

Issue Brief № 57

Educational Attainment, Community College, and Transfer in the Black Belt

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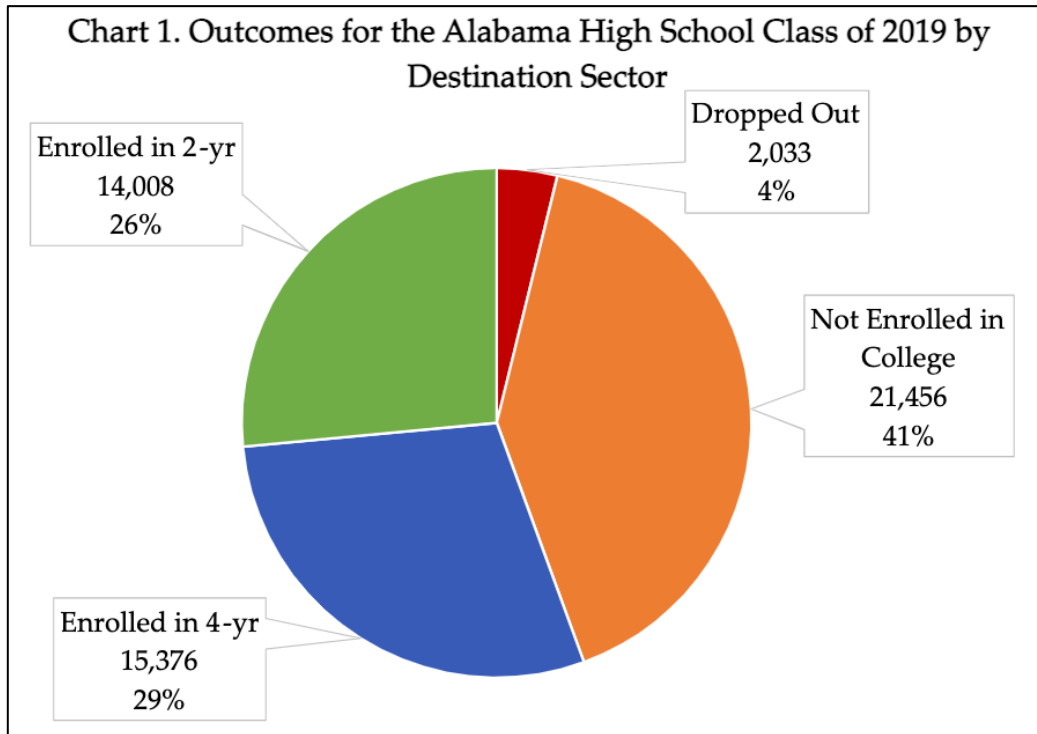
“Alabama business leaders have voted education and workforce training as the state’s primary issues for the last five years... [In the 2020 survey...] panelists provided specific comments, which included concerns about the lack of funding for education, the shortage of qualified workers, and a desire for more short-term training opportunities for all fields.” —Center for Business and Economic Research, The University of Alabama, April 2021¹

Home to 14 community college campuses (5 main and 9 satellite campuses) and 4 public four-year institutions, the Black Belt has the foundation to make great strides in postsecondary education in the coming decade if properly paired with further investment in students and institutions. In this brief we discuss educational attainment in the Black Belt, the role of community colleges and transfer, as well as policy recommendations to improve postsecondary outcomes in the Black Belt. We begin by noting national experts including the National Student Clearinghouse document the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has had on U.S. higher educational enrollments, excepting community colleges.²

High School Outcomes

Chart 1 shows that among Alabama’s high school class of 2019—the last year prior to COVID—four percent of students dropped out and 41 percent did not go on to enroll in college.³ Of the 55% of the 2019 cohort that did enroll in a postsecondary institution, roughly half enrolled at a community

college, and the other half at four-year colleges and universities. Alabama is a long way from achieving outcomes to show community colleges are the default from high school.



