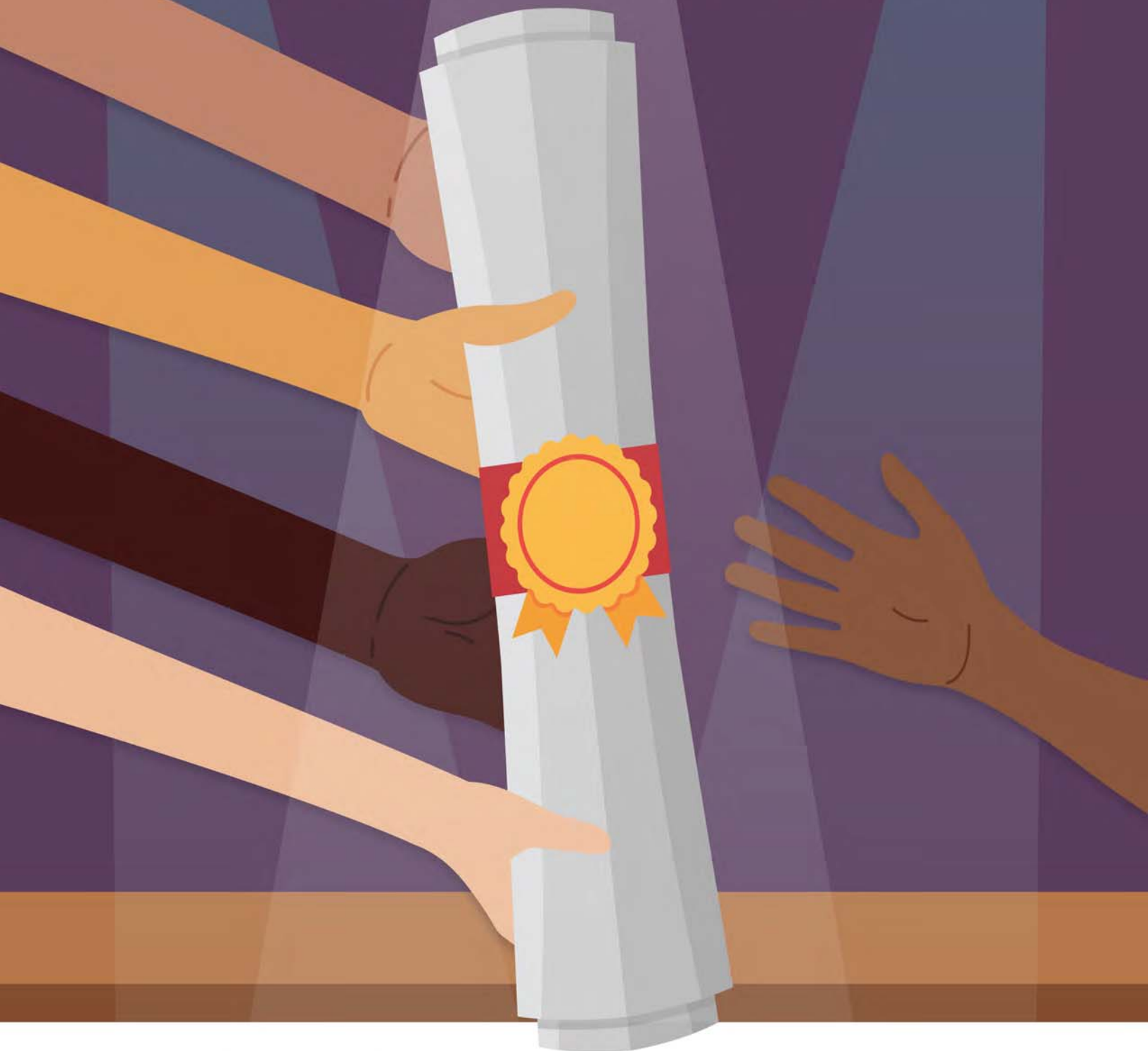


COLLEGE MATERIAL

*Programs Supporting Postsecondary Education
Readiness and Completion in Milwaukee*



WISCONSIN

POLICY FORUM

ABOUT THE WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

The Wisconsin Policy Forum was created on January 1, 2018, by the merger of the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum and the Madison-based Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Throughout their lengthy histories, both organizations engaged in nonpartisan, independent research and civic education on fiscal and policy issues affecting state and local governments and school districts in Wisconsin. WPF is committed to those same activities and that spirit of nonpartisanship.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to acknowledge and thank the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee and the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce (MMAC), which together highlighted this issue and commissioned this report. We also specifically thank the MMAC for helping to fund this research. We further offer gratitude to those groups who shared data, information, and insight used in this report: our survey respondents (listed in Table 1 on page 18) and key informants generously gave their time to tell the story of their work, and our study advisory committee members (listed in Appendix A) provided critical initial feedback on this project's scope and potential value. The analysis and policy options offered in this report, however, should be attributed to the Wisconsin Policy Forum alone.



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December 2022

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INTRODUCTION

In the city of Milwaukee, the vast majority of students do not achieve both high school and college graduation. Local coalition [All-In Milwaukee](#) has termed this situation a “completion crisis,” and it is negatively impacting not only those students but also the region’s workforce challenges. Indeed, the area economy could suffer greatly unless metro Milwaukee leaders can develop strategies to increase the home-grown talent needed to fill the increasing number of vacant skilled positions created by retiring Baby Boomers and to fulfill the region’s broader economic development objectives.

A potential bright spot is the multitude of out-of-school programming efforts that have been created to provide support and interventions for Milwaukee teens. For example, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee offer a robust “Graduation Plus” program that works with youth across the city through high school and college, while College Possible embeds AmeriCorps members in specific Milwaukee high schools to coach youth through the same journey. Across town, local higher education institutions house federally-funded TRIO programs that recruit and support historically underserved students, while centers like the Department of Multicultural Student Services at Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) and the Roberto Hernández Center at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM) welcome and work with students from diverse backgrounds once they arrive on campus.

While efforts like these are laudable on their own, those who are administering them may find it difficult to take stock of others engaged in this work and to pursue appropriate coordination and collaboration. Meanwhile, philanthropic supporters of these efforts, school-based staff, and other stakeholders seeking to connect families to services also would benefit from greater awareness of the range of out-of-school efforts to improve college readiness in Milwaukee.

To provide greater clarity on key characteristics of this landscape – from student needs to available services to sources of funding – the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee and the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce approached the Wisconsin Policy Forum in late 2021 for assistance. In this report, we summarize the findings from our quantitative research, surveys solicited from out-of-school programming providers, and interviews with key informants to address the following questions:

- Which organizations are providing formal out-of-school postsecondary readiness and success programming for Milwaukee youth, and who are they serving?
- What specific programming are they providing?
- How are these programs funded, and are they competing with one another for public or philanthropic resources?
- Is the supply of these programs meeting the potential demand?
- What do we know about the strengths and challenges of these programs?
- How well aligned or positioned are these programs vis-à-vis overlaps, gaps, and expansion opportunities?

We conclude by sharing a series of insights that we hope will provide guidance to providers, funders, and other partners who are seeking to address the current “completion crisis.”



Readers of this report should note that we primarily concerned ourselves with students' access to and success in postsecondary education, meaning formal education at a two-year or four-year higher education institution that culminates in degree attainment. Such focus should not be interpreted as a lack of appreciation for programs that focus on equipping students for immediate entry into the workforce, or programs that holistically support the well-being of youth without specifically focusing on their educational attainment. Rather, our narrow scope was informed by the extensive range of postsecondary readiness programming available and predicated on the concerns of business leaders that, while some jobs in the future will not require a college degree, Milwaukee is not currently well-equipped to fill those for which a degree will be a prerequisite.

Indeed, the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act Local Plan](#) published by Employ Milwaukee, Inc. for program years 2020 to 2023 notes that 35% of “occupations that are expected to have growth by 2026” in the local Milwaukee area require a bachelor’s degree or higher. [Data](#) from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2021 American Community Survey, meanwhile, shows that residents in Milwaukee County who completed high school or its equivalent had median earnings of only \$33,684 from the past 12 months, compared to \$38,306 for those with an associate’s degree or some college and \$57,848 for those with a bachelor’s degree. Examining students’ pathways through high school and college is thus critical both to the Milwaukee business community and to Milwaukee youth themselves and their future well-being.



POSTSECONDARY READINESS LEVELS IN MILWAUKEE

Before embarking upon a discussion of the out-of-school programming currently supporting Milwaukee’s postsecondary readiness, it is worthwhile to gauge the degree to which Milwaukee youth are succeeding in getting to and through college. After all, if a high proportion of Milwaukee youth across all student groups were already graduating from high school, enrolling in a two-year or four-year higher education institution, and completing a degree, then we would likely infer different programming demands than if the opposite were true.

Here, we analyze high school completion, postsecondary enrollment, and postsecondary completion. Our analysis is not meant to depict an exhaustive picture of current postsecondary readiness levels in Milwaukee. Rather, using publicly available data, we seek to provide a basic understanding of the student pipeline from high school through higher education.

Insufficient and Unequal High School Completion Rates

Data from public schools in Milwaukee since 2017 show that overall high school completion rates increased from 2017 to 2019 by almost seven percentage points (from 63.5% to 70.0%). These promising results appear to have been negatively impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, as completion rates dipped back down to 64.1% in 2021, the most recent year for which data are available. These declines occurred despite documented efforts by Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), the largest school system represented in the data, to ease graduation requirements in 2020 and 2021 in the face of COVID-19.

These figures reflect four-year *cohort* rates, meaning that they show the percentage of ninth-graders who entered high school together and then graduated with a regular high school diploma or other high school completion credential four years later. Contained within these data are all graduates of

Methodology Note

To calculate public high school completion rates, we compiled data for Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and independent charter schools operating in Milwaukee from annual spreadsheets published by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). In nearly all instances, the specific data source is the agency’s [WISEdash Data Files](#). The sole exception is the 2017 high school completion data for MPS, which was corrected after the data file’s release. For this analysis, we use the 2017 MPS data reported on the [WISEdash Public Portal](#).

“2017” refers to the 2016-17 school year. That single-year notation is used in this report for all school years.

Due to the small number of students in some groups and at several of the independent charter schools, DPI suppressed data in some cases as a privacy measure. These suppressions mean that not every metric examined in our analysis includes data from every public school in Milwaukee. In analyses for which only MPS data are available, approximately 92% of public school graduates in Milwaukee are represented.

