



UW-Milwaukee and the Achievement Gap

As Wisconsin's only public urban research university, UW-Milwaukee has a critical role in closing achievement gaps of different sub-groups of students. The success of all our students – not just those with resources – is UWM's number one priority.

UWM is one of America's top research universities and our mission commits us to providing access to excellent higher education to individuals who may not otherwise have this opportunity. The idea of access encompasses admission and retention through graduation. Troublingly, we face a gap in graduation rates between African American and white students, which is a challenge for many urban universities. We are addressing this and acknowledge that UWM must strengthen its efforts and enlist the assistance of others at every opportunity. Ensuring equitable educational outcomes is a critically important challenge for UWM and universities across the country.

Our goal is to close the achievement gap and improve graduation rates. African American students bring unique knowledge and experience, and they enrich our academic community. When they graduate, their skills and abilities are vital to the future success of our city.

There are a number of contextual factors that have an impact on the achievement gap at UWM:

- 84% of UWM students are Wisconsin residents, and more than a third of those students come from Milwaukee County. We have the most diverse student population in the state with one-third students of color (Fall 2016).
- As an access university that accepts students with varying levels of preparedness, UWM is among 42 four-year public universities in the nation that accept more than 90 percent of students who apply. Upon entry into UWM in 2010, nearly two-thirds of first-year students required math remediation.
- A recent report from The Education Trust stated that UWM's six-year graduation rate for full-time African American students is 21% as compared to 41% nationally. A more accurate comparison to UWM is institutions with a 90% acceptance rate; such institutions have a 26.5% average six-year graduation rate for full-time African American students. And when we look at African American students who began their studies at UWM in 2010 but graduated elsewhere, we see that an additional 6.9% of these students completed their degree.

What UWM is Doing to Close the Achievement Gap

UWM is implementing numerous strategies to support student success, including summer bridge programs to ease the transition of students from high school to college; extra instruction through peer-assisted study sessions; more intensive academic advising for struggling students; tutoring for all remedial courses, an early alert system that identifies poor student grades within the first few weeks of a semester so that advisors, instructors and faculty can intervene; peer mentors; and supplemental instruction. UWM's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning is leading an initiative to reduce by at least 20% the rate that students drop, fail or withdrew from each course that currently has a rate greater than 20%. The overall campus goal is to increase retention to 73% and the graduation rate to 45% by 2020.

Focusing on African American students, the following seven initiatives are having a positive impact on retention with significant potential to improve graduation rates.

1. MKE Scholars

The MKE Scholars program is for incoming UWM students affiliated with a Burke Foundation-sponsored pre-college program, including: College Possible, Boys & Girls Club of Milwaukee, Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, PEARLS for Teen Girls, United Community Center, Nativity Jesuit Academy, and Carmen High School of Science & Technology. The community organizations maintain connections to their sponsored MKE Scholars. Early successes of the program:

- The median GPA for MKE Scholar participants at the end of fall 2016 was 2.62
- 35 of the original Summer 2016 cohort of 40 are enrolled for spring 2017 for a fall-to-spring retention rate of 87.5%

2. Developmental Math Reform

UWM's Department of Mathematics reformed developmental (remedial) math, completely redesigning the courses to get students to credit-bearing math courses as soon as possible after enrolling at UWM. Outcomes were improved for all students, regardless of ethnicity. Both African American and Latino students were **four times** as likely to complete their remedial math requirement post-reform than they were under the legacy pre-reform system. The completion rate of credit-level math has **doubled** post reform independent of ethnicity, even though the post-reform results only allow a single semester for completion of credit-level math, compared to a 3-year completion period for the pre-reform results.

3. Peer Mentors

All first-year students are assigned a peer mentor who assists them with acclimation to campus and successful navigation throughout the first year. Underrepresented students who actively engage with their mentors do better than those who do not participate: The gap in one-year retention for underrepresented students who participate in the mentoring program is 5.8%, compared to an overall one-year retention gap of 8.6% for those not participating.

4. Supplemental Instruction

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is an academic assistance program that uses peer-assisted study sessions. These are regularly-scheduled, informal review sessions where students compare notes, discuss readings, develop organizational tools, and predict test items. The sessions are facilitated by "SI leaders", students who have previously done well in the course and who attend all class lectures, take notes, and act as model student. The purpose of SI is to increase retention within targeted historically difficult courses, to improve student grades in targeted historically difficult courses, and to increase the graduation rates of students. The achievement gap is narrowed for underrepresented students who attend SI sessions: 4.7% versus an overall gap of 8.6%.

5. Tutoring

Panther Academic Support Services provides tutoring for remedial courses. The gap in one-year retention for underrepresented students who participate in tutoring is just 3.7%, less than half the overall gap of 8.6%.

6. Financial Assistance for Students

Many UWM students are from Milwaukee, which has one of the highest poverty rates in the nation. The link between economic privilege and educational success is well documented. Stated differently, financial challenges are the primary reasons why students cannot continue their studies at UWM. With existing resources, we are able to meet the financial aid needs of just 40% of our students.

While UWM is unable to be competitive with tuition discounting – the process by which a college offsets its published **tuition** price (sticker price) with institutional grant aid for enrolling students – we have worked closely with UW System to support needs-based grants for students.

For 2016-18, the UW System committed \$3.3 M in one-time funds for student support, including financial assistance. A significant portion of these funds have been used to provide need-based retention grants to help financially struggling students who may need as little as \$300 to stay enrolled and continue to graduation. The funds are also being used to match private foundation scholarship funds aimed at students in need of college preparedness. Additionally, raising funds for student scholarships is among the top priorities of UWM’s “Made in Milwaukee – Shaping the World” fund-raising campaign. Scholarships have a significant impact on students’ ability to graduate in six years. The MKE Scholars program is a prime example of a scholarship program that, if taken to scale, would result in higher retention and graduation rates for UWM’s African American students.

7. The M³ (M-Cubed) Partnership: An Initiative for the Longer Term

While there is great urgency to act now to close the achievement gap, the complex nature of the challenge (intergenerational poverty, K-12 preparation, housing instability, attendance at multiple K-12 schools, etc.) requires a longer-term strategy as well. We recognize that the alignment of the city’s major public educational institutions is necessary to close the achievement gap.

M³ involves the three largest educational institutions in southeastern Wisconsin – UWM, Milwaukee Public Schools and MATC – that serve more than 140,000 students annually. Our shared goal is to increase student success at every level, ultimately increasing the graduation rates at all three institutions.

As part of M³, educators in K-16 are working to standardize and streamline the teaching of STEM subjects, improving college readiness and reducing time to degree completion. UWM, MPS and MATC are standardizing the math curricula across all three institutions this year, with the goal of reducing the number of students who need to take remedial classes when they become UWM students.

Working Together to Close the Achievement Gap

Closing the achievement gap is a complicated issue that clearly deserves urgent attention and action. This is a galvanizing moment for UW-Milwaukee and our communities. UWM is embedded in the region and is committed to strengthening its citizens through the equalizing power of education. Closing the achievement gap is key to addressing the upcoming demographic changes of an increasingly diverse student population. UWM has been and will remain a catalyst for change but we cannot do this alone. It is through our partnerships with alumni, other education institutions, non-profit organizations, the business community, and elected officials that we can – and will – close the achievement gap in Milwaukee.

For more information, visit: uwm.edu/chancellor