



# District Boundaries Affect Racial Representation at Michigan Community Colleges

By Bradley D. Custer | October 15, 2020

It has long been recognized that Black and Latinx students are underrepresented at America's top public universities and thus deprived of access to the institutions with the best graduation rates and career outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Much less understood is whether these students at least have equitable access to their local community colleges, which are supposed to be where all students can access affordable higher education.

This is partly because measuring racial representation at community colleges is technically more challenging. In many states, community colleges are intended to serve a specific district that may not reflect a neat radius surrounding their campuses, and there is no data source that makes these attendance zone boundaries readily available for all states. However, the Center for American Progress was able to analyze the general population demographics of community college districts in Michigan, which yielded more precise estimates of student representation. The results have implications for equity in higher education as well as for future analyses of community college access.

Findings from Michigan show that white students are underrepresented at all of the state's 28 community colleges, meaning the proportion of white students at a college is smaller than the proportion of white adults in the college district's general population. Even more striking is the large overrepresentation of Black students at several Detroit-area colleges, including an 18 percentage-point overrepresentation at Henry Ford College and a 17 percentage-point overrepresentation at Wayne County Community College.

Disparities in representation should raise red flags. Overrepresentation of Black students and the corresponding underrepresentation of white students are problems if colleges are not receiving enough resources to achieve desired outcomes. This is both because Black students often need additional support to complete college successfully<sup>2</sup> and because institutions that serve larger numbers of Black students or students of color generally receive less public funding<sup>3</sup>—trends that appear to be true in Michigan. Henry Ford College, which has the highest overrepresentation of Black students among Michigan community colleges, receives the third-lowest total revenue per full-time

equivalent (FTE) student in the state, according to a separate CAP study.<sup>4</sup> These issues could require remedying through policy and program changes, which is why accurate measures of racial representation at community colleges are critical.

Many factors might explain the nuances of any one college's enrollment demographics, and different methodologies may contribute to the appearance of overrepresentation or underrepresentation. This issue brief highlights the case of Henry Ford College to demonstrate the uniqueness of community colleges' local characteristics and the sensitivity of measures of representation to the way that attendance zones are analyzed. It should serve as a guidepost for future researchers and policymakers to better judge whether community colleges are truly representative of their communities.

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## Michigan's community college districts

Michigan organizes its 28 community colleges into districts, giving each college a geographic area it is expected to serve.<sup>5</sup> Much like school districts, each community college district has boundaries; people living within the district boundaries pay taxes to the college, elect the college's board of trustees, and receive the lowest in-district tuition rate. The average in-district tuition price in the 2019-20 academic year was \$117 per credit hour, compared with \$195 for out-of-district students—a surcharge of \$78.<sup>6</sup> Out-of-state and international students pay even more. Though students can enroll anywhere, the cheaper in-district tuition rates encourage students to attend their home district's college. For these reasons, a district can be understood as a community college's attendance zone.

Each of Michigan's community college districts has long-established geographical boundaries that contain either a whole county, one or more school districts, municipalities, or some combination of those entities. For example, just south of Detroit is the Monroe County Community College district, which comprises all of Monroe County, whereas the Lansing Community College district comprises the geographical areas of 15 school districts in south-central Michigan.<sup>7</sup> Others are more complicated. Lake Michigan College, in the southwest corner of the state, includes all of Berrien County plus the South Haven Public School District and Covert Township in Van Buren County.<sup>8</sup>

But not every Michigan resident lives in a community college district, including an estimated 23 percent of graduating high schoolers.<sup>9</sup> A state district map shows large rural areas of Michigan not covered by a district, including most of the Upper Peninsula, the Thumb, and areas throughout the Lower Peninsula.<sup>10</sup> Students living in these regions would have to pay out-of-district tuition rates at any Michigan community college.

The community college districting system provides a unique opportunity for higher education researchers. As described in the next section, using a district's boundaries as the college's attendance zone solves an important problem in measuring representativeness and allows more accurate estimates of racial representation at Michigan community colleges.

