

Regional public universities increase access, social mobility for nearby residents

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By broadening access to higher education in their local geographic area, regional public universities increase the economic and social mobility of the residents in their counties, says new research co-written by a team of

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign economists.

As the backbone of the U.S. [higher education system](#), regional public universities enroll roughly 40% of all undergraduate degree-seeking students, many from disproportionately lower-income families compared with other four-year public universities. Regional public universities not only increase college attainment among people growing up in the county, they also increase high school graduation rates and other metrics of economic and social well-being such as employment, [household income](#), marriage and geographic mobility, said Russell Weinstein, a professor of labor and employment relations and of economics at Illinois.

"Regional public universities have positive effects on local economic and [social mobility](#)," Weinstein said. "For people who grow up around a regional public university, we found a host of positive knock-on effects, especially for [children](#) from lower-income families."

Weinstein's co-author is Greg Howard, a professor of economics at Illinois.

A central part of the mission of regional public universities has been to increase access to higher education by locating near potential students, being less selective and charging lower tuition—and they're more reliant on [state funding](#) and tuition than large land-grant universities and pricier private schools, Weinstein said.

"When legislators are thinking about allocating funding for regional public universities, it's important for them to know just how many benefits they provide to students in the surrounding community," he said.

To investigate whether regional public universities increase nearby children's educational attainment and [economic mobility](#), the researchers

compared the historical assignment of what were once called "normal schools"—that is, schools that were established by the [state government](#) to educate elementary school teachers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—to the placement of state-funded mental asylums as well as other data in order to pinpoint the effects of regional universities on the social mobility of nearby children.

Most normal schools eventually evolved into regional universities, the researchers said, while most state-funded mental asylums were converted into psychiatric hospitals or other rehabilitative facilities.

The researchers found that children from normal-school counties received more education and had better economic and social outcomes than children from counties that originally received state-funded mental asylums—and the effects were largest for children from lower-income families, according to the paper.

"For example, children whose parental income was at the 25th percentile—regional public universities raised the fraction of those children with a four-year college degree by more than 8%," Howard said. "In addition, regional public universities improved the fraction of children in the county who are employed in their mid-30s as well as their income percentiles, with effects concentrated among children from [lower-income families](#)."

The effects can be attributed to regional public universities' impact on individuals, rather than reflecting an influx of high-mobility individuals to the region, the researchers said.

"I think it's particularly interesting and relevant, given that these regional public universities were established in the mid-20th century for the purpose of improving the educational outcomes of people in their local areas," Weinstein said. "All these years later they're having this effect,

which is important for evaluating the impacts of these types of universities as well as thinking about the downstream effects that they have on their communities."

The study also helps quantify the benefit of public funding for regional universities and [higher education](#) in general, and points to the continued role of "geographic frictions" in college attendance and economic mobility, Weinstein said.

"We're identifying an effect on people who grew up in these counties relative to people who grew up in the same state but weren't near a regional public university," he said. "One of the policy questions raised by this research is whether students outside of the immediate geographic boundaries of the regional [public universities](#) would benefit from more outreach."

A working paper of this research was released by the IZA Institute of Labor Economics.

More information: Greg Howard et al, "Workhorses of Opportunity": Regional Universities Increase Local Social Mobility, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.4244417](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4244417)

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