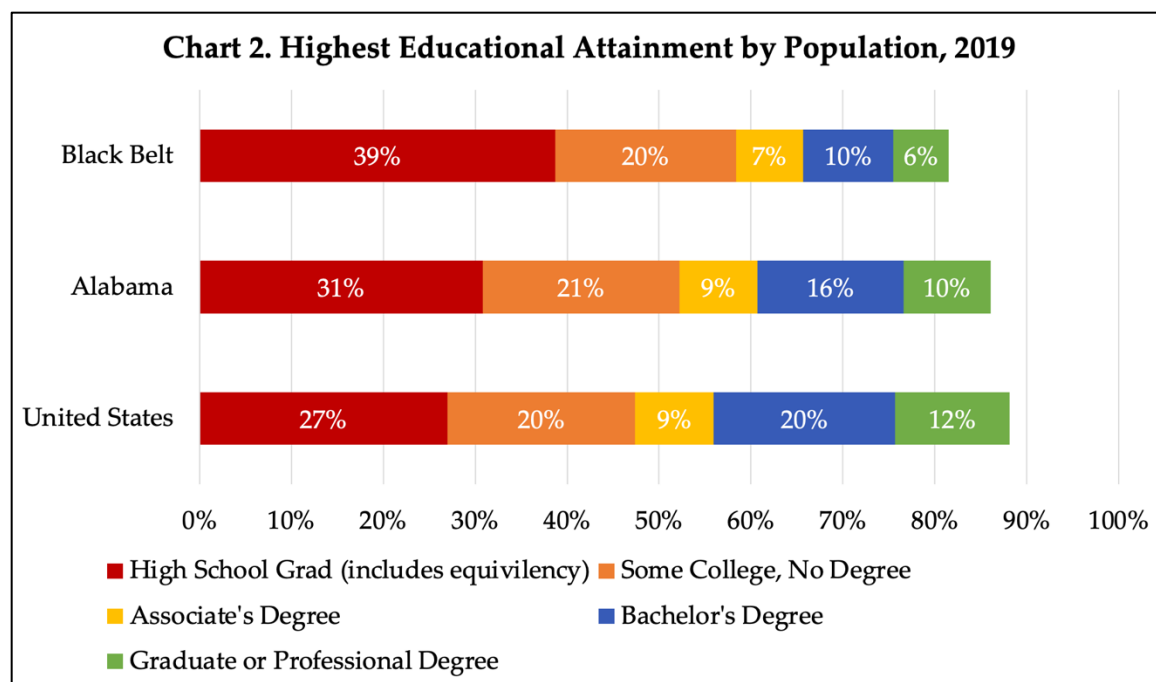
Universal postsecondary access is not as attainable as it should be for large numbers of Alabama youth, and COVID has made the situation worse. “Stop-outs”—students who graduate high school but do not go on to postsecondary education—increased from 41% in the class of 2019 to 49% in Alabama’s class of 2020.⁴

In the first brief of this *Black Belt 2022* issue brief series, *COVID-19 and Alabama’s Black Belt*, we noted that the pandemic impacted all of rural Alabama, and the Black Belt even more so. These same trendlines are not surprisingly found in the data here. *Six of the ten Alabama counties with the highest stop out rates for the class of 2020 were in the Black Belt, where*

the average stop out rate across all 25 Black Belt counties is over 50%. As the COVID-19 pandemic drove education online, the number of students going on to a 2-year college in 2020 increased to 27% statewide. Not surprisingly, though, given the gaps in broadband access exposed by the pandemic (also documented in EPC's *Black Belt 2020* series), the Black Belt average was slightly lower.⁵ Meanwhile, only 3 of the top 10 counties with the highest community college-going rate were in the Black Belt. With the stop out and community college-year going rates rising statewide, the 4-year going rate decreased from 29% to 24% in 2020. The Black Belt average 4-year going rate was lower at 22%; just 2 of 10 counties with the highest 4-year going rate are in the Black Belt—Montgomery and Macon, both home to or nearby to several four-year colleges and universities. All of Alabama's metro counties were in the top 10 for 4-year going rate except for Mobile.

Educational Attainment on a State and National Scale

To address the 51% of students who pursued higher education in the class of 2020, we now compare the Black Belt to the state and nation. Chart 2 displays the highest level of educational attainment for persons over 25 in 2019.⁶ 20% of the population of the Black Belt attended but did not complete college, with just another 7.5% and 10% going on to attain their associate's and bachelor's degrees, respectively. While the Black Belt seems to be ahead of the curve by population with high school degrees, and keeps pace with population with some college and associate's degrees, the Black Belt falls behind once bachelor's degrees and higher are considered.

