

Only 1 in 5 black students enrolled at UW-Milwaukee graduates in 6 years

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Published 12:03 a.m. CT Mar. 1, 2017 | Updated 7:16 p.m. CT Mar. 1, 2017



Only 1 in 5 black students enrolled full-time at UWM graduate within six years. *Mark Hoffman / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

A report released Wednesday ranks the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee among 21 four-year colleges and universities across the country that must "get far more serious about success rates for their black students," based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Only one in five black students (21%) who enroll full-time at UW-Milwaukee graduates in six years, and the completion gap between black and white students is 24.3 percentage points, according to the report from The Education Trust, which analyzed graduation rates for black students at 676 traditional public and private nonprofit colleges and universities.

The report identified 18 high-performing schools for black student success. It also identified the 21 bottom-performing schools with especially low graduation rates among

black students and large graduation gaps between black and white students — a list that included UWM.

"We have a moral imperative for students to be as successful as possible," UWM Chancellor Mark Mone said in an interview. "We have to focus on and do a better job to close the achievement gap."

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About 35% of UWM's incoming freshmen graduate in the bottom half of their high school class. And the most recent four-year graduation rate for black students in Milwaukee Public Schools — a major feeder school district for UWM — is 54.7%. Wisconsin also has [the nation's widest gap in high school graduation rates](#) for white and black students.

But far too often, universities try to justify low completion rates for black students by highlighting what they perceive are inadequacies of the students they choose to enroll, the report says.

"We believe when administrators get serious about college completion instead of focusing on research dollars or new buildings — when they focus on students first — they can move the needle," Andrew Howard Nichols, director of higher education research and data analytics for The Education Trust, said in an interview.

The Education Trust report notes that while the number of black students enrolled as full-time freshmen in four-year colleges and universities across the country in fall 2008 was up 37% over the past decade, what happened to them after they arrived on campus wasn't reflected in college access gains.

Many black students encounter financial, academic and social challenges that can make their path to a degree more difficult, the report says. Increasing college costs have a disproportionate effect on black students and contribute to higher debt levels. And inequalities in K-12 education mean too many black students start college in noncredit remedial courses, the report notes.

"As if those hurdles weren't high enough, the constant barrage of racist incidents on many college campuses make it quite clear that on-campus racism is still an issue black students have to deal with — and chilly or hostile campus racial climates have been found to have negative effects on black student outcomes," the report says.

Universities need to mine data about their students to find the nuances of their problems, Nichols said. Do students have difficulty getting through remedial math or English courses? Do they struggle in courses that are considered gateways to their majors? Are they dropping out because college is unaffordable?

Mone said UWM overhauled its remedial math program so students could complete noncredit remedial classes in two semesters rather than three — ideally reducing time to degree and cost. UWM also has improved its student retention rate (from first year to second year) by 1% each of the last three years, and added more supplemental instruction for courses that are gateways to majors, he said.

UWM recently partnered with Milwaukee Public Schools and Milwaukee Area Technical College on a new initiative called M-cubed. Through that initiative, educators are working to standardize and streamline the teaching of STEM subjects — science, technology, engineering and math — with a goal of improving student success and reducing time to degree.

"I would absolutely, highly confidently predict" graduation rates for black students will improve, Mone said.