

# Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Migration Patterns

March 2026

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## INTRODUCTION

This brief is part of a series produced by a University of Kentucky research team examining the effects of the Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship (WRKS).<sup>1</sup> Like numerous states, Kentucky has set a statewide postsecondary educational achievement goal, aiming to “accelerate job creation, grow the economy, and expand our tax base.”<sup>2</sup> Concurrently, the state has championed policies that attempt to narrow the gap between skill development that has traditionally been considered either “higher education” or “job training.” A prominent example is the Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship (WRKS), which provides “last-dollar” financial assistance for students who enroll in targeted workforce-linked sub-baccalaureate credential programs and first became available to students starting in the 2017-2018 academic year. WRKS is part of an emerging national trend in workforce-aligned aid policies that are typically designed with a focus on promoting certifiable skills in high-demand industry sectors. These programs aim to create career pathways to high-wage and high-demand occupations and to increase the supply of workers who can fill local industry needs.

## KEY FINDINGS

1. **Overall, students typically travel farther from home to attend four-year institutions than two-year institutions.** Students attending four-year institutions travel about three times as far, on average, as those attending two-year institutions.
2. **WRKS recipients tend to enroll close to home.** The average travel distance for WRKS recipients is 18.9 miles, closely mirroring two-year institution enrollment patterns.
3. **Rural students travel farther to attend colleges than do urban students.** Rural WRKS recipients travel nearly three times as far as urban recipients, reflecting differences in the geographic distribution of institutions and programs.
4. **Field-of-study differences are modest.** Travel distances vary little across workforce-aligned fields, suggesting broad geographic availability of programs.

<sup>1</sup> The full collection of briefs is available at: <https://martin.uky.edu/research/understanding-impact-work-ready-kentucky-scholarships>.

<sup>2</sup> 2016-2021 *Strategic Agenda for Postsecondary and Adult Education*. Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.

In this brief, we examine the distance Kentucky students travel to enroll in postsecondary institutions and programs, with a particular focus on WRKS recipients. There is increasing attention from scholars to how the geographic distribution of students and postsecondary institutions can lead to differential postsecondary outcomes and returns on investment, building on a body of literature that implicitly considered the role of proximity in college choices and access.<sup>3</sup> In general, these studies find that distance can matter for who goes to college, where they attend, and the programs to which they have access. Distance can affect enrollment decisions, persistence, and completion, and may be a particularly relevant consideration for students who may face work, family, or transportation barriers.

By comparing the distances that students must travel across institution types, student demographics, and fields of study, we aim to shed light on how WRKS fits into Kentucky's broader higher education and workforce landscape. Understanding proximity patterns among WRKS recipients can provide information about where students seek programs of study, and whether some students could face potential barriers. Our analysis provides early insight into simple measures of proximity that can relate to program and institution access, particularly in rural areas, with ongoing work that will explore patterns and consequences in more detail.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see studies by Acton et al. (2025), Card (1993), Hillman (2016), Korich et al. (2022), Long (2004), and Mountjoy (2022).

<sup>4</sup> This direct difference can differ in obvious ways from the distances that students must travel to attend various

## DATA

Our analysis draws on statewide administrative data from Kentucky's public postsecondary education system, covering all students who attended the state's eight public four-year universities and 16 community colleges across more than 70 locations. We focus on first-time postsecondary enrollees in Kentucky from the 2014-2015 through 2020-2021 academic years. We measure each student's travel distance as the straight-line ("as the crow flies") geographic distance between the student's county of origin and the postsecondary institution the student first attended.<sup>4</sup> We use county of origin information from students' enrollment applications. We assign each county of origin to a geographic coordinate based on the county-level Centers of Population data from the 2020 U.S. Census, which represents a population-weighted balance point for each county (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). We use the geographic coordinates of the main campus of postsecondary institutions.<sup>5</sup>

