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STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH APPLIED RESEARCH LAB
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

DATA BRIEF:
COLLEGE-GOING RATES AMONG
GRADUATES OF WISCONSIN
PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

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Overview

This data brief documents college-going rates among Wisconsin's public high school graduates. It focuses on overall college-going rates and disaggregates rates by students' race/ethnicity and economic disadvantage status. It also highlights how college-going rates have changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. All data used in this report are from the [Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction \(DPI\)](#), which links public high school completion data with postsecondary enrollment records provided by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) from the 2009-10 school year (i.e., fall 2009 to spring 2010) to the 2020-21 school year. Supplemental data can be found in the Appendix.¹

This brief finds:

- Wisconsin's college-going rate typically hovers around 60% and since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic dropped below 50%.
- When Wisconsin high school graduates go to college, the majority (around 75%) stay in-state.
- On average, college-going rates are typically 20 percentage points higher for white and Asian students than for American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students.
- Similarly, college-going rates for non-economically disadvantaged students are about 27 percentage points higher rates than economically disadvantaged students.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many of these college-going patterns, and this data brief suggest areas in which gaps may close or widen over time.

Overall College-Going Rates by Institution Type and Location

During the 2019-20 school year - the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic - 58,860 students graduated from a Wisconsin public high school. Among these students, 29,368 enrolled in college during the immediate fall semester after graduating, resulting in a reduced *college-going rate* of 50%.² In the pandemic's second year (2020-21) college-going rates fell even further to 47%. As shown in Table 1, the state's typical college-going rate hovered around 60% prior to the pandemic. It also shows the total number of students graduating from high school *and* the total number going to college fell for several years (from 2009-10 to 2016-17), rebounded for a few years, and then fell sharply at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only are college-going rates falling, but the total number of students graduating from high school and attending college are also falling.

¹ Please also see the SSTAR Lab's interactive data tool for exploring Wisconsin's college-going trends at the high school and county level: <https://sstar.wisc.edu/college-going-students-in-wisconsin/>.

² This report focuses on "first fall" college enrollments throughout.



Table 1:

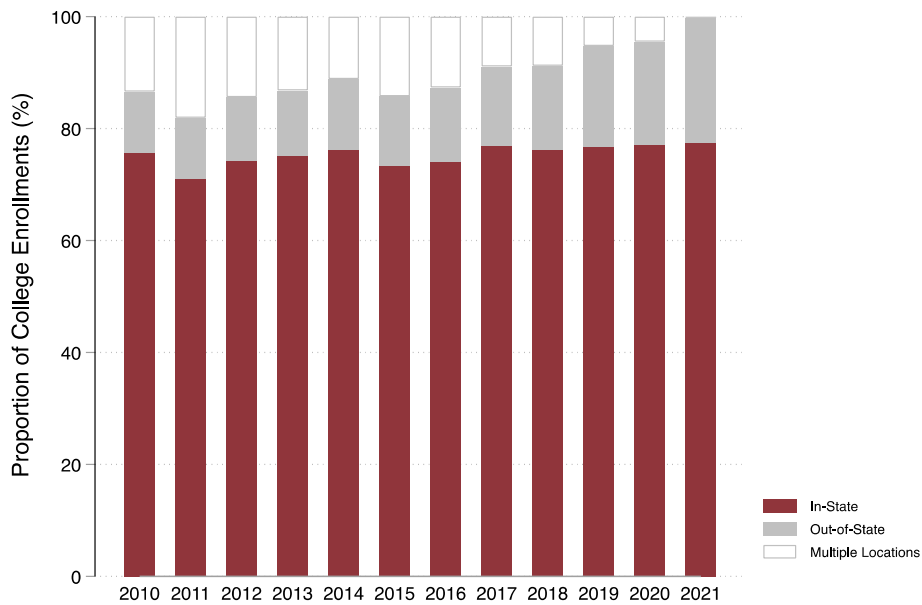
Annual college-going rates among Wisconsin’s public high school graduates