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## Method

A common approach to measuring representation involves comparing student enrollment data with general population data, both broken down by race. In studies of public universities, analysts use widely available state population data for comparison with student data. But this is more technically challenging for community colleges. Community colleges serve smaller geographical areas, so the state population is not suitable for comparison. Instead, analysts have used varying distance measures of a certain mile radius around a college's main campus to estimate the college's attendance zone, or the geographical area from where most of a college's students are expected to be drawn.<sup>11</sup> These distance measures, however, do not accurately reflect the real boundaries of the community that a college is intended to serve. Consider community colleges that serve a city's suburbs. The demographics of a suburb is likely distinct from the city, but using a certain mile radius for estimating the attendance zone of the suburban college will invariably pull in the population of the city, skewing results. For example, in Cook County, Illinois, five suburban community college districts border the city of Chicago. An attendance zone that is too large—even by 10 miles or 15 miles—will easily conflate the population of the city with that of the suburban municipalities.

To get around these hurdles, this issue brief exploits the rarely used district geography to define a community college's primary attendance zone. By comparing a college's enrollment with the general population of the people living within the college's district, this brief offers a new estimation of racial representativeness.

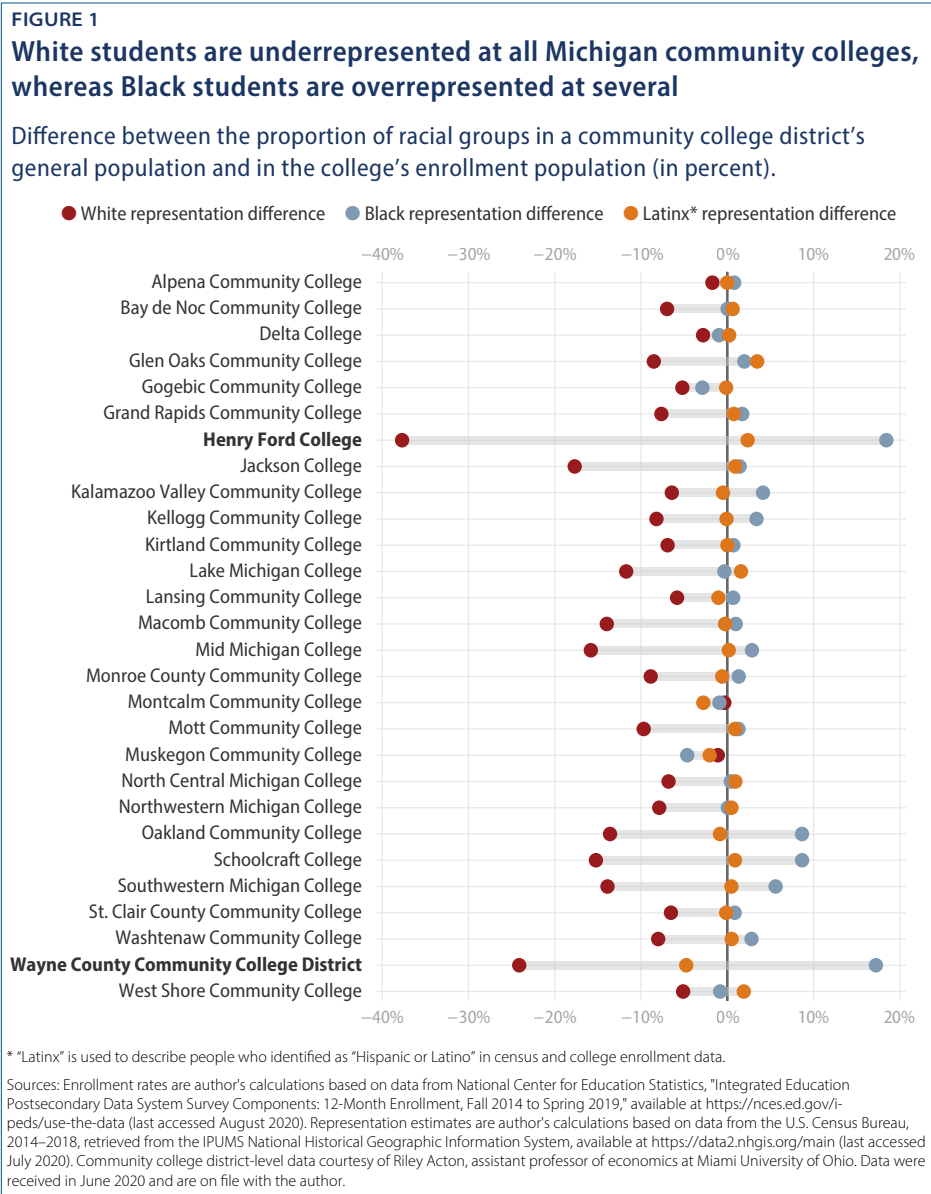
Unlike school districts, community college districts are not geographical entities available in census datasets. District-level datasets must first be constructed. For an unrelated study, a researcher built such a dataset for Michigan and shared it with CAP for this brief.<sup>12</sup> The dataset contains every census block in Michigan assigned to its community college district. Census blocks are the smallest unit of geography used to tabulate data from the census. The author of this brief aggregated the block-level district assignments up to the block group level, such that each block group in Michigan was assigned to its community college district. Block groups are combinations of blocks, containing 600 to 3,000 people, and are the smallest unit for which the U.S. Census Bureau provides sample data from the American Community Survey—the source of annual population estimates. The author then added block group census population estimates for adults ages 18 and older from the 2014–2018 American Community Survey, broken down by race and ethnicity. Finally, summing the population values of the block groups assigned to each district yielded general adult population estimates for the geographical areas within the community college districts. This formed the comparison population for the college student data.

