geographic area has access to an appropriately matched institution and the different undergraduate degree types offered within the Kansas higher education system: the bachelor's degree, Associate of Arts/Science, and the Associate of Applied Science. The study found that over half of the state's population, 54.6%, resides in a match desert, defined as a lack of access to at least one public four-year and one two-year community college within 30 miles. When considering driving distance as opposed to linear distance, the percentage of the population residing in a match desert grows to 83.9%. An analysis of educational attainment data revealed that the percentage of the population with an associate's or bachelor's degree or higher is 9% lower for areas classified as education deserts compared to the broader state. Areas defined as match deserts are 4% lower. Conversely, areas with geographic access have educational attainment rates 4.8% higher than the broader state.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the legislation and policies currently in place in Kansas make it more difficult to access higher education for certain geographies and certain populations. State policymakers recognize and value the importance of an educated populace both for the individual's prosperity and the social and economic benefits that higher education attainment brings to the overall society. Unfortunately, the policies and structure of the public higher education system in Kansas not only fail to support that goal, but actively detract from achieving that goal, as evidenced by the geographic disparities found in the quantitative phase of this study. The declining trend in enrollment and college-going rates over the last decade combined with the expected decline in high school seniors over the next decade should prompt action by policymakers to take a step back and decide if the public higher education system is structured in a way to meet the needs of this new environment. The state must conduct a frank self-assessment in how its policies have contributed to and exacerbated the problem, including assessing the system to determine if the service areas and missions of each higher education sector adequately reach all citizens in Kansas.

RESEARCHER RECOMMENDATIONS

A clear recommendation stemming from the results of this study is to revisit the home county protection for the state universities and develop a policy that does not disenfranchise wide swaths of the population from accessing an open-access, transferable education provided by the community college mission. Kansans living in counties that house state universities face unnecessary geographic barriers in accessing a two-year open-access education which limits opportunity for certain populations. Additionally, the affected counties are among the heaviest populated and most diverse counties in the state, further compounding the negative repercussions of state policies. The perceived duplication that this legislation seeks to avoid is short-sighted and ultimately limits the overall pool of potential students for the state universities. An approach that considers that long-term benefits of adding more students to the overall system should be the focus, rather than favoring one sector over another. Additionally, policymakers should amend legislation to allow the technical college sector to offer the Associate of Arts and the Associate of Science

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along with the currently offered Associate of Applied Science. The distinction between community colleges and technical colleges, in terms of degrees offered, is antiquated, and no longer reflects the needs of the modern workforce, especially when geographic location is considered. The current definition limits opportunities for students who pursue technical education to build upon those skills by transferring to earn a bachelor's degree. Building more seamless and relevant pathways between the two- and four-year sectors can help more Kansans obtain a bachelor's degree, providing economic benefits to the individual and the state, as well as provide state universities an additional market to boost their own enrollments.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

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To view the full Dissertation, go here: <https://hdl.handle.net/2097/43507>