	Public High School Graduates	Number of HS Grads Enrolled in College	College-going rate
2009-10	62,255	37,571	60%
2010-11	61,653	37,214	60%
2011-12	60,454	36,905	61%
2012-13	59,145	36,695	62%
2013-14	58,840	36,611	62%
2014-15	57,936	36,076	62%
2015-16	56,146	35,632	63%
2016-17	58,447	36,917	63%
2017-18	59,759	36,857	62%
2018-19	59,594	36,020	60%
2019-20	58,860	29,368	50%
2020-21	58,433	27,382	47%

When Wisconsin high school graduates enroll in college, most stay in Wisconsin. Figure 1 shows that approximately 80% of students stayed in-state in 2020-21, while approximately 20% went out-of-state. In prior years, a sizable share of students attended at least one in-state and one out-of-state institution in the same year (i.e., “multiple locations”) while the share staying in-state has slowly risen over time (even prior to the pandemic).³

Figure 1:

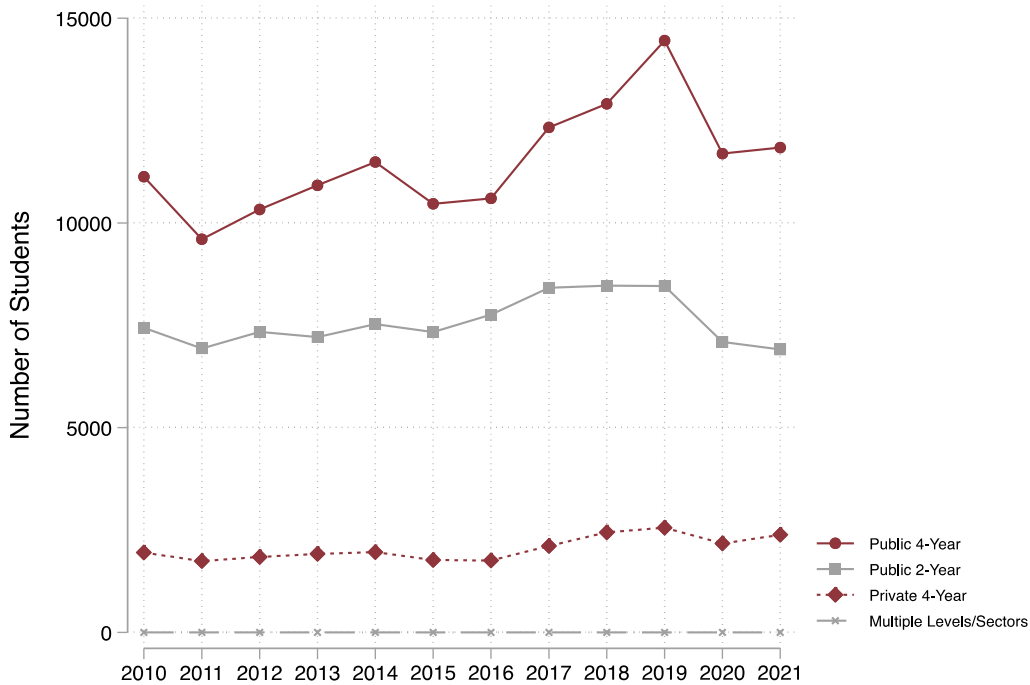
In-State and Out-of-State College Enrollments



³ See Appendix A and Appendix B for more detail by student’s race/ethnicity and economic disadvantage.

Most public high school graduates who stay in-state for college attend public four-year universities as shown in Figure 2 below. Two caveats are useful for interpreting this figure. First, the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) accounts for the vast majority of “public two-year” enrollments in the state while the University of Wisconsin System (UWS) accounts for all “public four-year” enrollments.⁴ Second, if a student transfers in their first year of college, they are accounted for in the “multiple locations” category.