Unduplicated 12-month undergraduate enrollment data for Michigan's 28 public community colleges by race and ethnicity came from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. The five academic years of enrollment data—2014-15 to

2018-19—were aggregated to align with roughly the same years captured by the 2014–2018 American Community Survey. As such, year-to-year changes in racial demographics during this time are masked.

Descriptive statistics reveal the proportion of each college’s white, Black, and Latinx students compared with the proportion of white, Black, and Latinx adults living in the college’s district.<sup>13</sup> The difference between the two proportions is the percentage overrepresentation or underrepresentation in the college’s student population.

## Representation at Michigan community colleges



Click [here](#) to download a spreadsheet that contains representation data for all racial groups.

Figure 1 displays descriptive statistics for each Michigan community college. White students are underrepresented across the state. The most extreme example is Henry Ford College, where white students make up 50 percent of the enrollment population—37 percentage points less than the district’s general population. At Wayne County Community College, the difference in white representation is 24 percentage points. These findings are consistent with national trends showing underrepresentation of white students at community colleges.<sup>14</sup>

At most Michigan community colleges, the proportion of Black and Latinx students closely resembles the proportion of Black and Latinx adults in the district general population, with only a couple instances of slight underrepresentation. Black students, however, are overrepresented at some of Michigan’s largest community colleges. In the Detroit metropolitan area, Wayne County Community College, Henry Ford College, Oakland Community College, and Schoolcraft College all have enrollment populations with a higher proportion of Black people than their districts, ranging from 9 percentage points to 18 percentage points. These four colleges enrolled 37 percent of all Black students at Michigan’s public four-year and two-year colleges in 2018-19.<sup>15</sup> In the southwestern corner of the state, Black students are overrepresented to a smaller degree, between 3 percentage points and 6 percentage points, at Kellogg Community College, Kalamazoo Community College, and Southwestern Michigan College.

Henry Ford College deserves a closer look. The unique characteristics of its district and student body provide a cautionary tale for analysts studying the racial representativeness of community colleges.

### Henry Ford College

Henry Ford College was founded in 1938 by the board of what is now the Dearborn Public Schools to offer continuing education to the district’s students.<sup>16</sup> As a result of this history, it is one of only two community colleges in Michigan today whose district serves only the area of one school district. The district includes the city of Dearborn and part of Dearborn Heights, an area of only 26.62 square miles.<sup>17</sup>

Though the Henry Ford College district borders Detroit, sitting about 10 miles from the city’s downtown area in the same county, the two areas’ populations are quite different. Census snapshot data from 2019 show that Detroit residents were about 10 percent white, 78 percent Black, and 8 percent Latinx.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, in the Henry Ford College district, according to this analysis, about 87 percent of the population was white, 4 percent was Black, and 3 percent was Latinx. Driving the district’s outsize white population is the fact that Dearborn has the highest proportion of Arab and Arab American people of any U.S. city, making up about one-third of the city’s residents.<sup>19</sup>

One might expect Henry Ford College’s students to resemble the residents of Dearborn and Dearborn Heights. Instead, this analysis finds surprising results. In the five years examined in this brief, Henry Ford College’s students tend to be about 50 percent white

and 23 percent Black. That puts white students at 37 percentage points under the proportion of white residents in the district and Black students at 18 percentage points over the proportion of Black residents in the district.