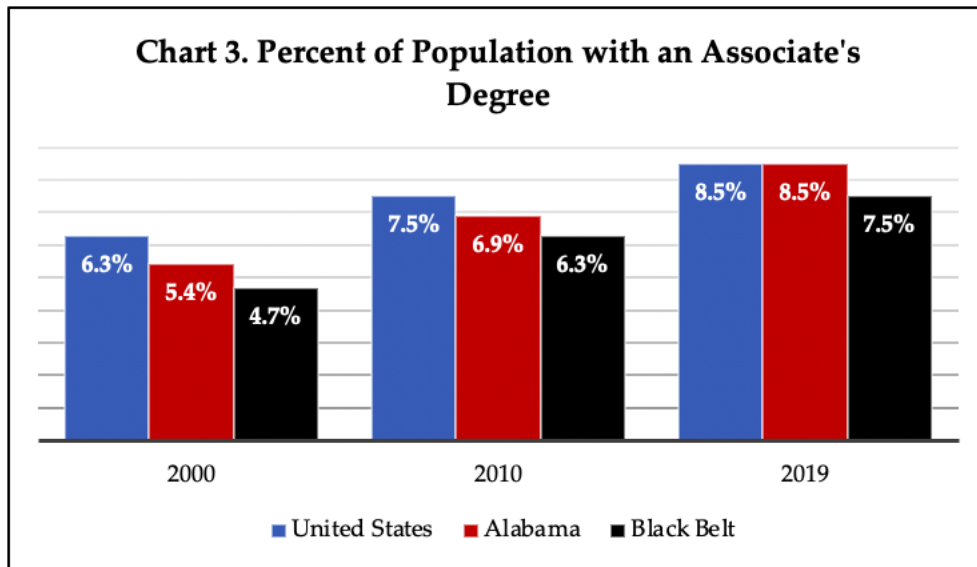


The Black Belt is still behind the state and nation in its share of adults over the age of 25 with some sort of educational attainment, beyond a high school diploma. Based on the data above, we see a total of 81% of the Black Belt adults over age 25 having attended and/or graduated from a secondary or postsecondary institution, leaving 19% of the Black Belt out of the postsecondary academic market as they did not obtain their high school diploma or equivalent or attempt higher education.

Associates Degree Attainment Over Time: The Black Belt is Catching Up

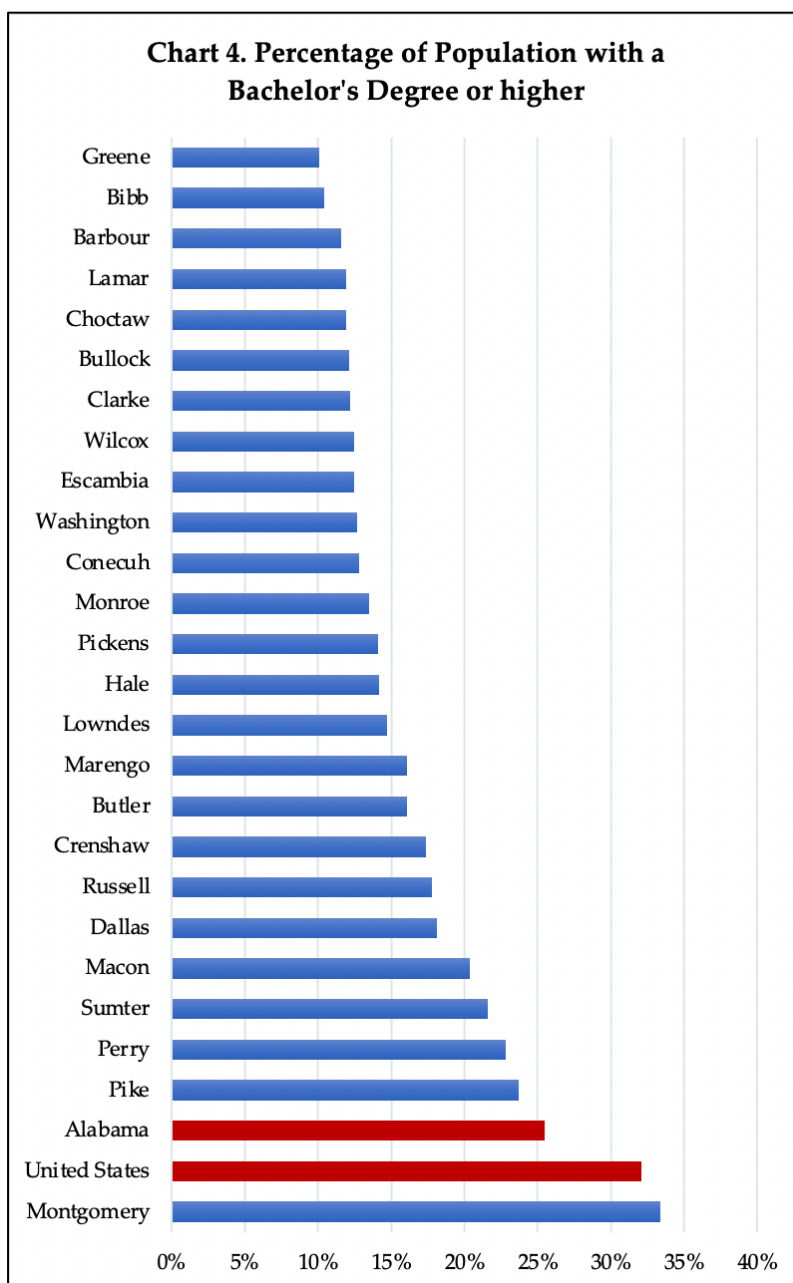
Chart 3 compares the percentage of the U.S., Alabama, and Black Belt population with an associate's degree over three decennial census periods going back to 2000.⁷ The Alabama statewide average, well behind the national average in 2000, had caught up to the nation by 2019, but the Black Belt average continued to lag. In fact, while both the Black Belt and statewide averages improved compared to the national averages, the gap