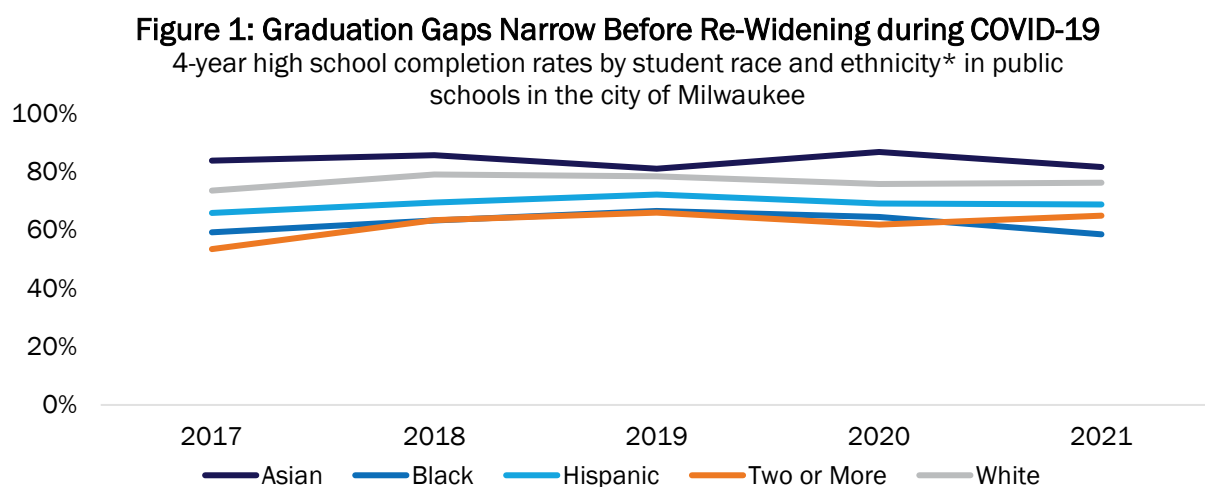
Data on Milwaukee private school graduates provide little additional insight, since they are not collected as graduation rates but solely as absolute numbers of graduates, without the context of how many students comprised the cohort. Furthermore, data on specific student groups are not consistently available for the private school graduates. For the purposes of this analysis, therefore, we solely focus on public schools while acknowledging that over a quarter of Milwaukee’s publicly funded K-12 students currently attend private schools through choice or voucher programs.



MPS, including of charter schools authorized by the district, and of the seven independent charter high schools operating in Milwaukee.¹

The overall high school completion rates mask notable variation among student groups. Data from the 2018-19 school year, the last year unaffected by COVID-19, provides a useful snapshot of the disparities. This 2019 data set shows completion rates by race or ethnicity ranging from 59.0% for American Indian students to 81.0% for Asian students, while students coming from economically disadvantaged households completed high school at a rate almost 13 percentage points lower than their non-economically disadvantaged peers (67.3% compared to 80.1%).

Differences also exist for student groups according to gender, English learning proficiency, and disability status. In 2019, 75.4% of female students completed high school, compared to 64.7% of male students. Also, 10 percentage points separated the 60.8% of English Learners and 70.3% of English-proficient students who completed high school. The largest 2019 gap was between students with and without disabilities: 46.9% versus 74.5% completion rates. While all of these categories are broad and encompass various distinct groups, “students with disabilities” merits specific mention, since students in this category may experience a wide range of physical, intellectual, or emotional behavioral disabilities that may affect their high school experience to a larger or smaller degree.



Source: Department of Public Instruction. *Data for American Indian students are suppressed for all years except 2019, in which 59% were reported as completing.

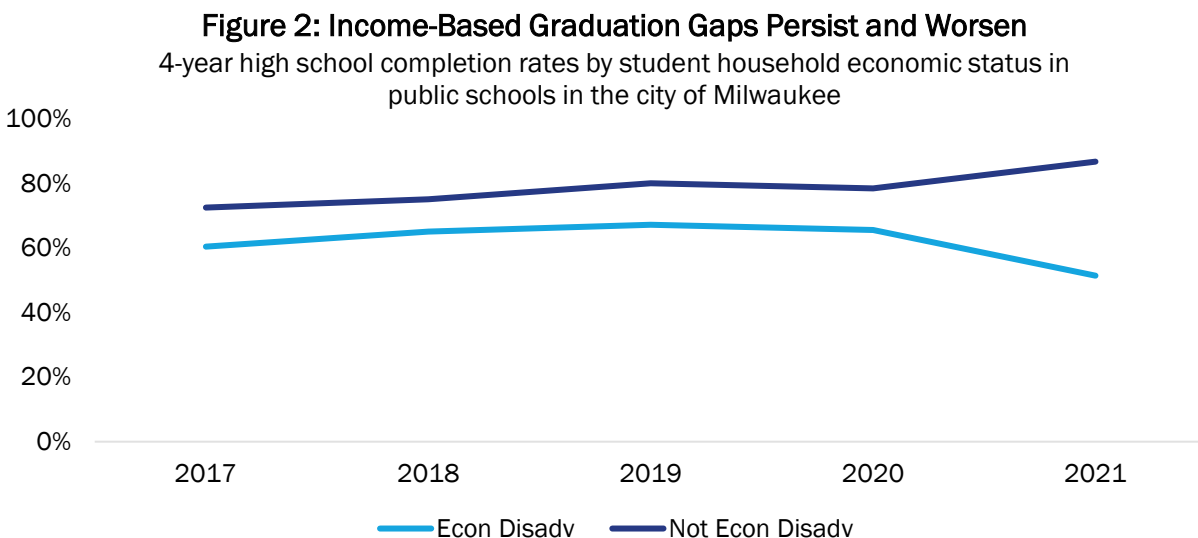
Disparities between student groups existed to various degrees over the full 2017 to 2021 timeframe. The race and ethnicity gaps were actually smallest in 2019 as completion rates increased for students identifying as Black, Hispanic, or two or more races and decreased for Asian and white students (see Figure 1).²

¹ As of 2021, an eighth independent charter, Central City Cyber School, graduated Milwaukee students. However, DPI suppressed their data due to small student numbers, and so the school is not contained within this analysis.

² In our descriptions of racial and ethnic student groups, we employ the terminology used by the data source. For example, DPI’s high school completion and postsecondary enrollment datasets refer to Hispanic students, whereas the Higher Education Regional Alliance’s postsecondary completion dataset refers to Hispanic/Latinx students.



As shown in Figure 2, the gap between economically disadvantaged students and their non-economically disadvantaged peers has hovered at around 12 percentage points since 2017 but widened dramatically in 2021, with 51.5% of students from low-income households completing high school compared to 86.8% of students from non-low-income households – a 35.3-percentage-point gap. This widening was due both to a precipitous drop in completion among students from low-income households (down from 65.7% the previous year) and a five-year high in completion among their non-low-income peers (up from 78.6% the previous year).



Source: Department of Public Instruction

The gender gap has ranged from 10.7 percentage points in 2018 and 2019 to 14.6 percentage points in 2021, with male students trailing female students in all years. The trajectory for English Learners has been more positive, with their completion rates increasing in every year except in 2021. However, English-proficient students' completion rate has declined since 2019, which further shrank the gap with their English Learner peers down to two percentage points by 2021. The disparity between students with and without disabilities showed some signs of narrowing prior to 2021 but remained in the double digits; the smallest gap, in 2020, was still 27.3 percentage points.

Taken as a whole, these high school completion data reveal a secondary education system that is serving some student groups better than others but none especially well. Out of the 14 distinct student groups examined, only six achieved average high school completion rates of over 70%, and another six – nearly all representing historically underserved populations – averaged completion rates of less than 65%. In contrast, the statewide high school completion rate has remained above 88% since at least 2017 (although disparities on the basis of race and ethnicity, economic status, English Learner status, and disability persist at the state level, as well).

Still, the overall upward trajectory of high school completion from 2017 to 2019 was encouraging, with all but one student group in the analysis experiencing gains, and double-digit percentage-point gains for students with disabilities, English Learners, and students identifying as two or more races.



Declining Postsecondary Enrollment Rates Exacerbated During First Pandemic Year

When we take a look at the next step in educational attainment – enrollment in postsecondary education – we find from DPI data that enrollment rates were not keeping pace with high school completion rate increases pre-pandemic and have been in decline overall.³ The cohort of Milwaukee students completing high school in four years in 2017 saw approximately 48.5% of its members enroll in a two-year and/or four-year college by the first fall after graduation.⁴ That number dropped two percentage points with each successive year before tumbling by 8.5 points (to 36.1%) for the class of 2020, which was the first cohort affected by the pandemic. Enrollment rates rebounded slightly for the class of 2021, up to 37.3%, but remained below pre-pandemic levels.

Data from the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#) and [U.S. Census Bureau](#) indicate that the sharp 2020 decline was not unique to Milwaukee youth. The former found that the percentage of the U.S. high school class of 2020 that immediately enrolled in postsecondary education dropped between four and 10 percentage points (depending on the high school characteristics studied) from the rate of 2019 enrollment – a decline that the research center called “unprecedented.”

As with the high school completion data, different student groups in Milwaukee experienced different average postsecondary enrollment rates (see Figure 3 on page 9). The precipitous 2020 drop, however – which compounded the overall decline in the city from 2017 to 2020 – affected nearly all student groups. For example, Asian students in the high school class of 2017 enrolled in higher education at rates 10 percentage points higher than Hispanic students, but both student groups saw year-over-year enrollment declines through 2020, for a total four-year drop of 15 percentage points for both groups. For both student groups, nine percentage points of that total drop occurred from 2019 to 2020. Both student groups also saw enrollment rates increase in 2021 – by six points for Asian students and two points for Hispanic students – but remained below 2019 levels.

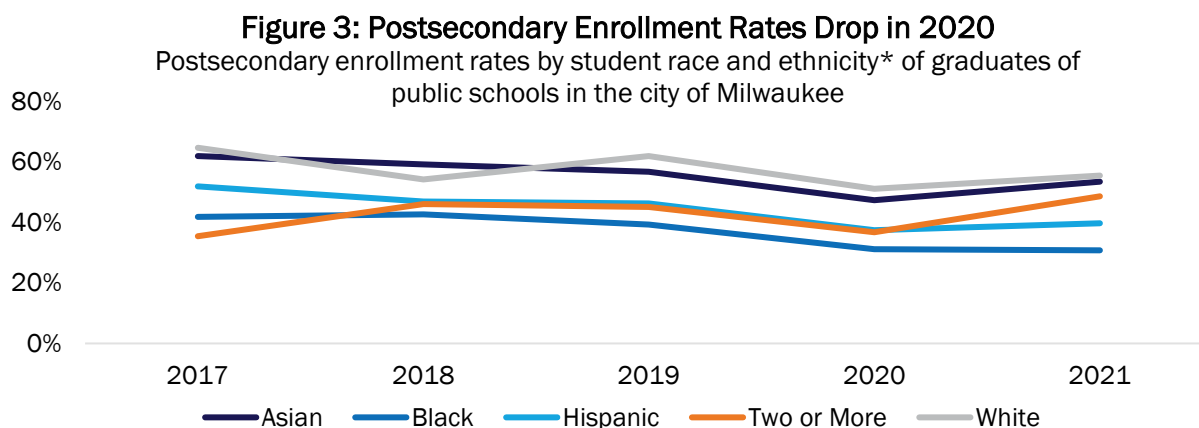
³ Like high school completion data, all postsecondary enrollment data cited in this report derive from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), which in this case receives the data from the National Student Clearinghouse. Our specific source is the state agency’s [WISEdash Data Files](#). The data files are organized by students’ high school completion year, and that approach is used throughout this report. The files do not distinguish between students who completed high school in four years and students who completed high school in more than four years.