Figure 2:
In-State College Enrollments by Sector & Level



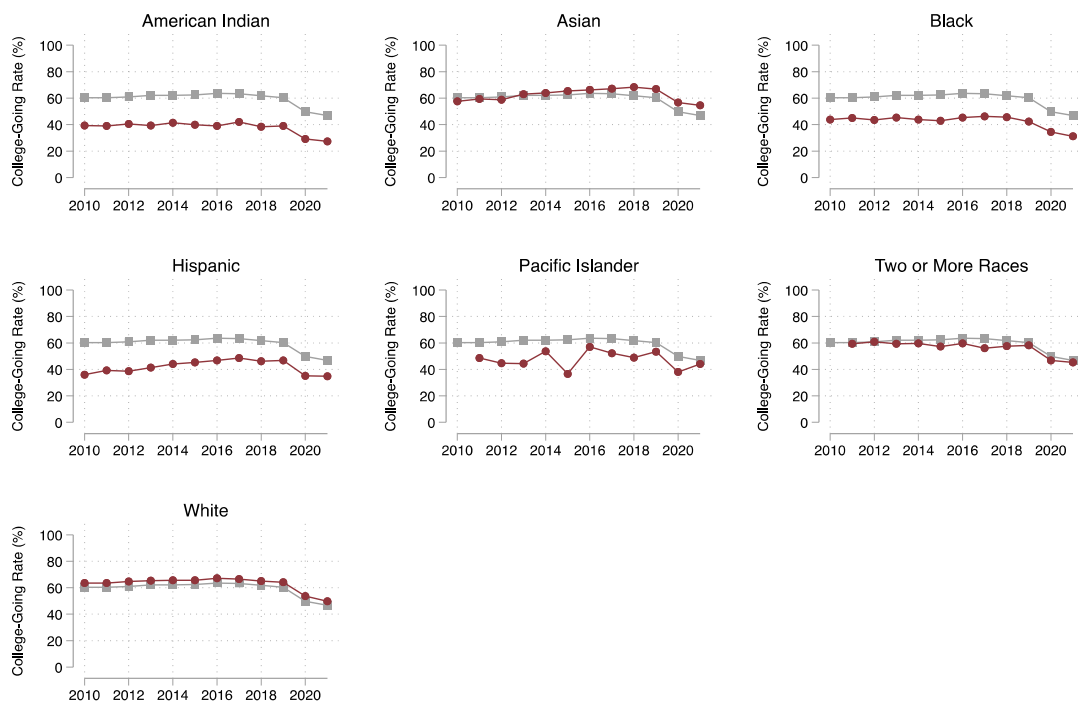
College-Going Rates by Race/Ethnicity

Wisconsin faces significant racial and socioeconomic disparities in college-going rates. Figure 3 shows overall college-going rates among public school graduates by race/ethnicity in comparison to the overall state rate. White and Asian students enroll in college at much higher rates than American Indian, Black, and Hispanic students. White students have enrolled in college at higher rates than the overall rate in every year, and college-going rates among Asian students have steadily climbed, exceeding overall rates since 2013. College-going rates among American Indian students are

⁴ In 2017-18, UWS merged its two-year and four-year campuses, so WTCS accounts for all public two-year enrollments after that year. For more details, see: Schonfeld, R. C., & Radecki, J. (2021, August 30). *Consolidating the University of Wisconsin Colleges: The Reorganization of the University of Wisconsin System*. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.315853>

consistently 20 or more percentage points lower than overall college-going rates in the state, while Black students' college-going rates are between 15- and 20-percentage points lower. Disparities in college-going rates among Hispanic students have shrunk over the decade, falling from 24-percentage points in 2009-10 to 12-percentage points in 2020-21. Multi-racial students had similar college-going rates to Asian students in the early 2010s; however, while Asian student enrollment has increased across the rest of the decade, multi-racial students have seen a downward trend in college-going rates. College-going rates among Pacific Islander students have been the most inconsistent over the decade, likely because they are a very small student population among high school graduates (less than 0.1%).

