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## How College Enrollment Changed for Kalamazoo Promise Students Between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020

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# HOW COLLEGE ENROLLMENT CHANGED FOR KALAMAZOO PROMISE STUDENTS BETWEEN FALL 2019 AND FALL 2020

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly reduced the college enrollment rate for students during the Fall 2020 semester. National data show that although enrollment of new students declined overall, it varied substantially by institution type and student characteristics. What national data do *not* reveal is how certain communities with already high college-going rates responded to the pandemic. We use data from Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) and the tuition-free program the Kalamazoo Promise to compare the immediate college enrollment of graduating high school students from the class of 2019 to that of the class of 2020. Overall, immediate college enrollment of KPS graduates declined from 74 percent to 60 percent. These declines were concentrated at two-year institutions among students who were socioeconomically disadvantaged, as well as among Black and Hispanic students. Contrary to national trends, immediate enrollment for KPS graduates at four-year institutions increased, with gains driven primarily (but not entirely) by White students. We present suggestive evidence that the Kalamazoo Promise, and policy decisions at four-year colleges, allowed some students to “trade up” from a two-year to a four-year institution.

**JEL codes:** I23, I24

**Key words:** college enrollment, Kalamazoo Promise, Kalamazoo Public Schools, COVID-19

## Key Takeaways

1. Among the Kalamazoo Public Schools Promise-eligible graduating class of 2019, 26 percent of Black, Hispanic, and White students did not immediately enroll in college. For the class of 2020, this share jumped to 40 percent. Nonenrollment increases occurred for each racial group, although overall nonenrollment rates continued to be higher for non-White students. Nonenrollment rates were also higher, for each racial group, among students who had been eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL).
2. Among Promise-eligible students, the total share who enrolled at Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC) declined from 35 percent for the 2019 cohort to 17 percent for the 2020 cohort. This decline occurred for each of the three aforementioned racial groups and was similar proportionally for both FRL and non-FRL students.
3. A greater share of Promise-eligible students, however, enrolled at four-year colleges, including Western Michigan University (WMU; 14 percent to 18 percent); the University of Michigan (UM) and Michigan State University (MSU; UM and MSU together, 5 percent to 8 percent); and private Michigan College Alliance (MCA) institutions (7 percent to 9 percent). For WMU, the increased share of enrollment was mostly driven by White students, notably FRL White students. For UM and MSU, the increased share was broad-based across racial and socioeconomic groups. Increased enrollment in MCA schools was generally bolstered by non-FRL White students.
4. Many four-year colleges shifted to standardized-test-optional admissions in the wake of the pandemic, and this decision possibly allowed some students from the 2020 cohort to “trade up”—for instance, from KVCC to WMU or from other four-year institutions to the more selective UM and MSU. Test-optionality and a preference for attending classes in person also may have helped MCA institutions attract more non-FRL White students from both KVCC (which was online only) and other four-year institutions.
5. The decline in KVCC enrollment is likely explained both by fewer students deciding to enroll in college at all and by other students who switched from KVCC to four-year institutions. While not ideal in terms of its effect on KVCC, it appears that the Kalamazoo Promise has allowed many students more choices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nearly all Americans had their lives disrupted by COVID-19, and high school graduates preparing to attend college were no exception. Nationally, the share of these graduates that enrolled in college within six months of finishing high school (which we will call immediate enrollment) fell from 36 percent for the class of 2019 to 28 percent for the class of 2020, a decline of 8 percentage points or 22 percent. Steep declines in enrollment occurred across the board—however, community-college enrollment was hit the hardest, with a decline of 30 percent, followed by enrollment at four-year private nonprofit institutions, (a decline of 29 percent), and four-year public institutions (a decline of 14 percent).

With the growing popularity of free-tuition college, it would be of interest to know whether college enrollment patterns over the past year differed for students with this form of aid. We focus on one of the earliest and most prominent place-based scholarships, the Kalamazoo Promise. Graduates of Kalamazoo Public Schools (KPS) in southwest Michigan benefit from this universal place-based college scholarship, which pays between 65 and 100 percent of college tuition for most colleges in the state. Similar to national trends, between the classes of 2019 and 2020, college enrollment among KPS graduates (90 percent of whom are eligible for Promise funding) experienced a noticeable, if milder, overall decline (8 percent), with enrollment drops in community colleges being the most severe, at over 50 percent. However, unlike national trends, enrollment in four-year institutions *increased*: enrollment at public institutions grew by 18 percent, and enrollment at private (nonprofit) institutions rose 28 percent. These increases suggest that some Kalamazoo Promise students may have “traded up” from community colleges to four-year institutions in Fall 2020, potentially due to many four-year institutions becoming test-optional that year, whether because of the pandemic or as a result of institutional decisions to widen access in the face of enrollment and financial concerns.

