

UW-Milwaukee and the Achievement Gap

The gap in educational attainment levels for under-represented minorities compared to whites in Wisconsin is unfortunate. Wisconsin ranks 50 out of 50 in the achievement gap between black and white students and 43 out of 50 for Hispanic students. This gap begins early and continues at the college level. As the destination campus for the largest number of students from Wisconsin and as the state’s only research-intensive campus with an access mission, UW-Milwaukee has a unique role in helping close the achievement gap: It is our goal to not only enroll students, but to help all of them graduate. If we are more successful at this goal, we can help reduce the college achievement gap.

These contextual factors impact the achievement gap at UWM:

- 82% of UWM students are Wisconsin residents, and more than a third come from Milwaukee County. (2019)
- We have one of the most diverse student populations in the state with nearly one-third underrepresented minority students. (2019)
- About 37% of our undergraduate students are the first in their family to attend college. (2019)
- As an access university that enrolls students with varying levels of preparedness, UWM accepts 86% of applicants. (2019)

Ensuring equitable educational outcomes is a critically important challenge for UWM and universities across the country. Closing the achievement gap requires the full mobilization of educational and community resources, an evidence-based focus on interventions that work, and a commitment to scale up the most promising strategies.

What UWM is Doing to Close the Achievement Gap

UWM is implementing numerous strategies to support student success. These initiatives have shown significant positive impact across UW-Milwaukee’s student body, with the greatest gains coming for those from underrepresented minority (URM) student participants.

What is most notable about the initiatives is that if a student participates *in at least one of the interventions*, the achievement gap closes. Engagement is our strongest indicator of success. Some of UWM’s most impactful efforts currently operating at scale include those listed on the left side of this table, with their retention rates and gaps displayed on the right:

Intervention	All Retention Rate	Non-URM ¹ Retention Rate	URM ² Retention Rate	Gap (if any)
All 2017 new fresh.	72.8%	73.6%	70.8%	2.8%
Peer Mentoring	77.3%	77.0%	78.1%	1.1%
Tutoring	80.3%	79.8%	81.4%	-1.6%
Supplemental Instruction	82.0%	81.3%	84.0%	-2.7%

Any Intervention	75.4%	75.6%	74.9%	0.7%
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¹Non-URM includes Asian American, International, and White students.

²URM includes African American, American Indian, Latino/a, and Southeast Asian American students (including those who are multi-ethnic).

In the following sections, we share detail about nine initiatives, including their positive impacts on retention and their potential to improve graduation rates.

1. MKE Scholars

Now in its third year, the MKE Scholars program is designed for incoming UWM students affiliated with a Burke Foundation-sponsored pre-college program. The students in this program engage in the following:

- Participate in a for-credit summer bridge program earning up to eight credits.
- Complete a five semester Learning Community series to earn the Cultures and Communities certificate; each course includes a service learning component.
- Meet regularly with the MKE Scholars Success Coach and Peer Mentor team.
- Engage in a minimum of one leadership experience per semester.
- Receive financial support in the form of scholarships, textbook stipend and access to an emergency fund.

Program Participant Profile

- 91% of participants are from Milwaukee (remaining 9% from Madison)
- 98% of participants are URM
- 73% of participants commute to campus as first-year students

Program Successes

By the end of the Fall 2018 semester:

- The first three cohorts of MKE Scholars had an average of 17 total credits accumulated by the end of their first fall semester. (The national best practice is 15 credits per term).
- The first two cohorts had an average of 31 credits by the end of their first year. This is a key indicator of students being on track toward degree completion.
- Participating MKE Scholars from the first cohort, now in their third year, were retained at a 60% rate (compared to 49% in a matched comparison group).

To date, the program has served 157 students, with plans to add an additional 60-80 students into its fourth cohort. As the program grows, we intend to reach program capacity with two cohorts of 80 for a total of 160 per year. With full cohorts, the partnership with the Burke Foundation requires a UWM contribution, both in-kind and in scholarship funds, of about \$320,000 per year. As we continue to track results on student progress to graduation, expansion to additional community partners, and thus more students, is a university priority.

2. Developmental Math Reform

In the fall of 2014 UWM's Department of Mathematics reformed developmental math, completely redesigning the courses to get students to credit-bearing math courses as soon as possible after enrolling at UWM.

The following table shows a comparison of results for the lowest placed students (historic Math 90 placement) entering UWM in Fall 2014 and Fall 2015, compared with those who entered in Fall 2008, 2009 and 2010 and completed the pre-reform legacy program. The first column of percentages indicates completion of developmental math requirements in a student's first year, the second column shows completion of developmental math requirements in a student's first three years, and the final column completion of credit level mathematics (Math 102, 103, 105, 108, or 175). The Fall 2008 - Fall 2010 cohorts were considered to have completed developmental math if they completed both Math 90 & 95; the Fall 2014 - Fall 2015 cohorts were considered to have completed developmental math if they completed at least one developmental course. (Students were considered to have completed a course if they earned a grade of C or better.)

