*Fiscal Facts by Wisconsin Policy Forum*

**Health care grads earning higher degrees, but worker shortages remain**

The number of students completing bachelor’s and advanced degrees in health science fields at southeastern Wisconsin colleges and universities rose considerably in the last decade, providing much-needed talent to one of the largest, fastest-growing sectors of the region’s economy.

Yet at the same time, attainment of associate’s degrees and certificates for other in-demand health science fields actually declined.

Meanwhile, southeastern Wisconsin health systems continue to report shortages of nurses, medical assistants, and other health care professionals. These findings emerge from a recent Wisconsin Policy Forum analysis of data from the 18 institutions that form the Higher Education Regional Alliance (HERA) and from interviews with higher education and health care industry leaders.

The data shows the total number of students completing degrees and certificates in health science fields at HERA institutions was modestly higher in 2019 compared to 2011. The number of students completing bachelor’s and advanced degrees in health science fields, however, was 45.6% higher in 2019 than in 2011.

The increase in bachelor’s degree completion among nursing students, in particular, follows a national industry trend that has accelerated over the past decade. Meanwhile, the number of students completing shorter certificate and associate degree programs in health science fields declined by 14%.

Between 2011 and 2019, men earned less than one of every five degrees and certificates awarded by HERA institutions in health science fields. Black and Latinx students are also underrepresented among health science graduates at the bachelor’s degree level and above.

The challenges examined in this report appear to be intensifying, as local health care industry leaders report growing worker shortages. And preparing enough health care workers to meet the demand may become an even bigger challenge in the future, as enrollment has declined since 2010 at many HERA institutions including UW-Milwaukee, UW-Parkside, and UW-Whitewater.

Untapped potential to reverse the trend remains, however, as a large share of high school graduates does not enroll in any college. HERA leaders say the challenge is to get more students to enroll in college and to create welcoming and supportive environments for them once they arrive. Heightened demand for health care workers may also create a need to continue to find ways to create new and expedited pathways to degrees and certificates in critical fields.

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