This study examines the student characteristics and environmental factors related to a community college student's decision to enroll either in-district or out-of-district. Student characteristics included: race, gender, high school class rank, college readiness, and family income. Environmental factors included: number of siblings, region, and the distance between a student's home area and the in-district community college. Results indicate that academic characteristics played a major role in this decision, as college ready students were significantly more likely to enroll in-district relative to their less ready peers. Results also indicate that as the distance between a student's home area and the in-district community college increases, students were less likely to enroll in-district. With regards to policy implications, these results may signify that community colleges need to consider operating satellite campuses, in order to better serve its in-district students, or work collaboratively with near-by out-of-district community colleges in order to meet the needs of students.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study seeks to establish why community college students decide to enroll in-district. Multiple studies have shown that select student characteristics related to demographics and academic preparation (i.e., age, gender, race, high school GPA, high school rank, etc.) impact college enrollment decisions (Rouse, 1995; Chapman, 1981; Long, 2004). Moreover, certain environmental factors (i.e., parents' income, friends' influences, family size, and distance between high school and post-secondary institution) have also been shown to influence college enrollment decisions (Rouse, 1995; Townsend, 2007; Chapman, 1981; Long, 2004). Therefore, both student characteristics as well as environmental factors have varying effects upon enrollment decisions for college-going students. The literature is deficient in analyses of school choice for community college students, particularly as it relates to enrolling in-district. Multiple studies have shown that select factors (i.e., parents' income, friends' influences, family size, and distance between high school and post-secondary institution) have also been shown to influence college enrollment decisions (Rouse, 1995; Townsend, 2007; Chapman, 1981; Long, 2004). Therefore, both student characteristics as well as environmental factors have varying effects upon enrollment decisions for college-going students. The literature is deficient in analyses of school choice for community college students, particularly as it relates to enrolling in-district. This study may be one of the first to consider operating satellite campuses, in order to better serve its in-district students, or work collaboratively with near-by out-of-district community colleges in order to meet the needs of students.

**RESULTS**

The data include all Illinois public high schools from the Graduation Class of 2003 (N=115,677). The data were obtained through an agreement between the Illinois Education Research Council and the Illinois Board of Higher Education and ACT. From the graduating class, only students who enrolled in a community college post-graduation were selected into the sample (n=28,513). Of these students, fewer than 5,000 students enrolled out-of-district.

The student characteristic variables were gleaned from the Student Interest Profiler of the ACT. Every Illinois junior is required to take the Prairie State Achievement Exam, of which the ACT is a component. Students who attended private high schools were not included in the analysis. College readiness is the interaction between a student’s reported high school GPA and his or her composite ACT score.

**FRAMWORK**

Figure 1 illustrates the foundation for this report. It indicates how student characteristics and environmental factors can impact a student’s decision to initially enroll in a community college. From there, it demonstrates the probability of either enrolling in-district or out-of-district.

**METHODS**

The data include all Illinois public high schools from the Graduation Class of 2003 (N=115,677). The data were obtained through an agreement between the Illinois Education Research Council and the Illinois Board of Higher Education and ACT. From the graduating class, only students who enrolled in a community college post-graduation were selected into the sample (n=28,513). Of these students, fewer than 5,000 students enrolled out-of-district.

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In order to calculate the distance between the student’s high school and in-district community college, the latitude and longitude coordinates of the high school were compared to the same coordinates of the in-district community college. Students predominately enrolled in community colleges in Illinois. However, numerous students enrolled in community colleges along the border between Illinois and Iowa, Missouri, and Kentucky. Some of the community colleges outside Illinois represent post-secondary institutions that were in closer proximity than community colleges in Illinois. Note that community college students from Chicago high schools who enrolled in any of the City Colleges of Chicago were considered to have enrolled in-district. A logit model was used in order to estimate the coefficients of the variables with SPSS.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Even though 83% of the sample enrolled in-district, understanding factors related to in-district enrollment, as opposed to out-of-district enrollment, could have important practical implications. Student's decision to not enroll at their in-district community college could reveal deficiencies in the program offerings, academic, or services that are provided locally. In contrast, students might have chosen to enroll out-of-district based upon certain external influences (suggestions from friends, or the proximity to the community college). Whatever the reason, an analysis of enrollment trends is necessary in order to help better serve Illinois community college students.

Based on the results, the greater the distance between a student’s high school and his or her in-district community college, the less likely it was that s/he enrolled in-district. While this outcome makes sense from a convenience point of view, more analysis is needed to determine why students would elect to enroll out-of-district when tuition rates are generally higher for out-of-district students. In this decision indicative of rational choice, or does it illustrate that other factors weigh more heavily in students' college enrollment plans?

In future research to focus upon the impact of institutional characteristics of the community college, such as services provided, programmatic offerings, availability of bachelor’s programs, and tuition. For example, Townsend (2007) argues that both honors programs and baccalaureate programs have been on the rise in recent years at community colleges. Do such programmatic offerings influence some students to not enroll locally?

In terms of policy, these results suggest that community colleges might need to explore operating additional satellite campuses or work in conjunction so that students have more options.

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Race and gender were also important factors in this decision, as African American students and male students were significantly less likely to enroll in-district. Also, a student’s college readiness level appeared to be an important factor in this decision – the less college ready the student, the less likely he or she was to have enrolled in-district. What are the implications of this result – did less prepared students feel that they would benefit more from an out-of-district community college? With regards to improvements of the model, it would be advisable for future research to focus upon the impact of institutional characteristics of the community college, such as services provided, programmatic offerings, availability of bachelor’s programs, and tuition. For example, Townsend (2007) argues that both honors programs and baccalaureate programs have been on the rise in recent years at community colleges. Do such programmatic offerings influence some students to not enroll locally?

In terms of policy, these results suggest that community colleges might need to explore operating additional satellite campuses or work in conjunction so that students have more options.

REFERENCES


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