⁴ To best see students’ trajectory from high school to college, we calculated postsecondary enrollment rates using the number of students enrolling in postsecondary education by the first fall after high school completion as the numerator, and the number of students who completed high school with their ninth-grade cohort in four years as the denominator. This calculation allowed us to track nearly the same group of students throughout, as illustrated in Figure 5 on page 12. The postsecondary enrollment percentages presented are slight overestimates due to the numerator including students who completed high school in four, five, six, and seven years, while the denominator only includes students who completed high school in four years.

Our calculation is somewhat different from what DPI publishes on the WISEdash Public Portal or in its WISEdash Data Files. The WISEdash Public Portal reports postsecondary enrollment rates using the same numerator as our calculation but for denominator uses the total number of high school completers in a given year, regardless of how many years students took to complete or which ninth-grade cohort they belonged to. WISEdash Data Files for postsecondary enrollment do not report rates of enrollment after high school but rather report on characteristics of those enrollees.



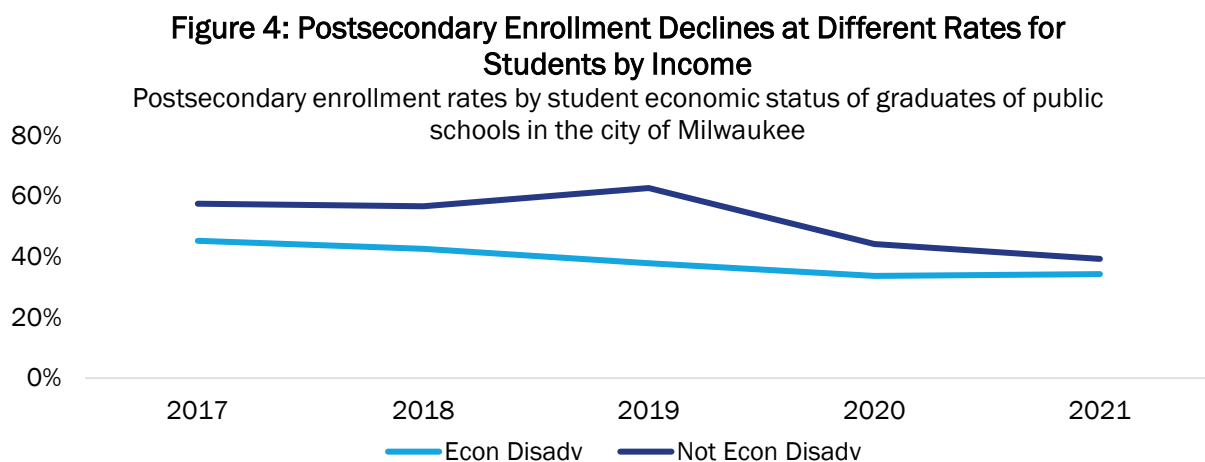
Black students' postsecondary enrollment rate dropped by 11 points from 2017 to 2020 and then again marginally from 2020 to 2021 to 30.8%, making this group the sole racial or ethnic group to see a further decline in 2021. Eight points of the total drop occurred from 2019 to 2020.



Source: Department of Public Instruction. *Data for American Indian students are suppressed for all years. Data for students identifying as two or more races should be interpreted with caution due to small sample size.

White students' postsecondary enrollment rates have fluctuated, with relative highs for the classes of 2017 and 2019 (64.8% and 62%, respectively, the highest rates for any racial or ethnic student group in those years) and relative lows for the classes of 2018 and 2020 (54.3% and 51.2%, respectively). Enrollment rates for white students in the class of 2021 bounced back from their 2020 low to land at 55.6%.

As shown in Figure 4, economically disadvantaged students enrolled in two-year and four-year colleges at progressively lower rates in every year examined until 2021, dropping from 45.2% for the high school class of 2017 to 33.7% for the class of 2020. Unlike for other student groups, 2020 did not feature a particular drop but rather maintained the pace of earlier declines before the rate temporarily stabilized in 2021 at 34.3%. Students who are not economically disadvantaged started from higher rates of enrollment – 57.4% for the class of 2017 – then fluctuated in the following two years before falling 18 percentage points for the class of 2020 and a further five percentage points for the class of 2021, down to 39.3%.



Source: Department of Public Instruction



Students with and without disabilities also saw decreases in enrollment rates from the high school class of 2017 to the class of 2020. For students without disabilities, this decrease began in small steps for the class of 2018 and class of 2019, with declines of less than a percentage point in each year, before plummeting 10 percentage points for the class of 2020 down to 36.5% enrollment. Students with disabilities saw more variation in the earlier years but then experienced a similar drop of 11 percentage points between the classes of 2019 and 2020, down to 17.1% enrollment. Both student groups saw one-percentage-point increases in 2021 enrollment rates. The gap in enrollment for students with and without disabilities remained in the double digits in all years examined.

Male and female students followed a similar trend. Both groups' postsecondary enrollment rates fell in every year from 2017 to 2020, capped by a particularly marked decline from 2019 to 2020. Female students in the class of 2017 enrolled in two-year or four-year college at a rate of 51.9%, compared to 40.8% of the class of 2020, with 8.2 percentage points of the overall 11-point decline occurring in the final year. Male students in the class of 2017 enrolled in higher education at a rate of 44.2%, compared to 30.1% of the class of 2020, with 8.8 percentage points of the overall 14-point decline occurring in the final year. Both student groups saw one-percentage-point increases in 2021 enrollment rates.

English Learners are an outlying student group in these data, with a higher enrollment rate for the high school class of 2020 (29.8%) than for the class of 2017 (24.4%), although 2020 still saw a drop from the previous year's high of 34%, and 2021 saw a further drop (unlike the partial recovery experienced by most student groups). The enrollment rate for English-proficient students, on the other hand, declined for four years in a row, from 51.6% for the class of 2017 to 36.7% for the class of 2020, before stabilizing for the class of 2021 at 36.8%. Over half of their overall decline occurred between 2019 and 2020.

Why the Divergence Between High School Completion and Postsecondary Enrollment, and What Does It Tell Us?

Overall, postsecondary enrollment rates demonstrate similar disparities as high school completion rates, with rates similarly and negatively affected during the pandemic years. Of particular relevance to our overall analysis of postsecondary programming, however, is our finding that pre-pandemic – from 2017 to 2019 – high school completion rates rose overall. **Yet, even as students graduated high school at increasingly higher rates, many were enrolling in postsecondary education at increasingly lower rates.** English Learners and students who were not economically disadvantaged were the only notable exceptions to this rule, with higher college enrollment rates for those student groups in the high school class of 2019 than in the class of 2017.

Explaining this widening pre-pandemic gap between high school completion and postsecondary enrollment is a challenging task, although demographic shifts offer a clue. The total number of postsecondary enrollees from 2017 to 2019 remained relatively steady, ranging from 1,704 to 1,728. What changed was the number and composition of high school completers: 292 more students completed high school with their ninth-grade cohort in 2019 than in 2017, for a total of 3,898 completers in 2019. If we look at post-secondary enrollment rates as a fraction, the denominator of high school completers increased from 2017 to 2019 while the numerator of postsecondary enrollees remained roughly the same, leading to lower rates. Though disappointing, this outcome still came with a silver lining: more students were completing high school.



The vast majority of the increase in high school completers came from economically disadvantaged students (roughly 95%, although an exact percentage is unavailable due to data suppression), and a near-identical percentage were Black or Hispanic students. Given that these student groups have been historically underrepresented in higher education institutions, it is not unexpected that postsecondary enrollment rates have fallen. Restoring them will require intentional effort to overcome historical and ongoing challenges, including ensuring that improved high school graduation rates equate to improved readiness – academic and otherwise – for the rigors of college.

Other factors may have also played a role in stagnant postsecondary enrollment. For example, with unemployment at historic lows in recent years, the strong labor market may have lowered the real or perceived need for further education in the eyes of high school graduates and lured them directly into the workforce. This trend has been seen in previous strong labor markets, particularly in the case of enrollments in two-year colleges.

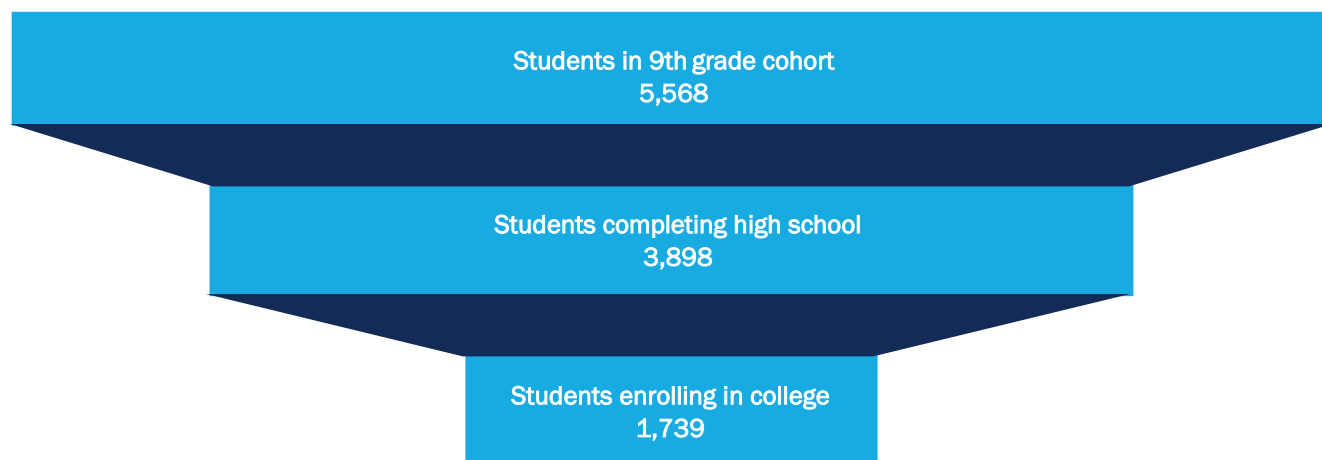
The failure of increased high school graduation rates thus far to produce increased postsecondary enrollment metrics also mimics a finding from a [2021 Forum brief on Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\) completions](#). Increased FAFSA completion rates typically translate into higher postsecondary enrollment rates – but in Milwaukee, a successful pre-pandemic campaign to increase FAFSA completions did *not* yield corresponding increases in postsecondary enrollment rates for the city’s students. Future inquiry might explore whether this disconnect is due to the aforementioned competition from the job market, insufficient financial aid secured to attend college, gaps in student supports during senior year and the summer following graduation, FAFSA efforts expanding more quickly than other necessary complementary college readiness efforts or not targeting students oriented toward college, or other causes.

Further inquiry and years of data may be necessary to fully understand these trends and what is guiding the decisions of Milwaukee high school students. The available data so far, however, suggest that **future classes of high school graduates are likely to be more diverse than in the past, and that greater support, preparation, and perhaps proof of the value of a college education will be necessary to successfully steer them toward postsecondary enrollment**. The existing data further suggest that any recovery from the pandemic may be more difficult for postsecondary enrollment – where the pandemic exacerbated an existing downward trajectory – than for high school completion.