This short paper further examines the differences in enrollment patterns between 2019 and 2020 for Kalamazoo Promise students, exploring enrollment trends by race and socioeconomic status (determined by free and reduced-price lunch eligibility, or FRL).

Specifically, we ask the following:

1. By student racial group, how did enrollment patterns change between 2019 and 2020?
2. By student racial group and socioeconomic advantage, how did enrollment patterns change between 2019 and 2020?

### **Data and Sample**

We use data housed at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research through an ongoing partnership with the Kalamazoo Promise and Kalamazoo Public Schools district. We focus on students who enroll within six months of high school graduation (essentially, in the fall of the year they graduate), as data are not yet available for Spring 2021, and on institutions where students can use their Promise scholarships. Among the class of 2019, there were 695 graduates, and among the class of 2020, 712 graduates.<sup>1</sup> Across both classes combined, 39 percent were White, 37 percent Black, 13 percent Hispanic/Latinx, and the remaining 11 percent were multiracial, Asian American, or Native American. Most graduates—71 percent—had been FRL-eligible, indicating family income of less than 185 percent of the federal poverty level. We limit our racial group analysis to White, Black, and Hispanic students because of small populations among the other groups.

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<sup>1</sup> Among the 2019 cohort, 19 students did not enroll in college by the fall after high school graduation but did by Spring 2020. Another 17 students from each cohort either enlisted in the military or enrolled in higher education institutions where Promise funds could not be used.

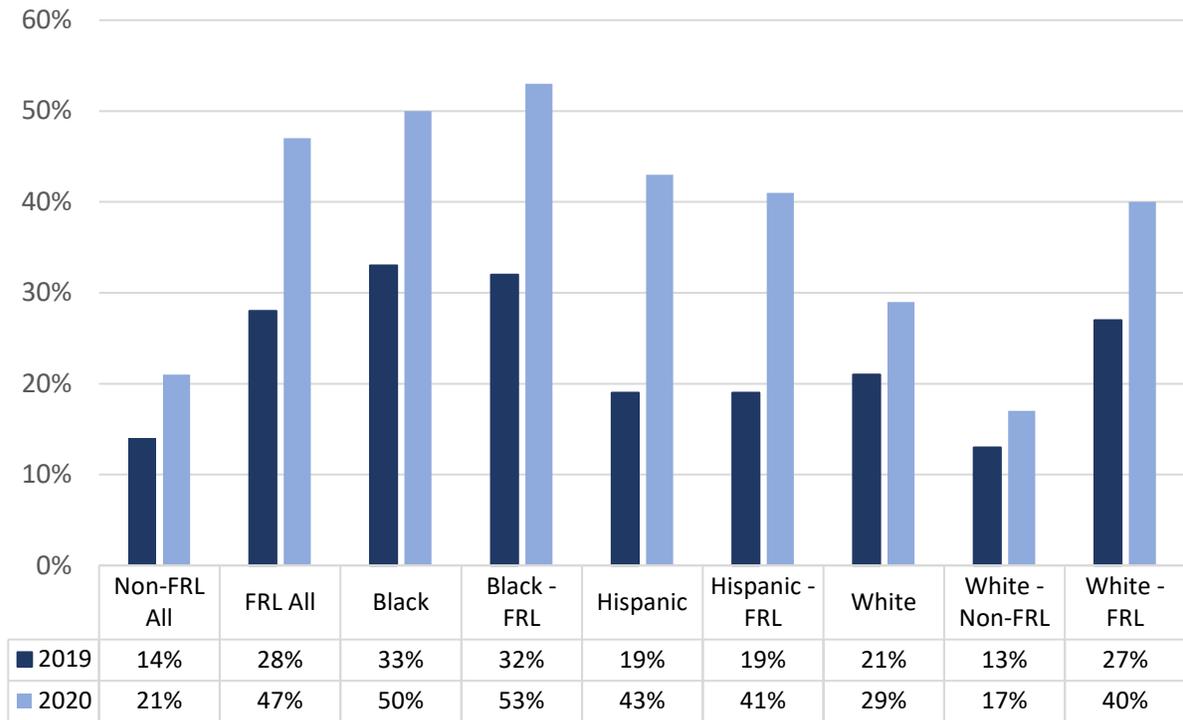
### Nonimmediate Enrollment, Overall

Between the 2019 and 2020 cohorts, the percentage of students who did not immediately enroll in college increased from 26 percent to 40 percent. These nonimmediate enrollment rates rose for each studied racial group: among Hispanic students, the percentage increased from 19 percent to 43 percent; among Black students, it increased from 33 percent to 50 percent; and among White students, it increased from 21 percent to 29 percent.