Figure 3:
College-Going Rates by Race/Ethnicity



College-Going Rates by Economic Disadvantage

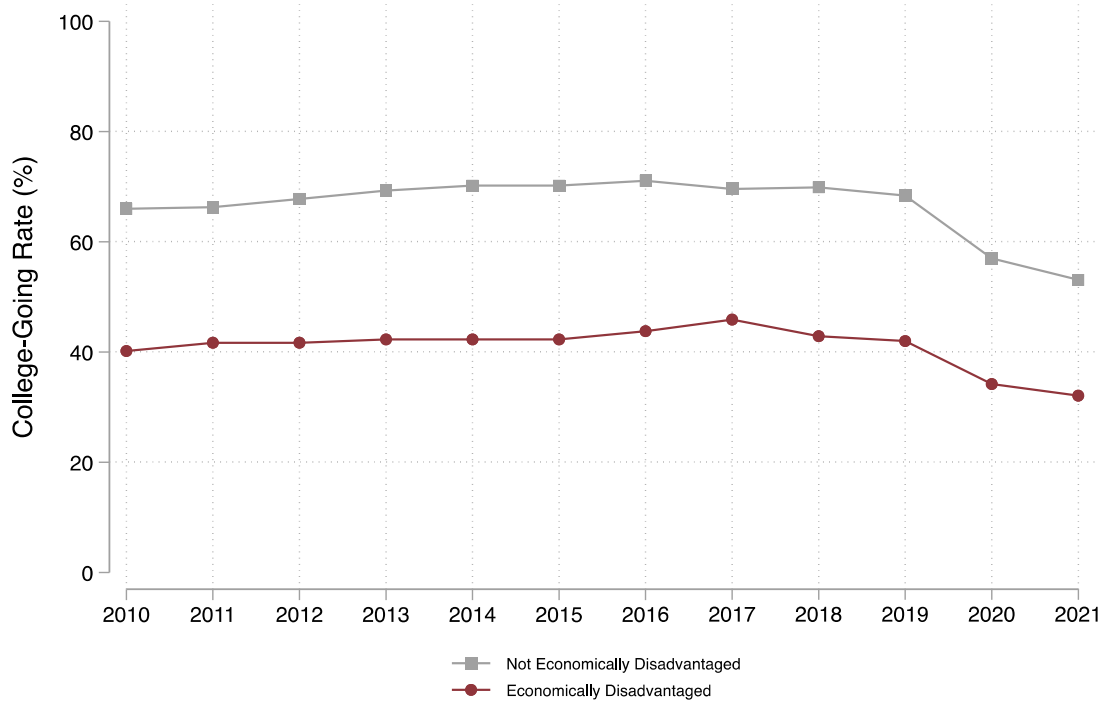
Disparities in college-going rates by socioeconomic status are slightly more pronounced than racial disparities. Figure 4 shows the college-going rate among economically disadvantaged students (as determined by free and reduced-price lunch status) and non-economically disadvantaged students.⁵ With the exception of 2016-17, the gap between economically disadvantaged students and their peers was consistently 25-percentage points or more throughout the decade. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the college-going rate for economically disadvantaged students was slowly rising from 40% in 2009-10 to nearly 46% in 2017-18 when it started to slowly decline. College-going rates for economically-disadvantaged students fell from 42% in 2018-19 to 34% in 2019-20 and to 32% in

⁵ See for more details: <https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/econ-status>



2020-21. Perhaps surprisingly, the college-going rate for non-economically disadvantaged students saw a sharper decline following the pandemic, falling from over 68% in 2018-19 to 53% by 2020-21. While non-economically disadvantaged students still have higher college-going rates, the gap shrunk to its smallest in the decade - 21-percentage points - after the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Figure 4:
College-Going Rates by Economic Disadvantage



Conclusion

College-going rates are a key indicator of educational access in Wisconsin. This brief documents longitudinal trends to provide insights for state and institutional leaders seeking to address educational inequities. Continued attention to racial and socioeconomic disparities in college-going rates and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are necessary. Additionally, more insight is needed to identify barriers to access that might be hampering improvement - financial aid access, admission rates, etc. Further research can help policymakers and other stakeholders ensure that all Wisconsin graduates have the opportunity to pursue higher education.