between the Black Belt and the Alabama statewide average widened, from .7 to 1.0, between 2000 and 2019.



The small percentage differences displayed in Chart 3 might be explained by prior EPC research in 2020 documenting the Black Belt's declining overall population and declining elementary and secondary school enrollments: in other words, even as both population and high school graduations decline, more pursue life-changing community college degrees. This is an important public policy subject that deserves further study.^{8,9}

That associate's degrees are steadily increasing in popularity in the Black Belt likely reflects the policy shift by the Alabama Community College System to create comprehensive community colleges in the 1990s, rather than single-purpose technical colleges that had limited (if any) general education transfer programs that led to associate's degrees. We applaud successive leaders of ACCS for their commitment to this policy shift.



Bachelor's Degrees in the Black Belt

Chart 4 shows the percentage of population with a bachelor's degree or higher for the 25 Black Belt counties, the Alabama statewide average, and the national average for 2019. The Black Belt average of 17% by itself is not explanatory, because Montgomery County is an outlier, exceeding the state and national rates for this level of educational attainment.¹⁰ Montgomery's higher than average bachelor's

degree attainment reflects its physical proximity to more four-year institutions, both in Montgomery County (Alabama State University, Troy University–Montgomery, Auburn University at Montgomery) and nearby Lee County (Auburn University). This also reflects Montgomery County's largest employer: state government. Roughly 25% of nonfarm employment in Montgomery is state or local government, compared to just 16% in Birmingham, and these jobs are more likely to require a bachelor's degree.¹¹

In contrast to Montgomery (which is in the eastern Black Belt), there are few four-year institutions that serve the western Black Belt—the University of West Alabama, which is deeply committed to serving the Black Belt, is the only public four-year college or university in a western Black Belt county. There are also fewer private four-year institutions in the western Black Belt, as several have closed in recent years, including Concordia College (an HBCU in Selma) and Judson College (in Marion). The lack of state-supported student aid could not have helped these institutions reach more high school students and adult learners in the sparsely populated western Black Belt. This limited the state’s ability to maximize progress made in the community college sector.