Pre-reform (2008-2010)	Y1 ¹ Comp. Remed.	Y3 Comp. Remed.	Complete Credit
All students	27.0%	43.2%	27.7%
Underrepresented minorities	17.4%	33.5%	17.8%
African Americans ²	12.7%	26.2%	13.2%
Latinos/as ²	21.8%	42.7%	20.9%

Post-reform (2014-2015)	Y1 ¹ Comp. Remed.	Y3 Comp. Remed.	Complete Credit
All students	71.1%	75.4%	58.5%
Underrepresented minorities	62.7%	69.1%	46.9%
African Americans ²	51.2%	58.8%	33.5%
Latinos/as ²	76.9%	87.7%	64.6%

¹The first year includes the first fall and preceding summer, first Winter/Im and first spring.

²Multi-ethnic African American and multi-ethnic Latino/a students are not included in the "African American" and "Latino/a" categories.

By any metric, outcomes were improved for all students, regardless of ethnicity. **Both African American and Latino/a students were roughly four times as likely to complete their developmental math requirement post-reform than they were under the legacy pre-reform system.** The completion rate of credit-level math has doubled post reform (111% increase). The improvement for underrepresented minorities is even greater (160% increase), with African Americans achieving a 150% increase, and Latinos/as achieving a 210% increase.

The success in the reform was in part due to reducing the number of semesters in developmental math from two to one. With that in mind, for students who placed slightly higher but still developmental, in the past two years we have offered those students the opportunity to take their one developmental course in a linked combination with their first credit-bearing course. We have found the number of those students completing both courses in the single semester to be over 80%, and plan to expand this program.

3. Peer Mentors



All first-year students are assigned a peer mentor who assists with acclimation to campus and successful navigation throughout the first year. URM students who actively engage with mentors perform better than those who do not participate. In fact, based on 2017 data, they are retained at a rate of 78.1%; that rate is 5.3 percentage points higher than the overall first-year class. In 2017, URM students who participated in the mentoring program were retained at a rate that was 19.2 percentage points higher than non-participating URM students.

4. Supplemental Instruction

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is an academic assistance program that utilizes peer-assisted study sessions. SI sessions are regularly scheduled, informal review sessions in which students compare notes, discuss readings, develop organizational tools, and predict test items. Students learn how to integrate course content and study skills while working together. 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 students.

The purpose of SI is to increase retention within targeted courses that have shown to be historically difficult for students, to improve student grades in these courses, and to increase the graduation rates of students. The achievement gap is eliminated for URM students who attend SI sessions. In fact, underrepresented minority students participating in SI sessions during the 2017-18 year were retained at a rate that was 2.7 percentage points higher than majority students who also participated.

5. Tutoring

The Student Success Center provides tutoring for many courses taken by freshmen and sophomores (100 and 200-level courses). Much like participants in SI, the achievement gap was eliminated for URM students participating in tutoring, with a retention rate that was 1.6 percentage points higher than participating majority students.

6. Summer Bridge

In 2016, UWM implemented a new summer bridge program model to better support entering students who have demonstrated a need for additional academic preparation. The students start at UWM the summer before their first fall semester by taking two to three credit-bearing courses. The intent is to provide a solid transition from high school to the rigors of college within a supportive and structured environment.

UWM’s summer bridge program supports students’ progression through both the math and English course sequences. Students start the summer in a four-credit English 100 course. After successful completion students move to English 102 for the fall term. 93% of the summer 2018 cohort of students advanced to English 102 for fall. Similarly, students take a math course during summer, often at the developmental level, in preparation to advance to the next course in the sequence for fall. 94% of the summer 2018 cohort of students advanced in math for the fall term.

Three years after the summer bridge program remodel, this initiative is reporting strong results including participants completing more credits which a key indicator of degree completion.

Comparing bridge participants with prior years' students entering with similar academic profiles (specifically ACT and SAT scores), UWM is pleased to report some promising progress. While URM students are disproportionately represented in both groups (pre-bridge program and post-bridge program), the gap in retention to the second fall was reduced for 2016 participants and completely eliminated in 2017. In fact, 2017 URM bridge participants were retained at a rate higher than their non-URM peers.

	Pre-Bridge Reform Comparison Group			
	Fall 2014		Fall 2015	
	% of Total Starting 1st Fall	% Retained to 2nd Fall	% of Total Starting 1st Fall	% Retained to 2nd Fall
URM	65.4%	65.5%	59.3%	61.8%
Non-URM	34.6%	72.0%	40.7%	67.9%
ALL	100.0%	67.7%	100.0%	64.3%
Gap (if any)		-6.5%		-6.2%

	Post-Bridge Reform Participants			
	Summer 2016		Summer 2017	
	% of Total Starting Summer Bridge	% Retained to 2nd Fall	% of Total Starting Summer Bridge	% Retained to 2nd Fall
URM	61.1%	75.8%	65.6%	66.7%
Non-URM	38.9%	81.0%	34.4%	54.5%
ALL	100.0%	77.8%	100.0%	62.5%
Gap (if any)		-5.2%		12.1%

7. Multicultural Centers

Effective July 1, 2019, all multicultural centers report to one division, Global Inclusion and Engagement. The centers focus on the cultural aspects of attending UWM, creating a sense of belonging and addressing how best to navigate community issues. Students receive holistic advising that complements and supports academic advising students receive from the Office of Central Advising and the schools and colleges where students are completing their degree. We believe the new structure will build the centers' capacity to serve students in culturally relevant ways that support overall success.