We also disaggregated enrollment within racial groups by students' socioeconomic status, as captured by their FRL eligibility. Among students not eligible for FRL, nonimmediate enrollment rates changed relatively little between the classes of 2019 and 2020. For White students, the rate rose from 13 percent to 17 percent, but for Black students, the rate *declined* slightly, from 26 percent to 23 percent. As for Hispanic students, too few were ineligible for FRL to report their nonimmediate enrollment shares.

Among FRL-eligible students, nonimmediate enrollment increases between the two cohorts were much larger. For White students, the share rose from 27 percent to 40 percent; for Black students, it rose from 32 percent to 53 percent; and for Hispanic students, the rate more than doubled, from 19 percent to 41 percent. These patterns, collectively shown in Figure 1, indicate not only that socioeconomically disadvantaged students are less likely to immediately enroll in college—which is well known—but that they also bore the brunt of the overall decline in immediate enrollment during the pandemic.

Figure 1—Nonenrollment Rates by Race and FRL Status



NOTE: The figure shows the percentage of each graduating cohort (2019 vs. 2020) that did not immediately enroll in college, by race and FRL status. Statistics for non-FRL Black and Hispanic students are not shown because of small populations.

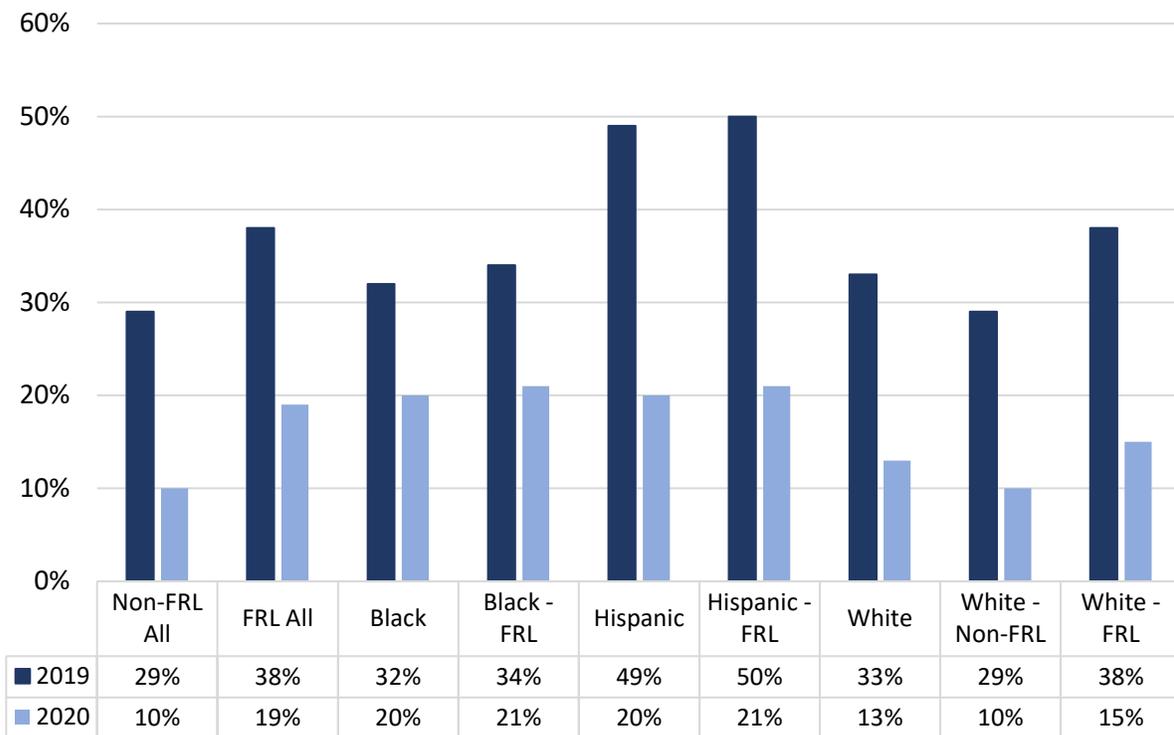
### Enrollment Changes, Kalamazoo Valley Community College

The share of students immediately enrolling in Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC)—the local community college and the most commonly attended institution for Kalamazoo Public Schools graduates—fell by half between 2019 and 2020, from 35 percent to 17 percent. Each of the three racial groups experienced large declines: the share of Hispanic students enrolling at KVCC dropped from 49 percent to 20 percent, the share of White students fell from 33 percent to 13 percent, and the share of Black students declined from 32 percent to 20 percent.