There are many geographic factors associated with rural persistent poverty areas that limit access to higher education.¹² In 2022, for Black Belt communities, often geographically isolated with limited financial resources, delivering on the promise of better education and economic opportunities for their young people and young adults are often out of reach. For nearly 75 years, there have been promises to extend state and federal roadways through the Black Belt with no action. In 2019, Governor Kay Ivey and the state legislature finally made good on those past promises to build a four-lane road through the Black Belt with the approval of the Rebuild Alabama Act of 2019, while congressional leaders continue to consider expanding Interstate-85. Reliable transportation and infrastructure (i.e., maintained roads in this instance) are some of the greatest geographic barriers preventing Black Belt residents from pursuing higher education. This is why the 2002 statement of Robert Pedersen—that

in rural America access to higher education in practice means access to a reliable used car—still rings true today.¹³

Community College Enrollment and Pell Grants

As in Chart 3 shows, there has been growing interest in community colleges in recent years because of their low cost and greater availability. However, in the Black Belt, community college enrollment appears to be lower due to the higher out-of-pocket expenses (especially child care and transportation) of living in sparsely populated area that spans over 20,000 square miles across 25 counties (larger than 9 U.S. states by area).¹⁴

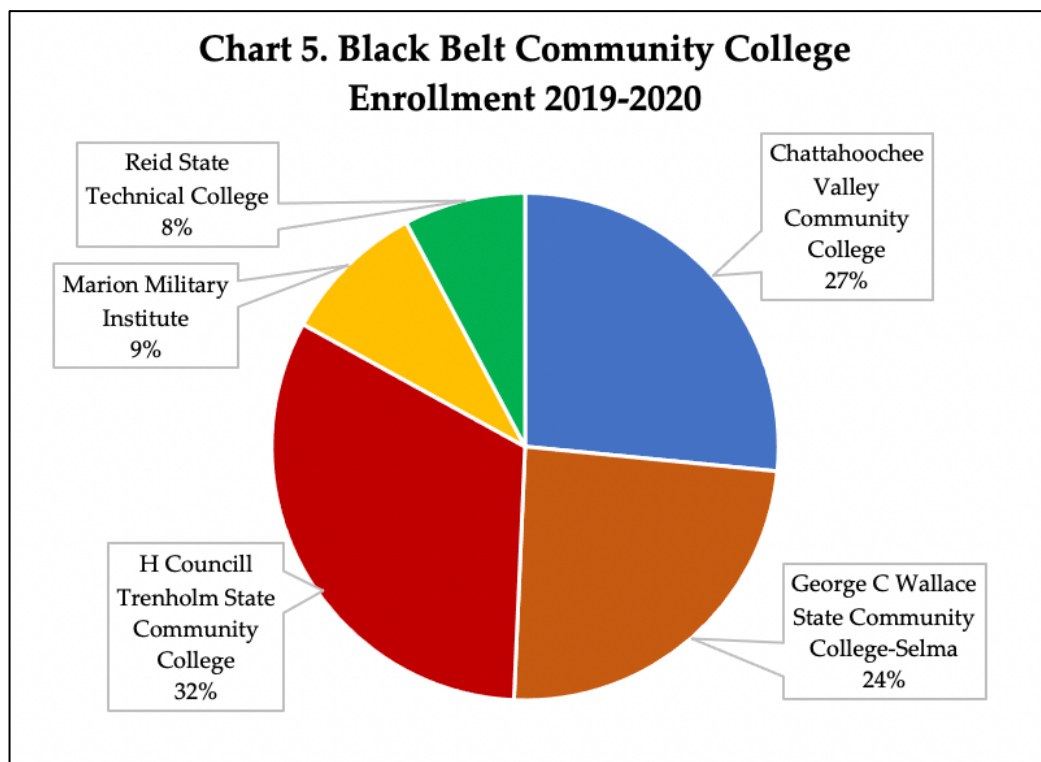
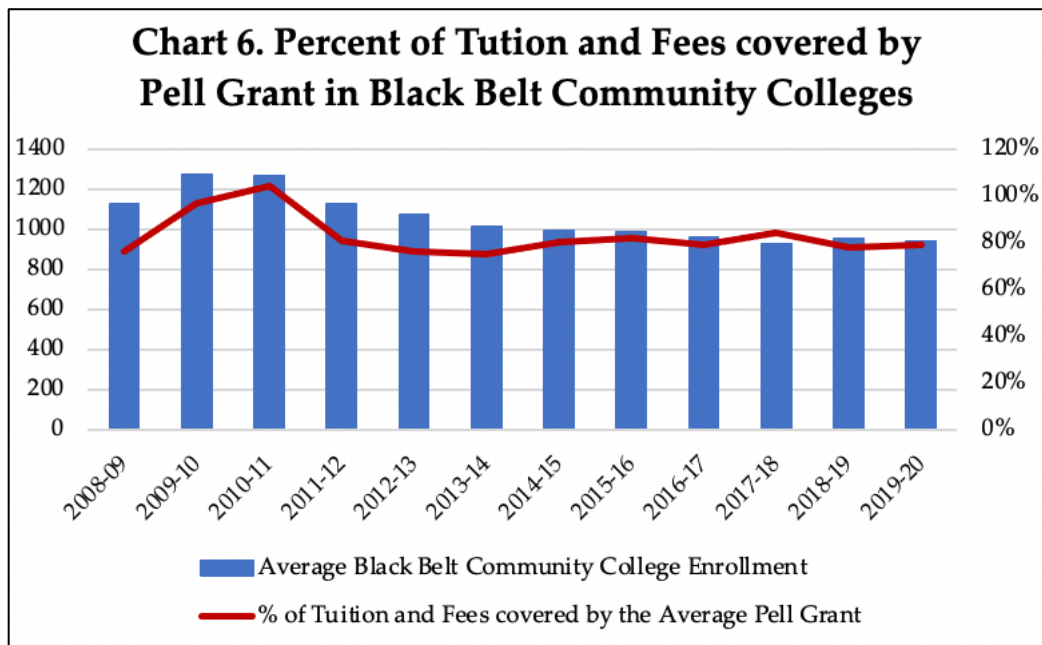