Our centers include:

- American Indian Student Center
- Black Student Cultural Center
- Roberto Hernandez Center
- Southeast Asian American Student Center

8. 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 a primary reason why students cannot continue their studies at UWM. With existing resources, we are able to meet only about 40% of demonstrated financial aid need.

Currently, UWM is unable to be competitive with tuition discounting – the process by which a college offsets its published tuition price with institutional grant aid for enrolling students. However, the campus is in the process of reviewing data and devising a need-based grant program, which would provide institutional gift assistance in addition to federal and state grants. Hopefully, once implemented, the institutional assistance in combination with federal and state aid, will result in students enrolling, retaining and graduating at higher percentages.

Raising funds for student scholarships is among the top priorities of UWM’s fundraising campaign. Scholarships have a significant impact on students’ ability to graduate in four to six years. As noted in section 1 above on “MKE Scholars”, the campus is providing matching scholarship funds to support students. 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 all UWM students.

9. 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 (e.g., intergenerational poverty, K-12 preparation, housing instability, attendance at multiple K-12 schools, etc.) necessitates a longer-term strategy. We recognize that closing the achievement gap requires the alignment of the city’s major public educational institutions.

M³ involves the three largest educational institutions in southeastern Wisconsin – UWM, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) – that serve more than 130,000 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 utilize a K-16 approach to create seamless transitions between our institutions and increase success within our institutions. UWM, MPS, and MATC are in a unique position to bring together faculty and teachers in communities of practice to identify and address areas of concern, increase alignment of the core curricula (math and English Language Arts) across all three institutions, and increase transition support (bridge programming and coaching).

M³’s goals are to:

1. Raise aspirations, readiness, and student success
2. Educate families about the value of post-secondary learning (Head of household data for Milwaukee's children show that 20% of parents/caregivers have not attained a high school diploma, 55% have a high school degree or GED, 8% have an associate degree and 17% have a bachelor's degree or higher.)
3. Align curriculum and services from middle school to post-secondary education to create a seamless system
4. Create and cultivate a culture of learning in which there is an expectation to continue education after high school
5. Engage the student voice, provide safe spaces, and commit to equity and inclusion.

Specific outcomes M-Cubed seeks to achieve are to:

- Utilize well-planned campus experiences at UWM and MATC to expose 9th and 10th grade students (MPS) to postsecondary options and ensure student career choices align with academic preparation.
- Meet regularly with the family, parents and guardians of secondary students through the M³ Parent Institute, a school-based and counselor led effort to ensure parents have the tools to plan, advocate and support their child's bright future.
- Align curriculum and support services for students transitioning from MPS to MATC and UWM through advancing success strategies including dual enrollment, 15-to-finish, momentum year and guided pathways.
- Increase financial aid available to college freshman by promoting early completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). With 75% of MPS graduates completing the FAFSA in 2018, students were able to access all available federal, state and institution scholarship funds, including Pell grant, the Wisconsin grant and private scholarships such as MKE Scholars and the MATC Promise.
- Accelerate college completion through a new dual enrollment model that allows high school seniors to acquire college credits from MATC and UWM prior to graduation.
- Ensure M-Cubed institutions are committed to equity, inclusion and safe spaces through increasing culturally relevant teaching practice, seeking feedback and connecting students from diverse backgrounds to learn from each other and lead efforts to improve our community.

Working Together to Close the Achievement Gap

Closing the achievement gap is a complicated issue that clearly deserves urgent attention and action. UWM is embedded in southeastern Wisconsin and is committed to strengthening its citizens through the equalizing power of education. Closing the achievement gap is critical 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.

Links to Data Resources

UWM Facts

<https://uwm.edu/facts/>

MKE Scholars

<http://uwm.edu/studentssuccess/first-year-student-success/mke-scholars/>

Milwaukee's Poverty Rate:

<https://www.wuwm.com/post/poverty-race-milwaukee-unpacking-new-us-census-estimates#stream/0>

Impact of Poverty in Higher Education:

<http://www.nysut.org/news/nysut-united/issues/2013/november-2013/how-poverty-impacts-student-success-in-higher-education>

M³ Initiative:

<https://milwaukeecourieronline.com/index.php/2019/03/29/mps-students-earning-college-credit-at-uwm-and-matc/>

<https://www.wuwm.com/post/m-cubed-partnership-enters-its-fifth-year-high-hopes-milwaukee-students#stream/0>

<http://mps.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/en/District/Initiatives/M-cubed.htm>

<http://uwm.edu/m-cubed/>