Appendix A:

Postsecondary Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and College Type

In addition to racial differences in overall college-going rates (Figure 3), there are slight differences in the distribution of students among different types of institutions. Appendix A shows these distributions by race/ethnicity for graduates that enrolled in Fall 2020, where percentages represent the proportion of college-going graduates in each racial/ethnic group who enrolled in each type of college. For example, a higher proportion of Asian, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander students enroll at in-state institutions compared to American Indian, Black, white, and multiracial students. The proportion of college-going students enrolled in public vs. private institutions is fairly similar across racial/ethnic groups, though Black student enrollment in public institutions is lowest proportionally at nearly 76%. Higher proportions of Asian, white, and multiracial college-going students enrolled in four-year institutions compared to American Indian, Black, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander students.

	In-State vs. Out-of-State Enrollment		Public vs. Private Enrollment		Four-Year vs. Two-Year Enrollment	
	In-State	Out-of-State	Public	Private	Four-Year	Two-Year
American Indian	78.7%	16.5%	85.2%	14.8%	70.3%	29.7%
Asian	80.4%	16.6%	85.3%	14.6%	77.9%	21.9%
Black	68.6%	24%	75.9%	23.8%	63.9%	35%
Hispanic	84.5%	12.1%	80.3%	19.6%	62.9%	36.5%
Pacific Islander	84.6%	15.4%	100%	0%	66.7%	33.3%
Two or More Races	74.3%	21.7%	82.2%	17.4%	72.2%	27.6%
White	76.9%	18.6%	84.5%	15.3%	73.8%	25.8%

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% because some students enrolled in multiple institutions.



Appendix B:

Postsecondary Enrollment by “Economic Disadvantage” Status and College Type

Economically disadvantaged students are also more likely to attend certain types of institutions compared to their peers. Appendix B shows the proportion of college-going graduates who enrolled in different types of institutions in Fall 2020. 82% of college-going low-income students enroll at in-state institutions, compared to only 75.8% of non-low-income students. Enrollment at public vs. private institutions is comparable, with 85.1% of low-income students enrolling in public institutions compared to 83.6% of non-low-income students. The largest difference, however, is in four-year vs. two-year enrollment; almost 76% of non-economically disadvantaged enrolled in four-year institutions compared to just under 59.2% of economically disadvantaged students.

	In-State vs. Out-of-State Enrollment		Public vs. Private Enrollment		Four-Year vs. Two-Year Enrollment	
	In-State	Out-of-State	Public	Private	Four-Year	Two-Year
Economically Disadvantaged	82%	14%	85.1%	14.7%	59.2%	40.3%
Not Economically Disadvantaged	75.8%	19.6%	83.4%	16.4%	75.9%	23.6%

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% because some students enrolled in multiple institutions.



Appendix C:

Data Structure Detail

DPI's college-going data provide a headcount of students attending each unique combination of institution type (see table below).

Institution Level	Institution Sector	Institution Location
Two-Year	Public	In-State
Two-Year	Public	Out-of-State
Two-Year	Public	Multiple
Two-Year	Private	In-State
Two-Year	Private	Out-of-State
Two-Year	Private	Multiple
Two-Year	Multiple	In-State
Two-Year	Multiple	Out-of-State
Two-Year	Multiple	Multiple
Four-Year	Public	In-State
Four-Year	Public	Out-of-State
Four-Year	Public	Multiple
Four-Year	Private	In-State
Four-Year	Private	Out-of-State
Four-Year	Private	Multiple
Four-Year	Multiple	In-State
Four-Year	Multiple	Out-of-State
Four-Year	Multiple	Multiple
Multiple	Public	In-State
Multiple	Public	Out-of-State
Multiple	Public	Multiple
Multiple	Private	In-State
Multiple	Private	Out-of-State
Multiple	Private	Multiple
Multiple	Multiple	In-State
Multiple	Multiple	Out-of-State
Multiple	Multiple	Multiple