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**Facing demographic challenges, UW System officials stepping up efforts to reach underrepresented students**

*By WisPolitics.com*

University of Wisconsin officials are ramping up efforts to reach minority and other underrepresented high school graduates and get them to enroll at UW System schools.

A recent report from the UW Office of Policy Analysis and Research shows the percentage of Wisconsin high school graduates enrolling in UW System schools right after graduation — known as the participation rate — has begun to decrease after holding steady for decades.

While the participation rate had been close to 32 percent since the early 1980s, the report shows it’s begun to recently dip, reaching 28.6 percent in 2019. That’s the lowest it’s been since 1982.

“It’s a drop of about 10 percent, which is pretty sharp, that occurred in a two- or three-year period,” said David Ward, a former UW System and campus administrator and president of NorthStar Analytics, which has done a number of economic impact studies for UW schools.

But at the same time, new fall freshman applications for UW System schools have seen a 30 percent increase over each of the last two years. Officials note that applications from in-state residents, first-generation students and underrepresented minorities have also risen.

“In general, first-generation, underrepresented minority, and low-income students have historically been less likely to attend a UW institution, and these groups now represent a higher proportion of high school students,” said UW System President Tommy Thompson in an emailed statement.

He explained the UW System is taking a number of approaches to boost applications for these groups, including waiving application fees, creating an easier electronic application process, allowing applicants to apply to multiple universities with one application, and suspending the ACT requirement. And the UW System’s summer program for incoming high school students is being expanded, he added.

Still, the UW Office of Policy Analysis and Research report shows the issue of declining participation is “particularly noteworthy among the populations that [have] historically been less likely to attend and populations that have proven more vulnerable to economic and social factors.” That includes minority groups as well as students from low-income families.

The participation rate for Hispanic and Latino students dipped below 20 percent in recent years. And the rates for African American students and American Indian students both fell below 10 percent in 2018 and 2019, the report shows.

Report authors say ensuring broad participation of state residents in higher education is the “central challenge” facing the UW System in the coming decade. Although the number of overall Wisconsin high school graduates is projected to remain largely level through 2024, the number of minority graduates is expected to increase while the number of white graduates is expected to decline due to demographic changes in the state.

“This makes it particularly important that participation of groups that have not traditionally been well-represented be recruited more effectively,” report authors said.

Ward told WisBusiness.com the falling participation rate could be linked to two key messages that students have been consistently hearing in recent years. Ward previously held the positions of interim chancellor at UW-Oshkosh and senior vice president of academic affairs for the UW System. He’s also the mayor of Sturgeon Bay.

For one, he noted that student debt in the United States is at an all-time high, passing the $1 trillion mark several years ago. And at the same time, the ongoing labor shortage has resulted in many graduating students being targeted directly by employers with internships and other offers.

“So, the messaging there has been from a number of sources. ‘Oh, you really don’t need a four-year degree; you can make $80,000 as a lineman for a utility, or in a factory, you can make $50,000.’ And there’s some truth to that, for skilled blue-collar jobs,” Ward said. “So those two messages together I think are having an impact.”

Over the years, Ward says he’s noted the general trend of minority groups making up a larger proportion of new graduates in the state.

“In particular, you look at the Hispanic numbers; they are going up pretty sharply,” he said. “That’s an increasingly important cohort in the university system.”

Although application rates aren’t a guaranteed indicator of enrollment numbers, a release from UW shows the number of applications for this fall from underrepresented groups is 19 percent higher than in June 2020, and 23 percent higher than June 2019.

Aside from statistics on participation rates among various populations, the UW OPAR report also includes projections for high school graduates in different regions of the state through 2026. Some regions are expected to fare better than others, due to factors such as the growth of suburban areas and the state’s aging population.

While the Green Bay area and south-central Wisconsin are expected to see up to 10 percent more high school graduates by 2026, the southeast region containing Racine and Kenosha is projected to have 10 percent fewer graduates by that time.

The Milwaukee area is set to see modest growth in its high school graduate population, bucking the trend of urban cores around the United States seeing a general decline.

Ward explained that compared to other UW System schools, UW-Green Bay and UW-Oshkosh are “probably in a little better position” because the areas they draw from are seeing the most growth. Plus, he said, campuses that offer opportunities in technology, engineering, health care and environmental studies are better off due to continued growth in these fields.

“The impact of declining graduates and declining participation rates is likely to be uneven,” he said. “It’s going to hit some campuses harder than others.”

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