In all cases, the key statistic here for those providing postsecondary readiness programming is that **fewer than 50% of public high school graduates in Milwaukee are enrolling in postsecondary education immediately after graduation**. Figure 5 on page 12 illustrates this major “leak” in the pipeline using 2019 as an example year. In 2019, 70.0%, or 3,898, of the cohort of 5,568 public school students in Milwaukee who had begun ninth grade together in 2015 successfully completed high school. Then, 1,739 public school students in Milwaukee enrolled in college in the fall of 2019, the first fall after their high school completion. These students represent approximately 44.6% of the 3,898 high school graduates, or 31.2% of the original ninth-grade cohort. The percentage of students enrolling in postsecondary education has further decreased since the onset of COVID-19.



Figure 5: Fewer than 50% of All High School Graduates Enroll in Postsecondary Education
High school to postsecondary enrollment pipeline for Milwaukee public school students completing high school within four years in 2019



Source: Department of Public Instruction.

Note: "Students enrolling in college" may include some students who completed high school in more than four years.

“Leaks” and Disparities Persist Through Postsecondary Completion

Education practitioners, researchers, and advocates are increasingly recognizing the need not only to encourage students to attend college, but also to graduate. Many of the benefits of postsecondary education, such as more job opportunities and higher earnings, accrue only upon a student’s degree completion. For that reason, attending college without graduating can leave students with debt but without the increased opportunities or higher earnings that could help them repay it, thereby leaving them potentially worse off than if they never enrolled.

Publicly available data do not allow for linking public high school graduates in Milwaukee directly to their postsecondary outcomes. However, to glean some understanding of current postsecondary completion rates, we can turn to public data published by the [Higher Education Regional Alliance](https://www.herawisconsin.org/m7-region-data-dashboard/) (HERA), a consortium of 18 public and private two-year and four-year institutions in southeast Wisconsin.⁵

Large proportions of Milwaukee youth attending college enroll at local institutions, making the HERA outcomes useful for hints at how these students fare in postsecondary education. Notably, however, we cannot separate Milwaukee youth outcomes from all other enrolled students’ outcomes in the institutional data. Conclusions based on these data, therefore, should be made only with caution.

⁵ HERA posts degree and certificate completion data on its M7 Region Data Dashboard:

<https://www.herawisconsin.org/m7-region-data-dashboard/>. Our analysis reflects the data posted as of September 2022.

Any inconsistencies in student cohort sizes reflect data suppressed for student privacy purposes at the individual institution level. Online data may be updated as more precise information becomes available.



HERA published its most recent completion data in May 2022, displaying outcomes for the student cohorts that began at a four-year institution in fall 2015 or at a two-year institution in fall 2018. HERA also compares these completion statistics to the same dataset published three years earlier. These data show troubling overall completion rates and disparities between student groups but also recent improvements for all students and especially for historically underserved student groups – at least prior to the pandemic.

Among all reporting HERA institutions, 33% of students completed their degree in the expected timeframe, an increase of two percentage points from the previous release of data. Half (49%) graduated with a degree within 150% of the expected timeframe, an increase of one percentage point from the previous release of data. Looking specifically at bachelor's degree completion, students who enrolled in a four-year college or university in fall 2015 achieved a three-percentage-point increase in completion rates over their 2012 predecessors. Within that 2015 cohort, 40% completed their degree within the expected timeframe (up from 37%) and 60% completed within 150% of the expected timeframe (e.g., within six years for a typical four-year degree), which was up from 57%.

These gains are echoed in our [Metro Milwaukee Innovation DataTool](#), which shows that educational attainment in the Milwaukee metro area is rising at a relatively strong pace. The share of the region's adults (ages 25 and over) with bachelor's degrees or higher increased from 31.8% in 2011 to 39.2% in 2021. Milwaukee's 7.4-percentage-point improvement during that period outpaced more than half of the metro areas we track. In 2021, the share of metro Milwaukee's adult population with bachelor's degrees or higher also exceeded the U.S. average. Note, however, that these statistics reflect the educational attainment not of youth from Milwaukee or of graduates of southeastern Wisconsin colleges but rather of current adult residents in Milwaukee, regardless of their origin.

Students who graduated from a degree or certificate program lasting fewer than four years also saw an increase, although their overall completion rates were lower than the bachelor's degree students. Among this cohort, 15% of the students earned their degree or certificate within the expected timeframe (up three percentage points from three years prior) and 22% earned their degree or certificate within 150% of the expected timeframe (up four percentage points from three years prior).

Although we cannot map these degree completion rates directly onto the high school completion and postsecondary enrollment data previously examined, laying them side by side provides a rough, if inexact, sketch of the full pipeline from high school through college. We previously saw that, in 2019, 70% of the public school students in Milwaukee who started ninth grade together in 2015 successfully completed high school. Approximately 44.6% of those completers, or 31.2% of the original ninth-grade cohort, enrolled in college immediately following high school.

The HERA data suggest that only a portion of the students who do enroll in college will graduate on time, with higher levels of attainment for bachelor's degrees and much lower levels attained via degree or certificate programs of fewer than four years. If, for illustrative purposes, we were to assume that the completion rate for Milwaukee students paralleled the overall 33% completion rate for HERA postsecondary enrollees, **it would equate to approximately 14.7% of Milwaukee high school completers earning their degree on time, or 10.3% of the original ninth-grade cohort.** These numbers are purely hypothetical but illustrate the gaps facing students and the postsecondary pipeline.

Broken down by race and ethnicity, the HERA postsecondary completion data show that all student racial and ethnic groups in the four-year institution cohort of 2015 saw increases over the cohort of

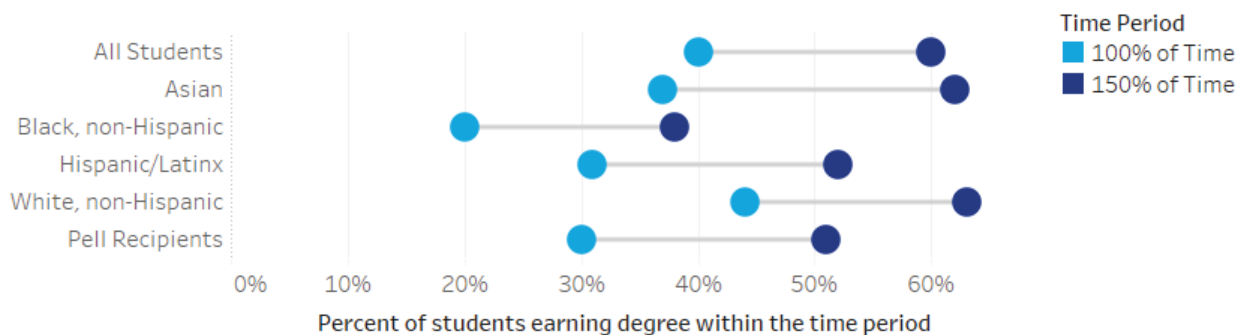


2012, but similar racial and ethnic disparities as in the high school completion and postsecondary enrollment datasets persisted (see Figure 6). For students completing their bachelor’s degree in the expected timeframe, only one student group held an average completion rate higher than the cohort’s overall average: 44% of white students received their bachelor’s degree, compared to the cohort average of 40%. Data for many individual HERA colleges and universities also reveal wide institutional gaps.

Promisingly, the increases over the 2012 cohort were largest for the non-white students: 20% of Black, non-Hispanic students in the 2015 cohort completed their bachelor’s degrees within four years, an increase of four percentage points over the 2012 cohort, while rates for Asian students increased by five percentage points to 37% and rates for Hispanic/Latinx students increased by six percentage points to 31%. For students completing their bachelor’s degrees in 150% of the expected timeframe, white students and Asian students both exceeded the cohort’s overall completion rate of 60%, while Hispanic/Latinx students saw the largest growth compared to the 2012 cohort. Data suppression limited our ability to conduct similar racial and ethnic analyses of students completing degrees or certificates of less than four years.

Figure 6: Bachelor’s Degree Completion Disparities Persist

Postsecondary completion rates of 2015 enrollees in four-year HERA programs, by race and ethnicity and economic status



Source: Higher Education Regional Alliance (HERA)

Students who receive federal assistance via Pell Grants because of their low-income status completed both types of degrees – bachelor’s and those earned in fewer than four years – at rates lower than their cohort average, but those in the 2015 bachelor’s degree cohort saw larger growth: whereas the overall increase over the 2012 cohort was three percentage points for all students, Pell Grant recipients increased their completion rate by six percentage points.

Female students outpaced male students in both absolute completion rates and growth in completion rates, and in both bachelor’s degrees and degrees or certificate programs of fewer than four years. Men closed the gap somewhat in the additional time between the expected completion timeframe and 150% of the expected completion timeframe. Breakdowns by disability status and English Learner status, which we examined in the high school completion and postsecondary enrollment sections, were not available for examination for this dataset.

Students at private institutions in the HERA consortium received their bachelor’s degrees at higher rates overall for the 2015 cohort than did University of Wisconsin (UW) institutions in the region: 56% versus 28% in the expected timeframe, and 70% versus 52% in 150% of the expected time frame. The UW System consortium participants saw greater growth, however, from the cohort of 2012 to the



cohort of 2015: up six percentage points for completion within the expected timeframe, compared to private institutions' growth of two percentage points; and up four percentage points for completion within 150% of the expected timeframe, compared to non-public institutions' growth of one percentage point. UW campuses participating in the HERA consortium include Milwaukee, Parkside, and Whitewater. A full list of participating institutions is available at <https://www.herawisconsin.org/higher-education-partners/>.

Taken together, **these data support calls for youth to receive postsecondary readiness services that seek to increase both college enrollment *and* completion rates.** While it appears that many students would benefit from these services, with no student group examined achieving completion rates above 50% within the expected timeframe, the lowest rates remain for students enrolled in degree or certificate programs of fewer than four years, Pell Grant recipients, male students, Black, non-Hispanic students, and Hispanic/Latinx students. Further data inquiry may reveal greater challenges for even more specific groups – for example, whether male Pell Grant recipients of color experience particularly low rates of completion.

Contributors to the “Leaky Pipeline”

It is beyond the scope of this report to comprehensively examine why so many Milwaukee students end their formal education before graduating from college. Review of some common causes is worthwhile, however, to contextualize the specific work in which Milwaukee's postsecondary readiness providers engage with youth.

Concerns of college affordability dominate many national and state conversations regarding access to and success in postsecondary education. As college costs increase, financial assistance and student debt relief efforts have struggled to keep pace, especially as the incoming student body has diversified. Our 2022 report, “[A Little Help](#),” summarized the benefits of financial aid for student enrollment and on-time graduation, and juxtaposed these benefits with the recent stagnation of need-based financial aid for students in Wisconsin. The impact of this statewide trend is likely to be greater in Milwaukee given the higher levels of poverty for students in the city.