## FINDINGS

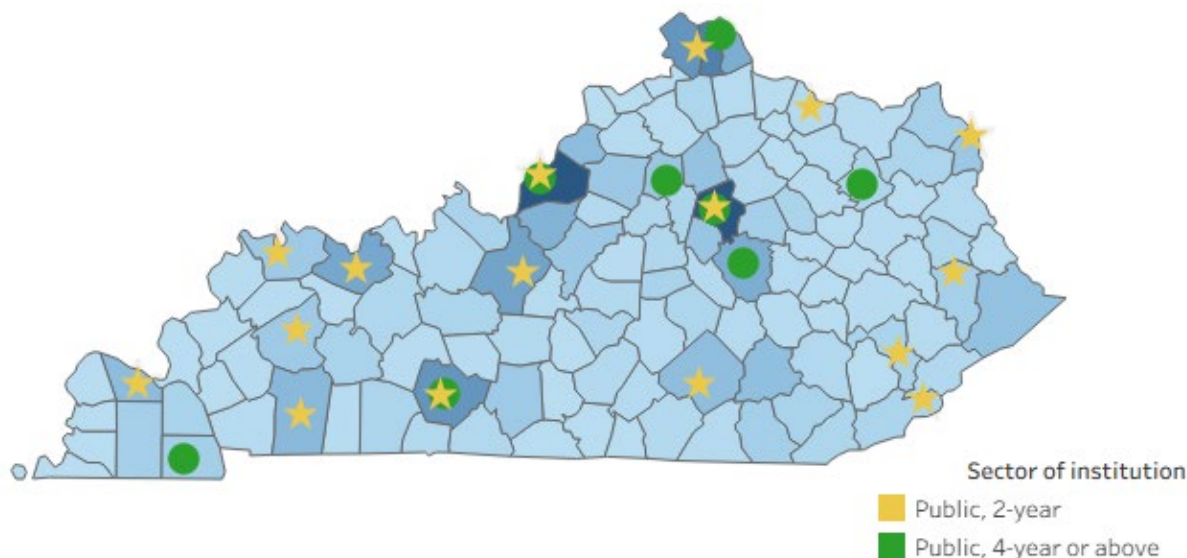
### 1. The Structure of Higher Education Institutions in Kentucky

In Figure 1, we display the main campus location of public higher education institutions in the state, with counties shaded by population. The two largest four-year institutions are located in the largest cities in the state, Lexington and Louisville. Public two-year institutions are more distributed across the state.

programs, typically by driving along roads. However, we use it in this brief for simplicity.

<sup>5</sup> Due to data limitations, we are unable to identify the specific campus at which a student is enrolled or whether the student is enrolled in a virtual credential program.

**Figure 1: Locations of Postsecondary Institutions and Population Size by County**



Notes: County level population is shaded based on the 2020 U.S. Census. Darker shading signifies a larger population. Higher education location is main campus only.

## 2. Migration Patterns by Institution Type

In Table 1, we summarize the distribution of travel distances from the 2014-2015 through 2020-2021 academic years for four-year and two-year institutions separately. Students attending four-year institutions travel the greatest distance on average, with a mean and median distance of 58.5 miles and 46.8 miles, respectively. The upper end of the distribution is substantial: 25 percent of four-year students travel more than 84 miles, indicating that four-year enrollment frequently involves attending an institution further from home.

In contrast, students attending two-year institutions tend to enroll in institutions closer to home. The average travel distance for two-year students is 19.3 miles, with a median of 14.4 miles. Three-quarters of two-year students travel fewer than 25.7 miles, suggesting that community and technical colleges primarily serve local populations. While a small number of students travel longer distances, the overall distribution is tightly concentrated near students' counties of origin.

## 3. Migration Patterns for WRKS Recipients

In Table 2, we present the distribution of travel distances for WRKS recipients from the 2014-2015 through 2020-2021 academic years, overall and disaggregated by demographic characteristics and field of study. Across the full sample (Panel A), WRKS recipients tend to enroll relatively close to home. The average travel distance is 18.9 miles, with a median distance of 14.8 miles. These short distances likely reflect the fact that many WRKS recipients enroll in nearby two-year community colleges, which are geographically dispersed across the state. In this sense, the localized travel pattern is consistent with the structure of Kentucky's postsecondary system and the types of institutions WRKS recipients commonly attended.

