

Regional

Location means a lot for college enrollments

Many believe that geography is just a matter of knowing the capitals of countries and states, but the science of geography is much more than that. It is, among other things, about correlating human activities and place. Now that institutions of higher education are scrambling to ensure that they have the enrollment they need in order to be financially sound, the location of colleges and universities has itself become far more important than ever before.

In a study published recently by the American Council on Education and the Center for Policy Research and Strategy titled "Education Deserts: The Continued Significance of 'Place' in the Twenty-First Century," its authors, Nicholas Hillman and Taylor Weichman of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, provide us with new and very revealing data about the importance of geography in higher education.

To begin with we need to understand that the choice of college is largely driven by four factors: cost, academic offerings, job preparation and location. One of the major findings by these researchers was that despite allegations that there are too many institutions of higher education in this country, the fact of the matter is that there are many of what they call "educational deserts," that is, geographic areas where college opportunities are quite few and far between. Essentially these are locations where the only higher education institution within a 50-mile radius is a community college – if even that.

This is particularly relevant to public institutions. Despite the fact that there are private institutions in rural areas, they are not only small in size but also

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tend to be more selective when screening student applications. They also tend to serve many students from far outside their geographic area.

Based on their definition of an "educational desert" in relation to the population by county, the report identified that the two biggest "deserts" are located in the Lexington-Lafayette (Kentucky) and Columbia (South Carolina) areas. Although this may be surprising given that both of these communities have large flagship public universities – the University of Kentucky and the University of South Carolina, respectively – these are institutions that are moderately selective and do not serve their communities as a whole.

But this dearth of educational opportunities goes far beyond those two areas. The researchers calculated that these educational "deserts" are home to about 25.3 million adults, roughly 12 percent of the total adult population in the United States. This lack of educational opportunities particularly affects minorities, including Native Americans, African Americans and Latinos. Furthermore, the graduation rate for those residents that still manage to go to college is well below the national average.

These geographical disparities can only serve to increase socio-economic inequalities among Americans. Many of the residents in these educational "deserts" work full-time or have to care of

dependents, meaning that they lack the mobility they need to seek educational opportunities elsewhere.

Some may think that in this internet age that these issues are irrelevant, but they would be wrong for numerous reasons. To begin with many people who live in rural areas do not have the means to buy a computer or have access to broadband internet. Also, as we have explained in past editions of this column, distance education is not very effective for students who work and/or for first-generation college students (many of whom are minorities). In fact, only about 10 percent of undergraduate students enroll exclusively online and the quality of education they receive is generally poorer than that delivered directly in a classroom, a lab, or a studio.

There are also other reasons why distance matters. For example, about 57 percent of incoming freshmen attending public four-year colleges enroll within 50 miles of their permanent home. The farther a student lives from a college or university, the less likely she or he is to enroll. Despite the fact that a lot of public colleges tout their affordability in an attempt to increase enrollment, a number of studies have shown that many students are more responsive to distance than to price.

We must realize that the location of a public higher education institution serves to encourage applications by locals because they represent a financial advantage in terms of transportation costs, better partnerships with local high schools (the main feeders of students who are college-bound), as well as community ties. Because of family, work, and even cultural reasons, many college students want

to stay where they grew up. Some studies have shown that is particularly true for Latino, African American and Native American students.

As Ruth Lopez-Turley, professor of sociology at Rice University, has stated, we "should stop treating the college-choice process as though it were independent of location and start situating this process within the geographic context in which it occurs."

One of the reasons this country was able to become an economic and political power was because it was able to expand higher education opportunities throughout the land, first through the creation of land-grant institutions in rural areas, a movement that started during the Civil War, and later by expanding federal funding as a result of both successive GI bills and after the Sputnik "shock" of 1957. I am afraid that in the current climate of diminishing public funding for higher education, and the increase in disparaging comments about the value of higher education, there will be little political will to eliminate higher education "deserts" from our cultural geography.

If America is the land of opportunities, then we should make sure that opportunities for higher education are available to all, irrespective of where they live. Otherwise the current economic gap between the "haves" and the "have not's" will continue to grow.

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