An early step to increase students' financial aid is successful completion of the FAFSA, which is a prerequisite for federal grants, work-study, and loans. Other entities also use FAFSA information to determine aid eligibility. Research shows FAFSA completion is associated with a higher likelihood that a student will enroll in a postsecondary institution. Our 2021 brief, “[Free-Falling FAFSAs](#),” noted that Wisconsin's FAFSA completion rates began slipping in 2018, although schools serving a majority of students of color saw rises in completion rates prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As fundamental as financial capacity to attend college is academic readiness, an area in which Milwaukee K-12 schools have historically struggled to support students. The majority of public schools in Milwaukee lag statewide averages for math and reading proficiency across grade levels, and recent results from the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) reinforce that MPS is among the lowest-scoring large urban districts in the country. Insufficient academic preparation can prevent students both from accessing college and from succeeding upon enrollment.

Students who do successfully enroll in college may face institutional cultures that have largely been slow to adapt to the changing student bodies they serve. Our 2021 report on teacher diversity, “[Opening Doors](#),” documented qualitative data on a “common perception...that the culture of higher education systems, and especially four-year campuses, generally do not understand or adequately



take into account the needs of students of color, multilingual students, first generation college students, and those from low-income families.” For similar reasons, students may feel discouraged from pursuing college if they do not see students who “look like them” on college campuses, since this absence reinforces notions of who is – and is not – welcome in the space. While this description does not capture the experience of all institutions or students, research has increasingly validated the importance of a student’s “sense of belonging” to their future success.

Previous Forum research has also shown that college students in Milwaukee face greater challenges than in the rest of the state. For example, our [2021 report on UWM](#) found that it stood out among UW campuses for having large numbers of students of color, students with military or veteran status, and undergraduates receiving Pell Grants for low-income students. UWM graduates also have higher debt levels than the UW System as a whole, though like other UW campuses these debt levels have been falling. In a related finding, a [2019 review](#) by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York showed the metro Milwaukee area stood out for its racial disparities in student debt.

As we will see in the pages that follow, these common challenges and knowledge of their students have led many postsecondary readiness providers in Milwaukee to incorporate scholarships, scholarship application support, FAFSA completion support, academic preparation, and models that support students’ sense of belonging into their many offerings.



POSTSECONDARY READINESS PROGRAMS FOR MILWAUKEE YOUTH

As the postsecondary outcomes for Milwaukee youth indicate, students in the city would benefit from greater support in moving from high school completion to postsecondary enrollment and through college to earn their degree. And indeed, a wide range of organizations provide services designed to support the city's students in preparing for and succeeding in college.

Our review of these organizations is not intended to imply that they are solely responsible for solving Milwaukee's "completion crisis," nor that out-of-school programming represents a silver bullet. The inequality faced by so many Milwaukee youth requires a holistic approach that goes beyond any single intervention. Instead, we hope that this review of current programming allows providers and their supporters to see their work as part of a broader landscape serving Milwaukee youth and to identify additional opportunities to effectively serve their students.

To capture a snapshot of out-of-school postsecondary readiness programming in Milwaukee, we conducted a survey in the summer of 2022 and received responses from 29 of the 60 distinct programs contacted. All programs fulfilled these criteria for inclusion in the survey:

- The program is offered to youth from Milwaukee who are in (or are of age to be in) high school or college, up to age 24.
- The program aims to directly support participants' readiness for, or success in, postsecondary education.
- The program is offered outside of school coursework and traditional school offerings.
- Students and families actively opt into the program, rather than passively encountering it as part of a default school experience.
- Programming is offered on a regular basis rather than through single sessions.

In some cases, a lone entity might offer separate programs that each fulfilled these criteria, as was the case at some universities, for example. In these cases, we counted each program separately. The 29 programs are hosted by 24 individual entities.

While the 29 surveyed programs may not be perfectly representative of the full landscape of out-of-school postsecondary readiness programming for Milwaukee youth, their answers do provide insight into the range of offerings available.

Programs Serve Students at Specific Stages of Their Educational Journey

In general, programs captured via our survey are run and staffed by two types of service providers: nonprofit organizations and higher education institutions. Examples of the former include All-In Milwaukee and the Graduation Plus College Access and Success program at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee; examples of the latter include the Educational Opportunity Program at



Marquette University and three distinct federal TRIO and pre-college programs at UWM.⁶ In total, we counted 13 service providers operating as nonprofits, 12 providers operating within higher education institutions, and four providers outside of these two categories, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Postsecondary Readiness Programs Participating in WPF Survey⁷

Program Name	Housed At:			Students Served:		
	Nonprofit	Higher Ed	Other	High School Aged	College Aged	Approx. Annual Total
All-In Milwaukee	x				x	320
Boys and Girls Clubs Graduation Plus College Access and Success Program	x			x	x	670
College Possible Milwaukee	x			x	x	1850
Concordia University–Wisconsin First-Year Bridge Program		x			x	80
Concordia University–Wisconsin Unlimited Potential Scholars		x			x	10
Employ Milwaukee			x	x	x	1,000
Future Urban Leaders	x			x	x	40
"I Have a Dream" Foundation Milwaukee	x			x	x	25
Jobs for America's Graduates	x			x		50
Journey House THRIVE Career Pathways	x			x	x	340
Marquette University Educational Opportunity Program		x		x	x	800
M-Cubed College Connections			x	x		1,000
Milwaukee School of Engineering Carter Academy		x			x	90
MKE Fellows (ALIVE Inc. Milwaukee)	x			x		190
Mount Mary Grace Scholars		x			x	80
MPS College and Career Centers			x	x	x	10,850
PEARLS for Teen Girls College and Career Coach Program	x			x		1,200
Schuler Scholar Program	x			x	x	1,000
SecureFutures	x			x	x	4,300
United Community Center Pre-College Program	x			x	x	780

⁶ Nine programs administered by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education are considered to be "TRIO programs," so called because there were originally only three. TRIO programs provide direct or indirect support to designated student groups in their educational journey from middle school through post-baccalaureate completion. More information is available at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>.

⁷ Representatives of Milwaukee Area Technical College's Multicultural Student Services Department joined WPF researchers for a key informant interview conducted after the survey. Their insight is not included in the summaries of survey responses but rather incorporated into overall analysis along with other key informants'. Representatives from Milwaukee Succeeds' Youth Forward MKE initiative also joined WPF researchers for a key informant interview conducted after the survey. We are grateful for the contributions of all individuals and groups listed here.

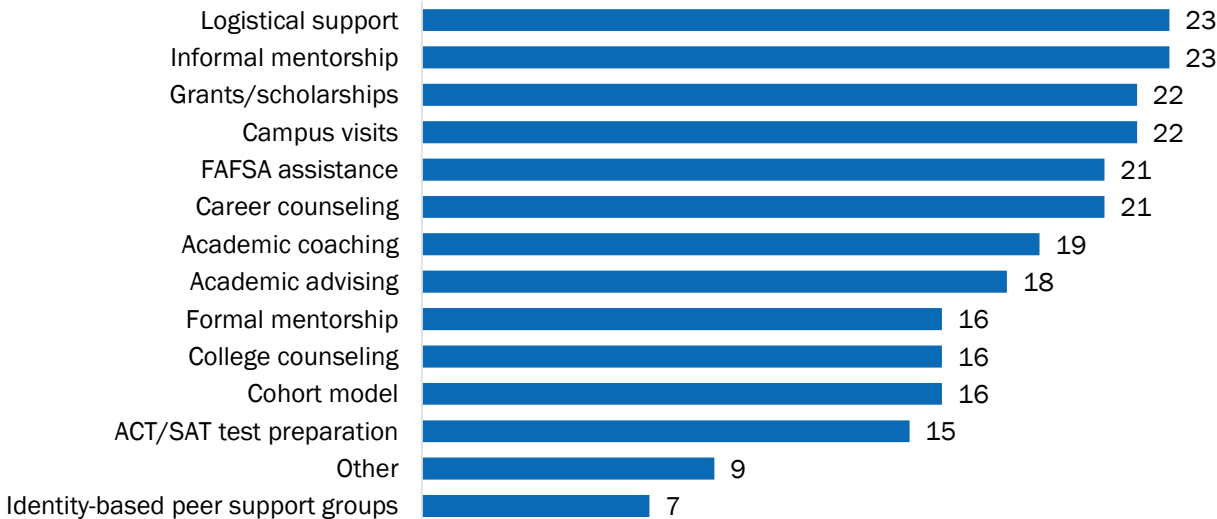


Program Name	Housed At:			Students Served:		
	Nonprofit	Higher Ed	Other	High School Aged	College Aged	Approx. Annual Total
UW–Madison Precollege Enrichment Opportunity Program for Learning Excellence (PEOPLE)		x		x	x	1,125
UWM Black Student Cultural Center		x		x	x	2,600
UWM Future Success Program		x		x		110
UWM Roberto Hernández Center		x		x	x	1,900
UWM Upward Bound		x		x		50
UWM Upward Bound Math and Science		x		x		60
UW–Parkside Promise Plus		x			x	120
Wisconsin Educational Opportunity Programs (DPI)			x	x		3,000
YWCA of Metro Milwaukee Teen Achievers Program	x			x		50

These programs addressed various stages of students’ progress through the pipeline from high school completion to postsecondary completion. Programs might support students’ *access and entry* into higher education, students’ *readiness* (academic and socioemotional) for education beyond high school, or student’s *success and completion* once enrolled in postsecondary education. Notably, most of the surveyed programs resisted easy categorization into solely one of these three stages of support.

Regardless of setting, providers reported that their programming incorporates a range of services for youth. The most frequently provided services are logistical support, informal mentorship, provision of (or support in accessing) grants and scholarships, campus visits, FAFSA assistance, and career counseling (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Providers Offer Multiple Services through Youth Programming
Number of surveyed programs providing each service



Source: WPF survey. The 29 surveyed providers could select more than one answer.



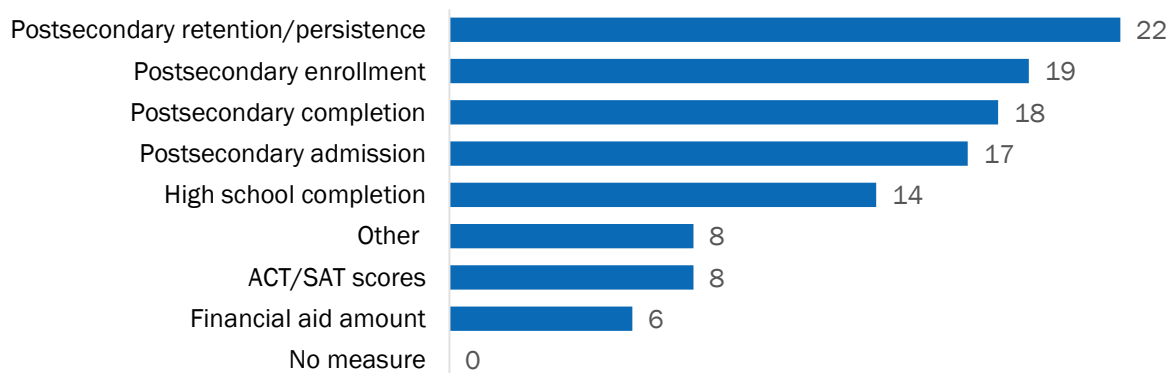
The average program provides 8.2 services, perhaps indicating that few programs find a single intervention to be sufficient and instead rely upon a more holistic approach that combines multiple services and supports. And indeed, when we followed up with selected providers in key informant interviews, many pointed to a case management model as key to their work: rather than making students “do the runaround,” as one interviewee called it, these programs prided themselves on acting as a one-stop support shop for youth, either providing services themselves or acting as connectors to available services elsewhere.