Henry Ford's student body does not look like its underlying community because it draws 59 percent of its students from outside its district. Most come from Detroit and other cities that belong to the Wayne County Community College District, where about 50 percent of the residents are Black.<sup>20</sup> This situation is unique. All but seven of Michigan's 28 community colleges draw more than half of their FTE students from within their district.<sup>21</sup>

While the case of Henry Ford College is unusual, it shows how sensitive measures of representativeness are to the way the attendance zones are drawn. Comparing these findings to an alternate approach demonstrates this point. A recent analysis by the Urban Institute used a 15-mile radius as the attendance zone for Henry Ford College, which reached far beyond its district borders. It captured both the parts of Wayne County where many Henry Ford College students live as well as most of Wayne County Community College District and communities that belong to Oakland Community College and Schoolcraft College. As a result, the Urban Institute got different racial representation estimates, with Black overrepresentation at just 2 percent and white underrepresentation at 14 percent in 2017.<sup>22</sup> This estimation using a wider attendance zone captures more of the communities where Henry Ford's out-of-district Black students come from, which reduces Black overrepresentation and white underrepresentation. The trade-off is that the radius is too big to represent the area that the college is realistically intended to serve, which skews the representation measures.

The CAP analysis using the district boundaries makes for much smaller attendance zones. This method measures racial representativeness more precisely, because community colleges in Michigan are designed to serve the residents of their districts.

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## Crossing district lines is costly for students

Beyond the methodological challenges of measuring racial representativeness, findings from this analysis raise questions about the Michigan community college district system and how it affects Black students.

The Henry Ford College example shows that students do not always attend the community college in the district where they live. To a student just across the Henry Ford College district boundary in the cities of Detroit or Taylor, perhaps it is simply closer to attend Henry Ford's Dearborn campus than to attend one of the six campuses of the Wayne County Community College District. Or perhaps Henry Ford has a stronger reputation than Wayne County, or it offers programs that the other does not.<sup>23</sup>

No matter the reason, these out-of-district students are penalized for their choice of college. Students living in Detroit and its suburbs would pay \$109.10 per credit at Wayne County Community College.<sup>24</sup> When these disproportionately Black students enroll at nearby Henry Ford College, they pay the out-of-district price of \$177 per credit for 100- and 200-level courses—a surcharge of almost \$68 per credit, or more than \$2,000 for a full-time course load.<sup>25</sup> But the price differential is not reciprocal. A Dearborn resident—much more likely to be white—who attends Wayne County Community College only pays an out-of-district price of \$118.30 per credit, just \$16.80 more than the in-district price at Henry Ford College. (see Table 1)

**TABLE 1**  
**Out-of-district students pay much higher tuition prices at Henry Ford College than at Wayne County Community College District**

2019-20 tuition prices per credit hour

College	In-district tuition	Out-of-district tuition	Total annual in-district tuition and fees*	Total annual out-of-district tuition and fees*
Henry Ford College	\$101.50	\$177.00	\$3,955.00	\$6,220.00
Wayne County Community College	\$109.10	\$118.30	\$3,778.00	\$4,054.00

\* For 30 credits

Source: Michigan House Fiscal Agency, "Michigan Community Colleges FY 2019-20 Tuition and Fee Rates" (Lansing, MI: 2019), available at [https://www.house.mi.gov/HFA/PDF/CommunityColleges/CC\\_Data\\_ML\\_Community\\_Colleges\\_Tuition\\_and\\_Fees\\_Rates\\_fy19-20.pdf](https://www.house.mi.gov/HFA/PDF/CommunityColleges/CC_Data_ML_Community_Colleges_Tuition_and_Fees_Rates_fy19-20.pdf).