Because most who attend KVCC are FRL-eligible, especially among Black and Hispanic students, we report enrollment shares of non-FRL students only for White students: the share for

these students who attended KVCC fell from 29 percent in 2019 to just 10 percent in 2020. Among the much larger group of FRL-eligible students, Hispanic students experienced the greatest decline in immediate enrollment at KVCC—in the 2019 cohort, 50 percent of these students attended KVCC right after high school, but only 21 percent did in the 2020 cohort. Large drops also occurred among White FRL-eligible students—from 38 percent to 15 percent—and Black FRL-eligible students— from 34 percent to 21 percent. Because KVCC already disproportionately enrolled socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and enrollment declines between 2019 and 2020 were concentrated among these students, the community college bore the brunt of the decline in immediate college attendance (Figure 2).

*Figure 2—KVCC Enrollment Share by Race and FRL Status*



NOTE: The figure shows the percentage of each graduating cohort (2019 vs. 2020) that immediately enrolled at KVCC, by race and FRL status. Statistics for non-FRL Black and Hispanic students are not shown because of small populations.

## Enrollment Changes, Western Michigan University

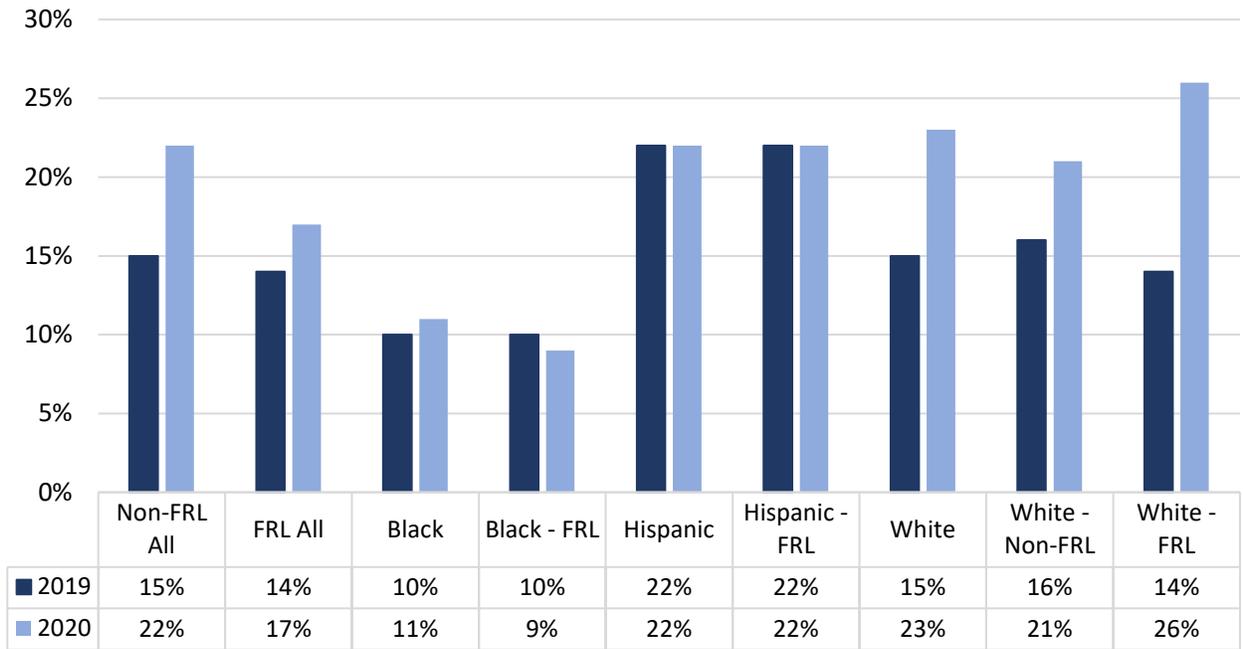
The share of Kalamazoo Public Schools graduates who enrolled immediately at Western Michigan University (WMU), the local four-year college, *increased* between the classes of 2019 and 2020, from 14 percent to 18 percent. Shares were stable for Black students (10 percent to 11 percent) and Hispanic students (22 percent both years), with the net increase driven by White students (15 percent to 23 percent).