Open-ended survey responses provided illustrative examples of how services that appear similar on paper may look quite different in practice or may differ depending upon their combinations. There are summer programs and year-round programs, programs that specialize in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), programs that prioritize securing financial assistance for students, and programs that pair financial assistance with robust advising and family engagement.

One intensive program begins working with students in the summer before ninth grade and builds in a residential, six-week summer school module alongside 22 weeks of after-school and weekend services during the school year. A less intensive model has advisors meeting students on a monthly or quarterly basis at their schools but also offers a drop-in center and monthly workshops. We learned of service delivery variations regarding frequency of contact with participants, eligibility requirements, content focus, length of program, and more, the most notable of which we will explore later in the report.

While this study was not commissioned to be evaluative in nature and did not analyze programs’ results, examining the impact that providers seek to have offered another way of understanding programmatic differences and similarities within the landscape. Participants’ persistence through college (i.e., not leaving partway through a degree program) topped the list of evaluation metrics used by survey respondents, with 22 programs (75.9%) selecting it (see Figure 8). Postsecondary enrollment, completion, and admission followed, with well over half of surveyed programs selecting each one – 19, 18, and 17 programs, respectively.

Figure 8: Programs Measure Impact on Key Student Success Milestones
Number of surveyed programs using each metric to measure impact



Source: WPF survey. The 29 surveyed providers could select more than one answer.

These numbers suggest that providers have successfully organized themselves around the “leaky pipeline,” with each milestone – postsecondary admission, enrollment, persistence, and completion



– representing a leak they seek to plug. Fewer providers reported tracking student access and readiness measures, such as the amount of financial aid secured or ACT or SAT scores attained.

Our survey criteria only included providers who maintain regular contact with their youth participants rather than those who offer one-off opportunities. For example, a nonprofit that hosted campus visits but no other form of postsecondary support was not counted in this study. Even so, surveyed providers showed wide variation in the frequency with which they offer their services. Nine programs, representing 31% of survey respondents, engage their students several times per week, while four programs (13.8%) engage their students on a weekly basis and seven (24.1%) engage their students on a monthly basis. Six programs (20.7%) engage their students on an “as-needed” basis; at least two of these build in two to four checkpoints over the course of a year. Finally, three programs (10.3%) reported that the frequency of student contact was dependent on the specific service that students were accessing, such as a single class versus a summer series.

Programs Serve Youth in Need, with Opportunity for Expansion

Given the great need among Milwaukee students, which students these programs seek to serve and their eligibility requirements are important factors. The average program surveyed uses at least two criteria to select students. The most common is the school that participants attend. Just over half (51.7%) of the programs surveyed limit their programming to students who attend a specific set of high schools, colleges, or both. In some cases, this criterion reflects where the program is housed – for example, a promise scholarship program at a specific university is only available to students who enroll at that institution. In other cases, the requirement reflects established relationships between a nonprofit organization hosting the program and specific high schools or colleges that program participants might attend.

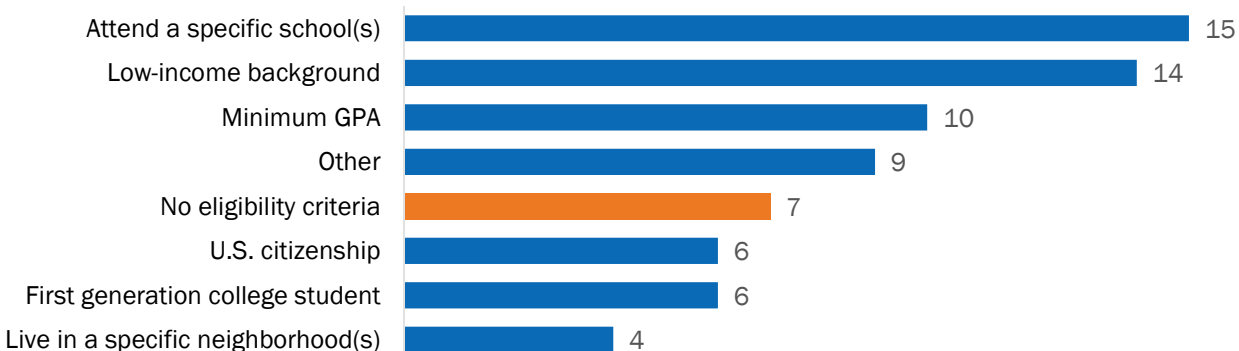
Student need factors into many but not all programs’ eligibility requirements (see Figure 9 on page 22). Fourteen of the surveyed programs, or 48.3%, only serve students from low-income backgrounds. Six programs, or 20.7%, serve students who are or would be first-generation college students. Of the 15 programs that accept students from specific schools, at least some define the schools with whom they have relationships based on need as understood by the schools’ demographics and history. Similarly, four programs, or 13.8%, solely serve students who live in a specific neighborhood or set of neighborhoods. Nine programs, or 31.0%, indicated that they use a criterion not listed among the survey preset options (marked as “Other” in Figure 9), with four of those noting that they target specific student demographic groups that may benefit from additional individualized support (e.g., “African American males between the ages of 16 to 23”) and two of them marking evidence of students’ need for academic support as a criterion.

On the other hand, 10 programs, or 34.5%, require students to have a minimum grade point average (GPA), although cutoffs vary widely; some programs set a low threshold intended simply to identify high school students with enough credits that postsecondary education appears as a viable option, while other programs’ higher thresholds prioritize those students that they believe are most likely to succeed if supported. Six programs, or 20.7%, serve students who are U.S. citizens (with at least one of these also accepting permanent residents), likely reflecting requirements of federal funding and prompting one interviewee to raise concerns that undocumented students (including those temporarily protected from deportation by federal law and permitted to work) may be underserved. Seven programs surveyed have no eligibility requirements.



Figure 9: Student Need One of Several Possible Criteria for Program Eligibility

Number of surveyed programs using each criterion to select potential participants



Source: WPF survey. The 29 surveyed providers could select more than one answer.

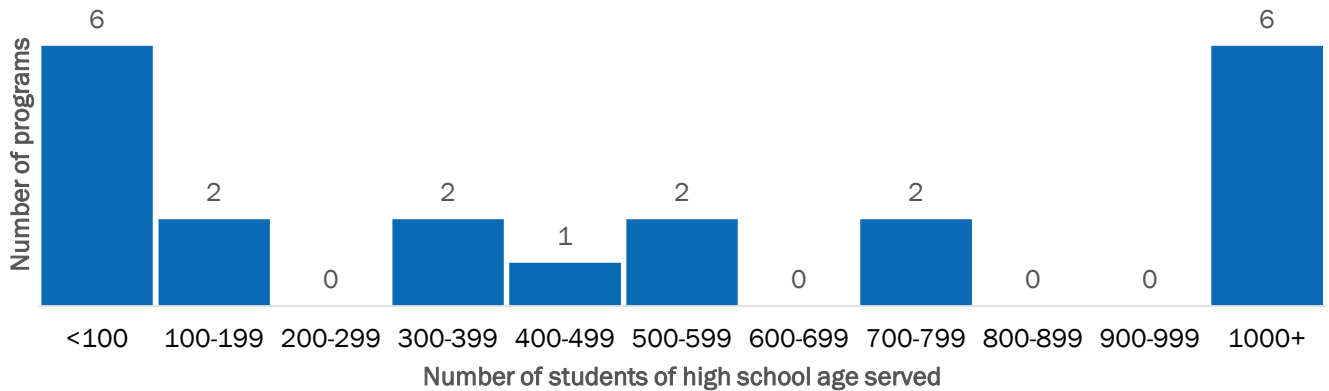
It may be surprising to some that more providers do not use eligibility requirements to target their programming to the student populations facing the largest gaps in postsecondary enrollment and completion, and it is possible that narrowing this focus could be an area of opportunity for providers. At the same time, however, the available data show there is ample room for improvement in serving most student populations in Milwaukee, and implementing further eligibility requirements could create more barriers and work for both programs and participants. These facts may justify programs taking a more inclusive approach, especially those that are not yet operating at full capacity. In fact, several providers noted that they had either recently expanded eligibility or wished they could do so to avoid stacking resources at a subset of schools and to meet the full range of need in the city.

The smallest program surveyed serves 10 students of high school or college age per year, while the largest serves over 10,800. In total, the 29 programs surveyed serve approximately 24,800 high school-age students and 9,100 college-age students per year (although these counts may include duplicates, since we cannot account for students participating in more than one program).

Figures 10 and 11 on page 23 show the distribution of programs by the number of students they serve. Programs serving students of high school age tend toward the extremes of serving either fewer than 100 students or more than 1,000 students. Programs serving students of college age are somewhat more likely to serve fewer than 100 students per year, at least among those programs surveyed. These smaller numbers among college-age students may reflect the drop-off between high school completion and postsecondary enrollment seen in the quantitative data. They may also suggest that expansion of programming to follow students into postsecondary education or to meet them once they arrive may be warranted.

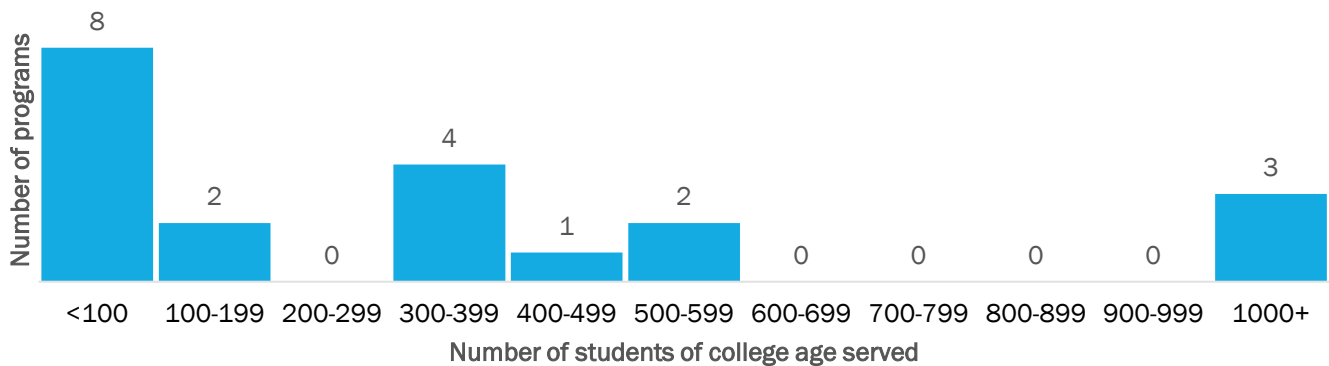


Figure 10: Programs Serving High School Students Skew Small or Large
Number of surveyed programs by size of program



Source: WPF survey.