Chart 5 shows the enrollment of all 5 main community college campuses located inside the Black Belt.¹⁵ Chattahoochee Valley Community College (CVCC) in Russell, H Council Trenholm State (Trenholm) in Montgomery, and George C Wallace State Community College–Selma (WCCS) each

enroll about 30% of the students attending Black Belt community college main campuses. This is likely due to their proximity to major roadways and cities, as well as their well-respected industrial maintenance, early education, and nursing programs.



A consistent theme running across the Education Policy Center’s 20 studies on Pell Grants is that with state investments in the state student aid at the bottom of the 16 Southern Regional Education Board states (under five percent of the total), federal Pell Grants are Alabama’s *de facto* state student aid program. Alabama students rely on Pell, but congress cut federal Pell grants five straight years starting in Fiscal Year 2012.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, enrollments fell five straight years, and eventually lower completions resulted across Alabama.¹⁷ Chart 6 would suggest there is some correlation between the share of tuition and fees covered by Pell grants and the enrollment in the Black Belt’s five main community college campuses.¹⁸ Prior to the cuts, the average Pell grant covered up to 104% of tuition and fees, with enrollment exceeding 1,200 students at each institution on

average. After the cuts, Pell in the 2019-2020 school year covered less than 80% of tuition and fees, and enrollment has since averaged below 1,000 at each campus.