This has serious equity implications. Whether a function of geography or other factors, the fact remains that the district pricing scheme forces students—especially Black students—to pay higher prices to attend a community college in the same state. In this case, students from relatively poorer cities are charged more to attend a public college than students from higher-income communities.<sup>26</sup>

The local funding system creates this dilemma. Residents of a district pay taxes to support the college, so residents get discounted tuition rates. Nonresidents who do not pay taxes to support the college must be charged more. Because of its small district size and lower taxable value, Henry Ford College has the third-lowest local appropriations revenue per FTE student among Michigan community colleges, at \$1,251. In contrast, the much larger Wayne County Community College, with its higher taxable value, has the third-highest local appropriations revenue per FTE student, at \$7,659.

That difference in local funding contributes to major gaps in the amount of money available to educate students. Henry Ford College's total revenue per FTE student is \$9,057. That's the third-lowest in the state and more than \$6,500 less than the revenue per FTE student at Wayne County Community College. (see Table 2)

**TABLE 2**  
**Henry Ford College receives much less local revenue than most other Michigan community colleges**

2016-17 revenue by source for Michigan community colleges

Michigan community colleges	Tuition revenue per FTE*	State appropriations per FTE	Local appropriations per FTE	Total revenue per FTE
Alpena Community College	\$4,631	\$4,261	\$1,809	\$10,701
Bay de Noc Community College	\$5,918	\$4,888	\$3,514	\$14,320
Delta College	\$5,281	\$2,963	\$3,102	\$11,347
Glen Oaks Community College	\$4,506	\$4,300	\$6,436	\$15,242
Gogebic Community College	\$4,804	\$4,992	\$1,556	\$11,351
Grand Rapids Community College	\$5,287	\$2,456	\$3,482	\$11,225
<b>Henry Ford College</b>	<b>\$4,986</b>	<b>\$2,821</b>	<b>\$1,251</b>	<b>\$9,057</b>
Jackson College	\$5,792	\$2,930	\$1,102	\$9,824
Kalamazoo Valley Community College	\$4,474	\$2,534	\$3,351	\$10,359
Kellogg Community College	\$6,860	\$4,906	\$4,258	\$16,023
Kirtland Community College	\$6,000	\$3,298	\$6,759	\$16,057
Lake Michigan College	\$4,636	\$2,172	\$6,258	\$13,066
Lansing Community College	\$4,340	\$2,987	\$3,579	\$10,906
Macomb Community College	\$4,277	\$2,209	\$2,213	\$8,699
Mid Michigan College	\$6,178	\$2,009	\$741	\$8,927
Monroe County Community College	\$4,860	\$3,025	\$7,811	\$15,695
Montcalm Community College	\$6,054	\$3,279	\$5,614	\$14,947
Mott Community College	\$6,610	\$3,641	\$4,684	\$14,936
Muskegon Community College	\$5,688	\$3,185	\$3,004	\$11,877
North Central Michigan College	\$4,063	\$2,040	\$3,733	\$9,836
Northwestern Michigan College	\$9,443	\$4,307	\$4,951	\$18,701
Oakland Community College	\$3,478	\$2,067	\$5,395	\$10,940
Schoolcraft College	\$4,951	\$1,979	\$2,525	\$9,454
Southwestern Michigan College	\$5,598	\$4,010	\$2,944	\$12,552
St. Clair County Community College	\$5,316	\$2,863	\$3,592	\$11,771
Washtenaw Community College	\$3,837	\$1,805	\$4,782	\$10,424
<b>Wayne County Community College District</b>	<b>\$5,437</b>	<b>\$2,555</b>	<b>\$7,659</b>	<b>\$15,651</b>
West Shore Community College	\$4,305	\$3,591	\$10,510	\$18,405

\* Includes tuition and fees, Pell Grants, and state and local scholarships for full-time equivalent (FTE) students

Sources: Center for American Progress calculations based on data from National Center for Education Statistics, "Integrated Education Postsecondary Data System Survey Components: Finance," available at <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data> (last accessed August 2020). See Victoria Yuen, "The \$78 Billion Community College Funding Shortfall" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/reports/2020/10/07/491242/78-billion-community-college-funding-shortfall/>.