Figure 11: Programs Serving College-Age Students Skew Small
Number of surveyed programs by size of program



Source: WPF survey

Unsurprisingly, given this range in program size, annual budgets for these programs also vary widely: from less than \$20,000 to \$3.5 million. In a few cases, the larger budgets include the grants and scholarships that programs solicit for or provide to participating students. Larger budgets also often enable more intensive service models such as case management.

Programs receive funding from a variety of national, state, and local sources, with the average program drawing upon 2.3 types of funding sources. The majority of respondents who selected “other” (seven out of 13) indicated that they received funding from their home institution, whether a university or MPS. When asked about *primary* funding source, survey respondents most frequently identified local philanthropy (see Figure 12 on the following page), with 34.4% selecting this response. This approach may reflect the fact that almost four-fifths (79.3%) of respondents are not affiliated with a national organization and only operate locally.

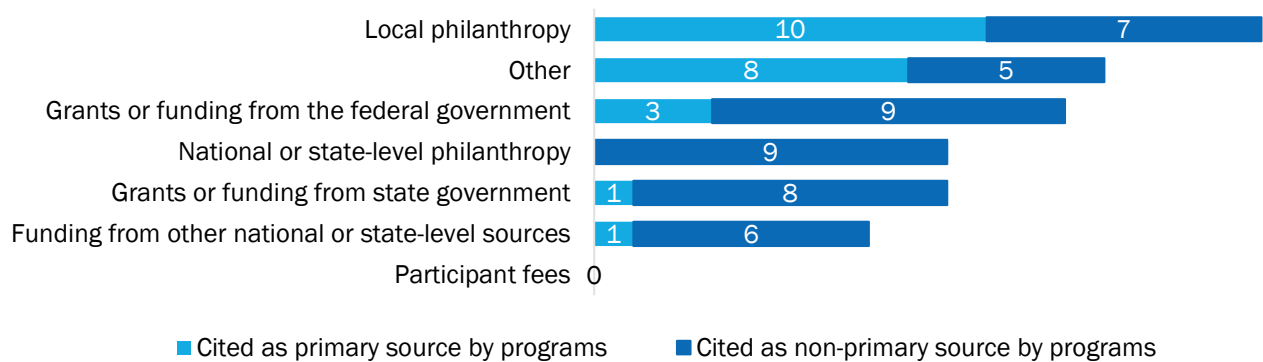
A natural question is whether these programs compete for the same sources of local charitable giving, which could lead to instability if funder priorities and dynamics shift. When programs listed



their specific donors, however, we saw little overlap, as only two foundations appeared multiple times in survey answers.

Moreover, almost three quarters (72.4%) of survey respondents have operated in Milwaukee for seven or more years, indicating that funding sources have remained steady enough to sustain this diverse range of programming over time and suggesting that many programs in the city now benefit from established track records and philanthropic relationships. While programs may still be competing for federal and state funds, and while the 29 surveyed programs may not represent the full landscape, the respondents that rely largely on local philanthropy appear to be operating with relative stability.

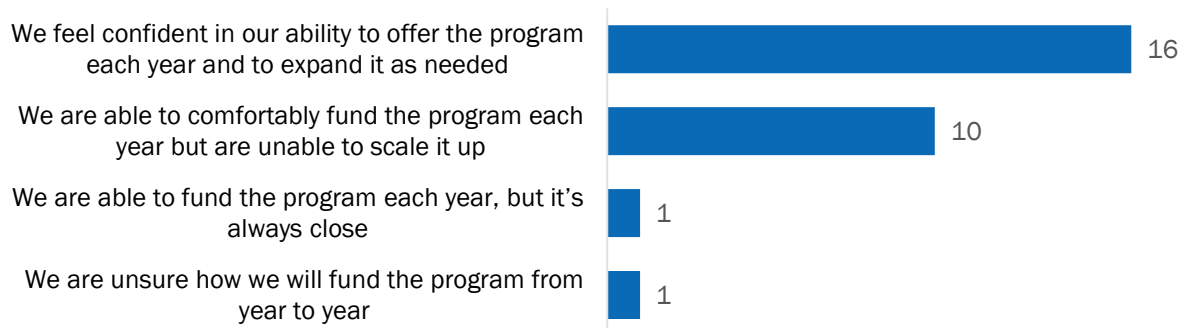
Figure 12: Programs Rely Heavily on Local Philanthropy
Number of programs receiving funding from each source



Source: WPF survey.

Further survey answers affirm this stability, with respondents overwhelmingly identifying their programs as securely funded (see Figure 13). Strikingly, over half (57.1%) of respondents believe that not only can they consistently offer their current programming, year over year, but also that they could expand their programming further. It is not clear how *much* more funding is available locally or through federal and state sources to support expansion, but our survey responses indicate that the system is not yet fully “tapped.”

Figure 13: Programs Express Confidence in Their Financial Capacity
Number of programs selecting each self-descriptive statement



Source: WPF survey. Only one selection allowed per respondent; one response missing due to incomplete survey.



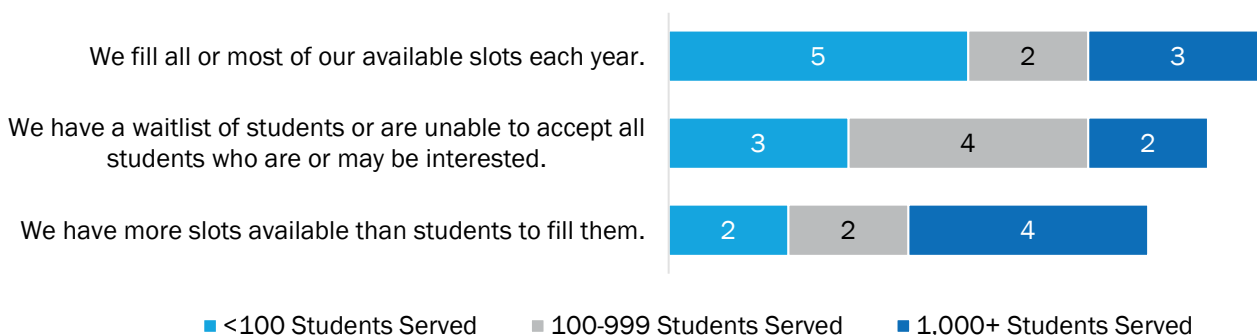
This perceived opportunity for expansion is promising, especially given the breadth of need reflected in the quantitative data. Yet barriers exist, most prominently with regard to funding and staffing. Eleven surveyed programs identified funding as a challenge in open-ended responses discussing opportunities to scale up (somewhat contradicting their responses to our direct question on financial capacity). Staffing arose as the second most frequently discussed barrier, identified by nine programs. In some cases, this challenge was another manifestation of the funding barrier, since the additional staff necessary to support additional students or services would increase program costs to a worrisome degree. In other cases, programs expressed concern about successfully recruiting quality candidates.

We were not able to fully resolve this seeming paradox of several programs reporting financial security and further potential for expansion on the one hand, but several also reporting funding as a challenge preventing them from expanding. Some of the disconnect derives from programs experiencing different levels of fundraising success: in a slim majority of cases, the programs that identified funding as an expansion barrier were not the same programs that identified themselves as confident in their ability to expand. Yet five out of the eleven programs in the former group were also in the latter group.

One interviewee clarified that her program was positioned for expansion contingent upon securing additional funding, which is perhaps how others interpreted the question as well. Another possible explanation may be related to the case management model employed by many of these programs. This high-touch model, which relies upon frequent contact and deep relationships with students, is resource-intensive. Additional grant or philanthropic funding may be available but not in amounts that allow for scaling up to a significant degree.

Student enrollment emerged as the next most frequently identified barrier to expansion. Although only three programs explicitly mentioned difficulty attracting student participants, other survey responses appeared to cast it as a broader challenge. When asked about capacity to serve all interested participants, results showed that some programs are currently underutilized, with 28.6% of respondents answering that they have more slots available than they have students to fill them, and only 32.1% seeing evidence of student demand to fill additional slots were they able to expand (see Figure 14). Underutilization is concentrated amongst the largest programs, which emphasizes both the potential for more students to be served but also likely challenges in tapping that potential.

Figure 14: Fewer Than Half of Programs See Student Demand Exceed Current Supply
Number of programs selecting each self-descriptive statement (out of 28 survey respondents)



Source: WPF survey. Only one selection allowed per respondent; one response missing due to incomplete survey.



Bridging the Gap Between Students and Services

With clear indications from the quantitative data that more students could benefit from postsecondary readiness programming than are currently receiving it, the above data on supply and demand and related factors become critical. Ideally, the third of programs that are currently unable to serve all interested students would be able to expand to meet demand or would redirect students to other beneficial programs that have capacity to serve them. On the other end of the landscape, the third of programs that are currently underutilized would improve their recruitment to more effectively reach youth who could derive value from their programming.

Both our survey responses and key informant interviews provided important perspective on some specific steps that might be considered to enhance the reach and effectiveness of the postsecondary readiness service landscape:

- **Minimize competition in student recruitment.** Interviewees frequently pointed to overlap in the students whom programs targeted, with specific schools or student groups receiving the bulk of programs' attention and potentially leaving demand from other students untapped. Our survey was not able to precisely define which parts of the city or student population may be garnering the most consideration from programs. Some interviewees suggested, however, that recruiting may currently be focused on higher-achieving students, on students from low-income households, and on schools serving large proportions of students matching these profiles. Moreover, a substantial number reported that they experienced the most success securing funding when they could demonstrate serving these types of students. This concentrated attention may result in multiple programs competing to recruit from the same pool of students, overwhelming the targeted students and schools and leaving out others.
- **Maximize alignment for participants shared across programs.** Cases of concentrated recruitment can result in the same students participating across several programs at the same time. Multiple interviewees recognized the danger of overstressing students and spoke of their efforts to counsel recruited students on where they invest their time and energy. On the other hand, survey respondents and interviewees also gave examples of students benefiting from participating in multiple programs at once or in succession, pointing to an overall positive effect of wraparound support. This net positive effect may be most likely to occur when program providers are in communication and can ensure that their services are aligned to be complementary for participants.
- **Expand and diversify recruitment.** Available data indicate a risk that some students are never recruited to apply to any program, much less multiple programs. In a city where a majority of public school students come from low-income households, income eligibility thresholds that are too restrictive can exclude students who will still struggle to afford college. Achievement eligibility thresholds based on students' GPA or other metrics, meanwhile, can skew participation toward students already positioned relatively well for postsecondary success. While these students likely still benefit from the services offered by Milwaukee providers, current offerings may be excluding students who, with additional support, could raise their achievement levels and increase their likelihood of attending and succeeding in college. The available evidence suggests that college-aged students and undocumented students may also currently be underserved. The same may be true for economically disadvantaged, Black, and Hispanic students as pandemic recovery continues and their high school completion



rates hopefully again begin to rise. Note that any programs diversifying their recruitment will need to consider how to adapt their goals and services to appropriately support their newest recruits, whose specific assets and needs may diverge from other participants’.