Few students of color who are not FRL-eligible attend WMU. However, among White non-FRL students, immediate enrollment increased from 16 percent to 21 percent between the 2019 and 2020 cohorts. Across all non-FRL students, the increase in the share attending WMU right after high school was similar: it rose from 15 percent to 22 percent.

Among FRL-eligible students, the share of White students who enrolled in WMU also increased, from 14 percent to 26 percent. For both Black and Hispanic students, the share of FRL-eligible students was generally stable between the classes of 2019 and 2020: 10 percent and 9 percent for Black students, and 22 percent in both years for Hispanic students (Figure 3).

The increase in WMU enrollment shares for White FRL-eligible students—and the stability for FRL-eligible students of color—could be a result of WMU widening access by becoming test-optional for Fall 2020. Removing the need for standardized tests may have allowed some students to “trade up” from KVCC to WMU, which in turn could explain *some* of the enrollment declines at KVCC. Given that many four-year institutions expect to remain test-optional for the 2021–2022 enrollment cycle, we will have to wait to see whether these enrollment shifts persist into the future.

Figure 3—WMU Enrollment Share by Race and FRL Status

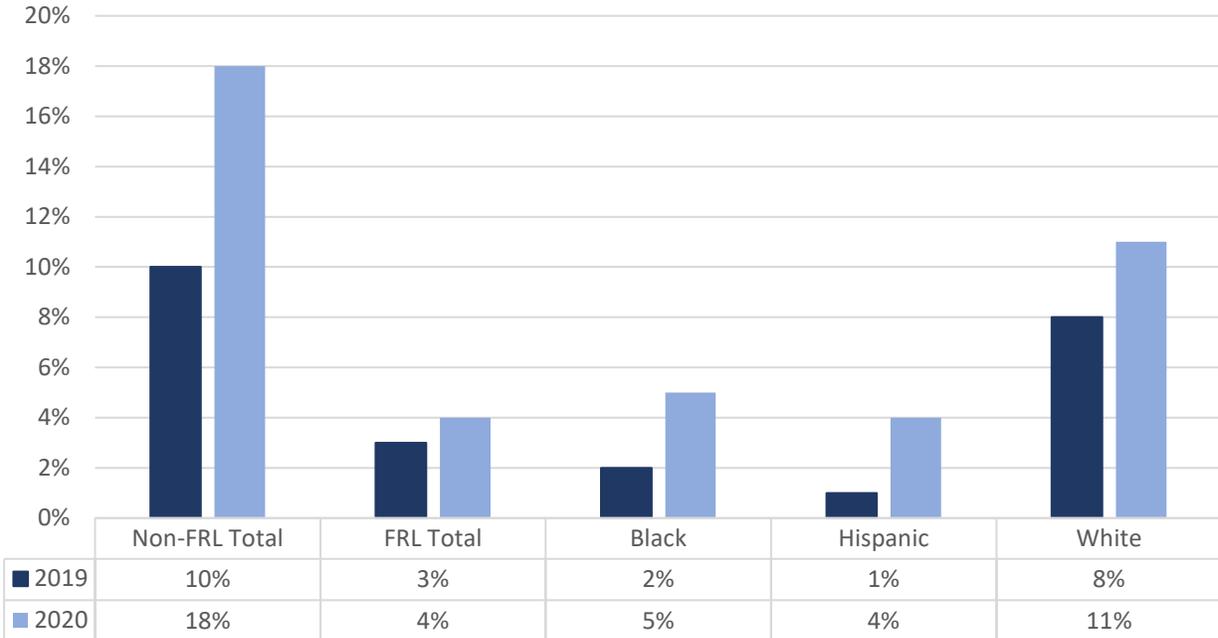


NOTE: The figure shows the percentage of each graduating cohort (2019 vs. 2020) that immediately enrolled at WMU, by race and FRL status. Statistics for non-FRL Black and Hispanic students are not shown because of small populations.