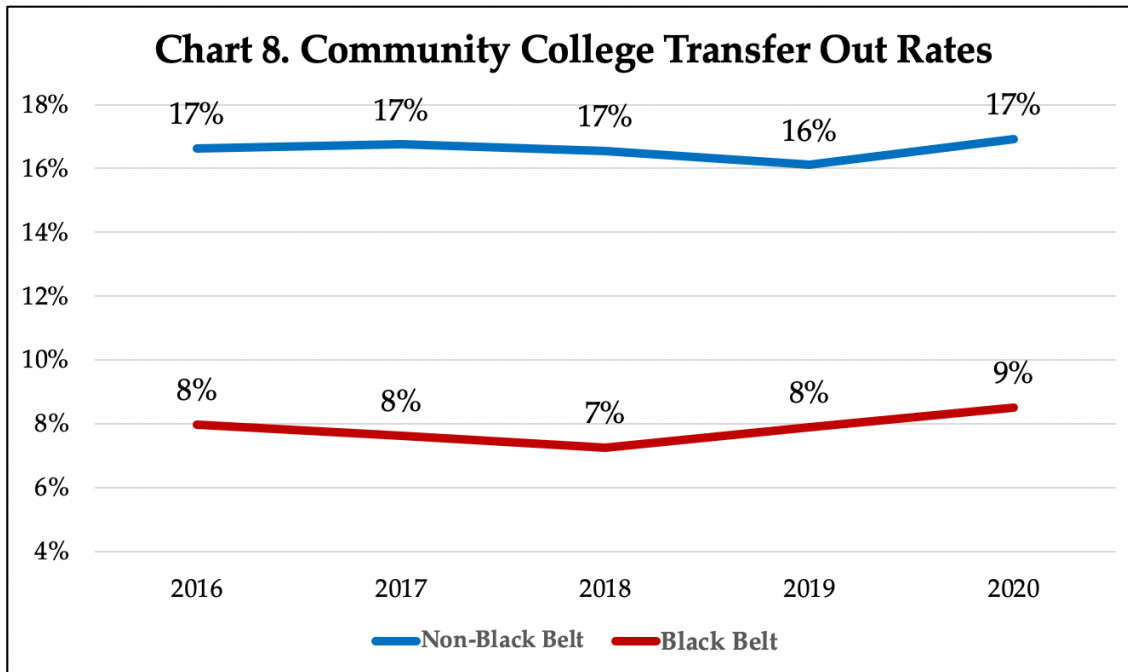
Community Colleges as Transfer Pathways

In Fall 2021, 7,618 students across Alabama started their journeys at Alabama community colleges before transferring to four-year institutions. James C. Palmer calls community colleges “the neighborhood schools of higher education,” due to their easier, more affordable transition to the collegiate environment, with smaller classes, more personal attention, and much lower cost (roughly half of public university charges).¹⁹

The Alabama General Studies Committee (AGSC) oversees the Statewide Transfer & Articulation Reporting System (STARS), which oversees a 41-course guaranteed acceptance of community college coursework for the state’s 14 public universities.²⁰ When AGSC&STARS was created in 1994, Alabama was one of five states in the country to have a bottom-up structure to guarantee transfer credit acceptance, with a committee of two- and four-year professionals to oversee the process. Today AGSC&STARS is housed at Troy University, and we turn to an analysis of STARS Guide usage to consider Black Belt students’ transfer intent.

Chart 7. Unique STARS Guide Requests for the Black Belt Community Colleges – Fall 2020					
Campus	Unique STARS Guide Requests	Fall 2020 FTE Enrollment	% of Alabama Total FTE Enrollment at Community Colleges	% of Alabama Total Unique Stars Guide Requests	% Difference
Chattahoochee Valley	314	893	2.1%	2.6%	23.3%
Marion Military Institute	17	432	1.0%	0.1%	-86.2%
Trenholm State	539	942	2.2%	4.4%	100.6%
Wallace State – Selma	79	765	1.8%	0.6%	-63.8%
Note: Data on STARS requests was not reported for Reid State Technical College					

In Fall 2020, the average share of total Full Time Equivalent (FTE) students requesting a STARS Guide across all of Alabama’s community colleges was 31%—so, nearly a third of all 2-year students are potentially interested in transferring to a 4-year institution.²¹ However, for community colleges in the Black Belt, this is not always the case. At Wallace State Community College Selma, only 10% of students requested one or more STARS Guides (significantly below the state average), and Chart 7 shows that this amounts to less than 1% of all unique STARS Guide requests compared to nearly 2% of all FTE community college students in Alabama. The last column in Chart 7 shows that Wallace State–Selma students are under-represented among STARS Guide requestees by over 60%. On the otherhand, Chattahoochee Valley and Trenholm State students are over-represented among STARS Guide requests relative to their total FTE enrollment. In total, students at Black Belt community colleges are over-represented among STARS Guide requests compared to non-Black Belt students by about 9%.



Despite this Black Belt community colleges being slightly over-represented among STARS Guide requests overall, Chart 8 shows that the statewide average transfer-out rate for Black Belt community colleges is much lower than for non-Black Belt community colleges. Transfer-out rates refer to the number of students transferring out to another community college or four-year university; the strikingly different patterns mean fewer Black Belt students are able to overcome the financial and other barriers to transfer.

In addition to STARS Guide requests, the AGSC reports data on 2-year students' transfer institutions of choice among the state's 14 public universities, four of which are in the Black Belt (ASU, AUM, Troy-Montgomery, and UWA).²² In Fall 2020, enrollment at these four universities comprised about 18% of total public university enrollment statewide, however only about 16% of transfer-intending students list one of those four institutions as their 1st or 2nd choice of transfer institution on their STARS Guides. This, combined with lower rates of STARS Guide

requests at some Black Belt community colleges, may indicate a lower level of interest among these students in pursuing further education beyond the first two years, in that the cost is seen as a bridge too far. We note that national experts including longtime former Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education President James Longendeker advocated for policy alignment across state appropriations, tuition, and state student aid policies—something Alabama can never attain with such a small state student aid program.