- **Ensure students perceive programming as valuable.** Students are less likely to sign up for a program if its services are not perceived as helpful. One relatively new program to Milwaukee projected greater enrollment in future years as the past participants vouched for the quality of the program’s services. Another program noted that the number of students they serve rose over time as they learned more about the specific needs of their participants and built services around those needs. In cases where program metrics reveal positive results, a provider may not need to adjust services but rather employ a more effective communication and recruitment strategy.

With 82.8% of survey respondents reporting that they already actively recruit students into their programs, these recommendations may help address the apparent disconnect between student need and student access to, and interest in, programming. Implementation of these recommendations may vary widely by provider, however, according to their budget, service model, reach, and particular expertise. For example, a federally-funded program may contend with strict eligibility constraints. A program employing a case management model may justifiably hesitate to expand recruitment without assurance that it could maintain the quality of its wraparound services.

These recommendations are therefore best understood as applicable to the landscape as a whole, with individual providers implementing them according to their unique positions and value to students and the landscape. Such implementation will likely require greater awareness among providers of each other’s services, greater coordination and partnership between providers, and some education of funders on the current levels of unmet need in order to redirect dollars to their most efficient use. Specific suggestions to support these conditions for success are detailed in the final section of this report.

Service Delivery Success Factors and Obstacles

Although this report is not meant to evaluate individual programs, survey responses and interviewees identified several ingredients for student success that are relevant and worth considering for the overall landscape of programs in Milwaukee. These approaches included:

- Serve with passion for student success.
- Invest in strong and consistent program leadership.
- Clearly communicate program expectations and structure to participants.
- Establish meaningful relationships with participants.
- Continuously improve to meet student needs.
- Match program needs with appropriate physical space.
- Use data to tightly focus decisions on what work to take on and with whom.
- Leverage partnerships to expand services available to students.

While none of these factors may be particularly surprising, further exploration of them with interviewees revealed some key obstacles and opportunities for improvement.



- **Financial literacy is a frequently unmet student need.** Multiple interviewees reported witnessing program participants struggling not only with the financial considerations specifically associated with attending college – such as understanding and accessing available resources and analyzing the costs and benefits of taking on debt – but also with financial life skills such as understanding credit scores and managing car payments. In a couple of instances, providers noted partnerships with organizations like SecureFutures and Educators Credit Union to meet these needs. MPS’ rollout of its relatively new requirement for students to complete a personal finance course in order to graduate may also help fill this gap. Some providers noted that undocumented students may face complex financial challenges that require more support and innovation to address. Importantly, this overall need for financial literacy is distinct from the equally concerning issue of college affordability. Greater understanding of personal finance may allow students and families to make the most of available resources but does not unto itself generate additional resources necessary to attain postsecondary education.
- **Mental health needs are growing.** Interviewees noted both a spike in mental health needs among students, especially through the COVID-19 pandemic, and their programs’ current limitations in meeting those needs. These limitations may be both internal and external. In the case of the former, staff may lack the capacity, training, and knowledge to identify student needs well enough to connect them with appropriate resources. Even if staff are able to do so, available external mental health resources are themselves stretched thin and may be difficult to access. One interviewee noted that students faced a six- to eight-week waiting list simply to get a consultation with a mental health professional. Brainstormed solutions from providers include partnering with university health centers and master’s programs in counseling and building a list of resources organized by geographic service area and by specialization. All programs in the city might benefit from having access to such a list.
- **Access to appropriate physical space is critical.** Interviewees from programs serving university students highlighted the value that students derived from their program centers acting as “safe and welcoming space[s]” in which they could not only receive services but also simply feel at home. Programs serving high school youth that have designated offices within high school buildings reported that those offices eased students’ access to and participation in their programming. Programs serving high school youth without such spaces reported more difficulty recruiting participants or securing appropriate alternative locations in which to provide services. The Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee recently addressed this challenge by opening a new Ready Center building, which now houses all of the Clubs’ college and career readiness efforts in a one-stop shop for youth. Such a solution seems unlikely to work for all Milwaukee programs, however, due to distinct programming needs and available capital.
- **The “network effect” is a promising result of even basic partnerships.** Limited interviews with youth suggested that students may first learn about other programs through their involvement with an initial program that acts as a connector. For example, one youth was accepted into a selective program after learning about it from a formal mentor with another program. This multiplying effect can mean that student involvement in even a single program can yield additional dividends, while students who do not participate in a single program may



effectively miss out on the full *network* of programs. To activate these potentially compounding benefits, providers must themselves know about other programs and services.

- **“Warm handoffs” are a promising form of deep partnership.** In these formal or informal relationships, program efforts follow students as they transition into another program, institution, or life stage (like entry into the job market). The source program coordinates with the receiving institution or takes other steps to minimize the risk that a student will fail to receive the necessary support through the transitions. Some programs may follow their participants through the full high school to postsecondary completion pipeline or even into the workforce, but these programs are rare, presumably due to challenges of scope and resourcing.

These noted gaps and promising practices recall the common challenges cited in our exploration of the “leaky pipeline,” which centered on the dangers when students do not feel a sense of belonging, are not academically ready for the next stage of their educational journey, or are not equipped financially. Extrapolating from our key informant interviews, we might build out our understanding of these challenges to include the role that physical space can play in students’ sense of belonging; students’ and families’ financial difficulties beyond college affordability that could be at least partially ameliorated through greater financial literacy; the unmet socio-emotional and mental health needs for Milwaukee youth; and the potential for greater coordination and collaboration between programs to support students.



SETTING CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

The quantitative data on public school students' progression through high school and college show the odds are currently stacked against Milwaukee youth. High school graduation rates lag the state, and less than half of students completing high school will go on to enroll in college. Available data indicate that, even once enrolled, students often do not receive their degree in the expected time frame, if at all. These dispiriting odds worsen for vulnerable and marginalized student groups.

To improve these outcomes, a bevy of out-of-school programs have been operating for years to support students' access to, and success in, postsecondary education. Our data, observations, and interviews capture a snapshot of Milwaukee's postsecondary readiness programming and invite reflection about the landscape's characteristics, strengths, and challenges.

Survey results indicated that the average program in Milwaukee focuses on one or more key gaps in the pipeline (college admission, enrollment, persistence, and completion), offers multiple types of services, has operated in the city for seven or more years, is unaffiliated with national programs, and relies upon local philanthropy in addition to other funding sources.

Both surveys and key informant interviews revealed evidence that this relatively stable and locally-focused landscape **is not yet reaching as many students as it could**. One third of surveyed programs reported being unable to serve all interested students, which indicates sufficient demand for expansion – if possible. Another third reported that they do not typically fill all available student slots, raising a different concern that existing programs are not always effectively reaching the students who could benefit from their services or providing sufficient benefit to inspire future students to join.

Our analysis of the supply and demand disconnect between students and services yielded four primary recommendations for the landscape:

- Minimize program recruitment competition.
- Maximize alignment for participants shared across programs.
- Expand and diversify recruitment.
- Ensure students perceive programming as valuable by adjusting services or better communicating their value.

In addition to these recommendations, we noted a need for greater emphasis on financial literacy, mental health needs, and appropriate physical space, as well as the potential benefits of more coordination and deeper partnerships among service providers.

While none of these actions or needs are easily met, we conclude by offering some specific steps that providers, host institutions, and funders might immediately undertake to set the conditions for improving the reach and effectiveness of postsecondary readiness programming in Milwaukee:

- **Host an annual summit of similar programs for strategic collaboration.** Specifically, such a gathering could be centered on addressing the apparent need for better coordination between programs as a means of reducing duplication of recruiting efforts and “spreading the wealth” of available resources to underserved schools and students. Our interviews indicated that some initial meetings of this kind have been occurring among some programs, and we encourage their



continuation and expansion. For maximum impact, an annual summit may benefit from dedicated leadership and sponsorship.

- **Hold regular smaller provider meetings to promote ongoing partnership and coordination.** A blueprint for these touchpoints might be MPS' monthly calls with various college readiness providers, which the district began hosting during the pandemic and which created an opportunity for providers to – in the words of one survey respondent – “share concerns, solve problems, and keep abreast of ongoing MPS policies and procedures pertinent to these organizations’ common goals.” In this context of communication and problem-solving, meetings may also focus on opportunities for providers to strategically partner to learn from and complement each other’s areas of expertise; further plug the “leaky pipeline” through more warm hand-offs; and address needs related to families’ financial literacy, student mental health, and appropriate physical space for programs.
- **Build and maintain up-to-date resource lists to further ensure that program leaders and staff are familiar with each other and each other’s services.** The “network effect” of programs being able to match their participants’ needs with other programs as relevant depends on staff members first knowing the available offerings. A resource catalog may be developed in a simple list format or as a more sophisticated database that allows for sorting and recommending programs based on characteristics like students’ interests, GPA, and demographics (akin to some national scholarship databases). These resource lists can also help fill a knowledge gap for school-based staff like principals, teachers, and guidance counselors and for students and families themselves. The [Black and Latino/a Ecosystem Support Transition \(BLEST\) Hub](#) and [Cream City Talent Collective](#) both represent promising forays into such “one-stop shops.” The MPS College and Career Centers may be an appropriate place to house such a compendium of resources due to the number of students they see and the number of programs with which they coordinate.

Of course, even if all of the above were to occur and every student in Milwaukee gained access to a postsecondary readiness program, participation alone does not guarantee student success. We encourage programs to continue gathering data on students, to refine which metrics best reflect their impact, and to publish their results. These results may be especially illuminating given the high percentage of programs that have been operating in Milwaukee for many years. DPI may also wish to consider collecting and reporting more comprehensive and comparable high school completion data for private schools and more accessible and interpretable postsecondary enrollment data to facilitate programs’ self-evaluation and further inform funders, policymakers, and families.

Even with expanded and coordinated programming that reaches more students and is based on strong data, substantial challenges for students are likely to remain. Partnerships between programs – both those offering services and those offering financial assistance – may increase students’ access to resources, but college remains unattainable for many. Mental health needs soared during the pandemic and the current system is unable to meet demand. And even when students successfully enroll in college, many are not prepared academically.

Out-of-school postsecondary readiness programs cannot solve all of these issues, nor should we expect them to do so. K-12 schools, the higher education system, and broader social institutions all have responsibilities to prepare and support students for success. Still, we hope these observations and analyses will provide both insight and an invitation for reflection and improvement for postsecondary readiness providers, their funders, and the students who depend upon them.



APPENDIX A: WPF STUDY ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Organization(s)	Committee Member(s)
All-In Milwaukee	Allison Wagner
Associated General Contractors of Greater Milwaukee	Mark Kessenich
Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee	Melinda Wyant Jansen Andre Douglas
Dr. Howard Fuller Collegiate Academy	Judith Parker
Higher Education Regional Alliance University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee	Vicki Turner
Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce	Susan Koehn
Milwaukee Area Technical College	Yan Wang
Milwaukee Public Schools	John Hill
Milwaukee Succeeds	Lorna Dilley
Rockwell Automation	Marci Pelzer
St. Augustine Preparatory Academy	Josephine Gomez

Note: Listings reflect members' organizational affiliations at the time of the study advisory committee's convening in February 2022.