These results suggest the need for policy changes that better consider geography, variable pricing, and equity.



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## Addressing inequities in Michigan's districts

First, the community college district system in Michigan needs to be reevaluated. The district lines were established around midcentury and have not been changed substantially since. Those boundary lines are rooted in local historical contexts that often do not serve today's residents. Because of historical segregation, the districts may reinforce inequitable local funding, resulting in better-supported and undersupported community colleges. Furthermore, many areas of Michigan are not covered by districts, forcing residents to pay out-of-district prices at all community colleges. A redraw of district boundaries that incorporates all land in the state and that rectifies historical segregation would improve the system for students.

Second, even with the current district system intact, the best option for students is for Michigan community colleges to eliminate the out-of-district penalty. Other states show how this is possible. Neighboring Wisconsin has a technical college district system that covers every resident of the state. Though tuition prices vary among colleges, there is only one price for all Wisconsin residents at every college, no matter the student's home address.<sup>27</sup>

A third option is one that some Michigan community colleges already offer: extend discounted tuition rates to residents of communities outside the district, called service areas. Such rates fall between the in-district and out-of-district rates. Bay de Noc Community College, which serves Delta County in the Upper Peninsula, extends its service area to Dickinson County, which otherwise belongs to no community college district.<sup>28</sup> Glen Oaks Community College, which serves St. Joseph County in southwest Michigan, extends its service area to adjacent counties and cities in Michigan and even four counties in the bordering state of Indiana.<sup>29</sup> In applying this approach, Henry Ford College might offer discounted service area tuition prices to the one-fifth of its FTE students who come from Detroit, Taylor, and Lincoln Park.

Any of the policy solutions outlined above could be stymied by the local funding system for community colleges in Michigan. Because the districts were not created equally, they have varying property tax values that affect local appropriations for the colleges. In order to reduce or eliminate out-of-district surcharge prices, additional state funding is needed to equalize differences among the districts.

Fortunately, Michigan lawmakers have long understood this reality. An equalization mechanism previously existed in the state funding formula used from 1984 to 2002. Colleges with smaller tax bases and levies compared with other colleges were awarded additional funding.<sup>30</sup> While that formula and its equalizing component was discontinued for nearly two decades, a form of it was added into the state's new performance funding formula in the 2019-20 academic year.<sup>31</sup> This allocates 5 percent of the money set aside in the performance-based funding formula for college districts with the lowest taxable values.<sup>32</sup> However, this resulted in only about \$122,000 divided among just six colleges, which is not enough to truly equalize funding inequities across the state.

And since Henry Ford College was not one of those six colleges, this method does not solve the problems identified in this issue brief.

Michigan needs a better strategy to balance the local funding differences among its districts. States such as Illinois—with its equalization grants and small college grants applied on top of base operating grants—may provide a better model for boosting funding at geographically small college districts.<sup>33</sup>

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## Conclusion

Public community colleges are supposed to be America’s open-door higher education institutions, but racial inequities and other barriers remain. Using community college district geography as a new approach to studying racial representativeness has offered several new insights. While this study focused on Michigan, at least 200 community colleges across 17 states charge tuition based on district residency.<sup>34</sup> Analyzing these areas would not be easy—district-level data and high-quality district maps often do not exist—but future analyses of racial representativeness must thoughtfully use attendance zones that take into consideration existing district boundaries and the neighboring communities in which students are known to reside. Using too big or too small an attendance zone will skew representation estimates.

For policymakers, this analysis lays bare the reality that some community colleges that educate an outsize share of Black students need more funding. Infusing these colleges with additional state aid can help to ensure students have sufficient support services and will allow colleges to stop surcharging out-of-district students. The Michigan district system, with its gaps in service areas and wide-ranging tuition prices, needs improvements to ensure that all the state’s students can access affordable community colleges.

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*The author thanks Dr. Riley Acton for sharing insights and data from her dissertation research.*

## Endnotes

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- 9 Riley Acton, "Effects of Reduced Community College Tuition on College Choices and Degree Completion," *Education Finance and Policy* (2020), available at [https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/edfp\\_a\\_00313](https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/edfp_a_00313).
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