With no state student aid program, Black Belt community college students face geographic challenges other community college graduates in the state do not: in the western Black Belt in particular, the act of transfer requires physical relocation, for the distances are too far for daily commuting to get to the junior and senior year. While a bachelor's degree is clearly not required to attain a well-paying job, some form of postsecondary education is, and the more on-ramps to lifelong learning opportunities that can disrupt the cycle of persistent poverty, the better.²³

Policy Recommendations

Postsecondary education is increasingly important for Alabama to attract and retain high-wage, high-skill jobs in all sectors, and the more people obtaining degrees and certificates, the better. By 2025, it is estimated that 60% of people in the state will need a degree or credential beyond a high school diploma.²⁴ In the Black Belt, a post-secondary degree or credential can offer more than a path to a good-paying job. In a region historically and currently struggling with high levels of poverty, promoting education beyond high school can be a key tool for disrupting and ending the cycle of

poverty. The overarching recommendation of this brief is to increase investment into post-secondary education in the Black Belt, to help make community colleges the default from the Black Belt's high schools, and to facilitate transfer and degree completion at four-year universities and colleges. There is a large market of potential postsecondary students in the Black Belt—made up primarily by adults who graduated high school but did not go on to college—and catering to these students will require careful alignment of education with well-paying employment opportunities.

Building on the recommendations of the previous briefs in this series, which have emphasized incentives to draw and retain healthcare workers and teachers to the Black Belt, investment in post-secondary education in the region should also focus on increasing enrollment in high-demand fields of healthcare and teaching, as well as advanced manufacturing, which is a growing industry in the Black Belt. Such investment should target both students and institutions. Scholarships for students pursuing degrees in the identified high-demand fields would make it more financially feasible for them to pursue these degrees, and additional student loan forgiveness would incentivize students to stay and work in the Black Belt for an extended period. Increasing investment at the institutions would also increase the resources available to these high-demand programs to engage in more recruitment efforts, expand course offerings, hire more instructors, and increase resources available to students for things like transfer counseling.

Further, this brief has shown a correlation between Pell availability and post-secondary enrollment.²⁵ Since Alabama has over the past seven

decades chosen not to make significant investments in state-funded student aid, the federal Pell Grant is the *de facto* state student aid program in the Black Belt. For this reason, it is essential that students are counseled on how to complete the Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA) to access regular academic and summer Pell Grants, which the EPC worked to make available nationwide. Last year, Alabama took steps to improve FAFSA completion statewide, as the state board of education voted to require high school seniors complete the FAFSA to graduate high school (though students can still opt-out with a parental waiver).²⁶ We strongly support this initiative, though we note that many Black Belt school superintendents have expressed concern that impoverished parents are not filing their federal tax returns, an essential piece of information for students to complete the FAFSA. For this reason, we strongly support pairing the FAFSA high school graduation requirement with increased state investment in counseling targeting at Alabama's 19 persistent poverty counties, all of which are in the Belt, so that students and parents can get the help they need to navigate the federal student aid application and college process.

We also call for a statewide lottery to fund free community college beyond high school, to bring hope not only to the Black Belt's 34,000 rising middle and high school students, but also to young adults statewide. The EPC proposed a plan for Alabama modeled after Tennessee Achieves, the nation's first statewide promise program, signed into law by former Governor Bill Haslam, a Republican, in 2015.²⁷ This was the first statewide Promise program; today twenty-eight other states have Promise programs of some kind. It is time for Alabama to join this national movement.

Finally, a common route taken by many prospective students (traditional and non-traditional age) in the time of COVID is online schooling. However, with much of the Black Belt having extremely limited (and in some cases zero) access to high-speed broadband internet, online classes are of a limited value for students from the region.²⁸ This same issue is discussed in a previous brief concerning the Black Belt's STEM education. Broadband expansion in this rural region is necessary to increase the access and viability of online schooling, which offers a more flexible alternative to in-person learning, particularly in terms of time and transportation.

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