We highlight important differences in travel distance across demographic groups in Panel B. Male recipients travel slightly farther than female recipients on average (19.7 miles versus 17.3 miles). Age differences are modest: recipients who first enroll at age 25 or older travel slightly shorter

distances on average than younger recipients, and have a notably lower median distance (11.6 miles versus 16.3 miles). This suggests that older students may be more likely to enroll in nearby institutions. Reflecting the distribution of population and postsecondary institutions previously described, urban students travel the shortest distances (average of 10.8 miles), while rural students travel the farthest (average of 30.4 miles). Suburban students fall between these groups.

In Panel C, we present travel distance by field of study. Differences across fields are relatively small compared to geographic differences. Students in skilled trades programs travel slightly farther on average (19.9 miles), while students in health and STEM programs travel somewhat shorter distances.

**Table 1: Travel Distance by Institution Types (AY2014-2015 to AY2020-2021)**

<b>Institution Types</b>	Average	25 <sup>th</sup> Percentile	50 <sup>th</sup> Percentile (Median)	75 <sup>th</sup> Percentile	Obs
Four-year institutions	58.5	18.1	46.8	84.2	56,629
Two-year institutions	19.3	4.0	14.4	25.7	116,529

Notes: Travel distance is measured in miles for first-time enrolled postsecondary students from the 2014-2015 through 2020-2021 academic years.

**Table 2: Travel Distance for WRKS Recipients (AY2014-2015 to AY2020-2021)**

<b>WRKS Recipients</b>	Average	25 <sup>th</sup> Percentile	50 <sup>th</sup> Percentile (Median)	75 <sup>th</sup> Percentile	Obs
<b>Panel A: Full Sample</b>					
All WRKS recipients	18.9	3.7	14.8	27.7	3,055
<b>Panel B: By Demographics</b>					
Female	17.3	3.7	13.4	24.9	1,071
Male	19.7	4.0	16.3	28.7	1,984
Age at first enrollment $\geq$ 25	18.1	3.7	11.6	25.4	648
Age at first enrollment $<$ 25	19.1	3.7	16.3	27.7	2,407
Urban	10.8	2.7	4.7	13.5	1,566
Suburban	24.4	18.2	24.7	29.2	748
Rural	30.4	19.9	29.3	37.8	741
<b>Panel C: By Field of Study</b>					
Business	18.9	3.0	13.6	27.7	464
Health	17.4	3.7	12.9	24.7	700
STEM	17.6	4.0	10.6	25.0	469
Skilled Trade	19.9	4.0	18.1	30.1	1,213
Other	20.1	4.0	15.3	27.7	177

Notes: Travel distance is measured in miles. Field of study is defined following Darolia, Guo, and Kim (2025). Of the 3,055 students in the sample, 12 have a 2-digit CIP code of 00 (not specified), and 20 have a 2-digit CIP code of 90 (undeclared).

## DISCUSSIONS

The descriptive patterns we document in this brief point to the ways in which geography structures educational opportunity across Kentucky. Differences in travel distance across institution types and communities suggest that enrollment decisions are made not only by financial considerations, but also by spatial proximity and institutional availability.

The distribution of travel distances highlights several notable patterns, all of which deserve future detailed inquiry. First, travel distance differs substantially by institution type. Students enrolling in four-year institutions frequently travel across larger geographic areas, while students attending two-year institutions tend to remain close to home. WRKS recipients closely resemble the latter group. The average and median distances for WRKS recipients are nearly identical to those of two-year enrollees overall, indicating that WRKS-supported enrollment is largely local in nature.

Second, geographic context appears to be associated with variation in travel distance. Rural WRKS recipients travel nearly three times as far as their urban counterparts on average. While WRKS can reduce some financial barriers, it does not directly address spatial constraints. For rural students, particularly those balancing employment or caregiving responsibilities, longer travel distances may impose additional nonfinancial burdens that could affect persistence and completion (Combs, 2026). The magnitude of the rural-urban gap suggests that spatial access remains a dimension of educational opportunity that merits future analysis.

Third, differences by demographic characteristics and field of study are relatively modest. Age

patterns suggest that older students may be more likely to enroll nearby, potentially reflecting work and family responsibilities that limit mobility. Variation across fields is small, indicating that most workforce-aligned programs are geographically distributed in a way that allows local access.

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