### Enrollment Changes, Michigan State and University of Michigan

Access to these two relatively selective institutions is generally limited. However, the share of KPS students enrolling immediately from high school at either of these universities rose from 5 percent in the class of 2019 to 8 percent in the class of 2020, a meaningful increase. This bump occurred for each racial group, although the numbers were small for Black and Hispanic students. Perhaps even more notably, the combined enrollment shares at these institutions for KPS graduates rose for both non-FRL *and* FRL students, and this was true for each racial group, although the numbers are quite small for these breakdowns (Figure 4). Test optionality for Fall 2020 at these universities could partly be behind the increased enrollment shares.

Figure 4—Michigan State and University of Michigan Enrollment Share by Race and FRL Status



NOTE: The figure shows the percentage of each graduating cohort (2019 vs. 2020) that immediately enrolled at either MSU or UM, by race and FRL status. Statistics for FRL status by race are not shown because of small populations.

### Enrollment Changes, Michigan College Alliance

The Michigan College Alliance (MCA) consists of a group of private institutions within Michigan where Kalamazoo Promise–eligible students can use their scholarship. For the 2019 cohort, 7 percent of graduates enrolled in these institutions, and this share edged up to 9 percent for the 2020 cohort. As with Michigan State and University of Michigan, enrollment-share increases at MCA schools were generally broad-based across racial and socioeconomic groups (except for Black FRL-eligible students, whose enrollment share fell), but most students who attend MCA schools are White and not FRL-eligible, and for these students, the enrollment share increased considerably, from 14 percent to 22 percent.

Because non-FRL White students’ enrollment shares also increased at WMU and the state flagship institutions, it is unlikely that MCA institutions siphoned off enrollment from those

public universities. Instead, the MCA colleges may have attracted students who otherwise would have enrolled at KVCC, where the share of enrollment of non-FRL White students fell from 29 percent to 10 percent. Although it is not clear why this shift took place, we believe that a combination of many MCA institutions becoming test-optional and offering more in-person classes, as well as adopting a deliberate change in their recruitment strategy during the pandemic, are reasonable hypotheses.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Nonimmediate enrollment rates rose sharply between the classes of 2019 and 2020 for Kalamazoo Promise students, from 26 percent to 40 percent. This increase is striking, but not surprising, given the uncertainty surrounding the health and financial effects of COVID-19 and the chaotic environment in which colleges were making instructional decisions for the 2020–2021 school year. The increases in nonenrollment occurred across racial groups, although they were larger for Black and Hispanic students.

The increased share of students who did not immediately attend college likely explains much of the extreme decline in KVCC enrollment between the 2019 cohort and the 2020 cohort. However, because enrollment shares increased at WMU, the state flagships, and MCA colleges, KVCC’s enrollment decline also probably stems from some students from the class of 2020 “trading up.” This sector shift, in turn, could be due to the combined financial and academic interventions of the Kalamazoo Promise, given that enrollment at four-year institutions declined nationally.

Considering the proximity between KVCC and WMU—both being in Kalamazoo—some students who would normally have chosen KVCC (or were denied access to WMU because of

standardized testing) were instead able to attend the university in Fall 2020. It appears that many of these students were White and FRL-eligible: WMU's enrollment share of these students rose from 14 percent to 26 percent, even as KVCC's share declined from 38 percent to 15 percent. Thus, the WMU increase accounts for about half of KVCC's decrease, percentage-wise. For FRL-eligible students of color, more of KVCC's decline appears to be driven by students not enrolling at all—a worrisome finding that deserves further investigation.

Among non-FRL students, MCA institutions have recruited an increased share of White students, and it is possible some were siphoned off from KVCC, although some could also have come from other four-year public colleges (besides the flagships and WMU), which saw their shares of these students decline. One explanation for the shift could be that COVID-19 produced a variety of polarized preferences, including for the various ways in which colleges chose to reopen. Given that all but one MCA institution (Albion College) offered either hybrid or in-person modes of operation for Fall 2020, it remains plausible that MCA colleges attracted some socioeconomically advantaged White students away from KVCC, which offered only online instruction for Fall 2020. For reference, Western Michigan University, Michigan State and the University of Michigan, and 7 of 12 remaining four-year public institutions, were either in-person or hybrid in terms of classroom instruction.

Our analysis offers a nuanced examination that shows that immediate enrollment for the Kalamazoo Promise class of 2020 was not necessarily detrimental for students in all cases. However, several questions remain unanswered, including which students may have changed their enrollment decisions and why, as well as whether these changes were one-time disruptions or reflect more persistent shifts. We hope to explore these questions in the near future.

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