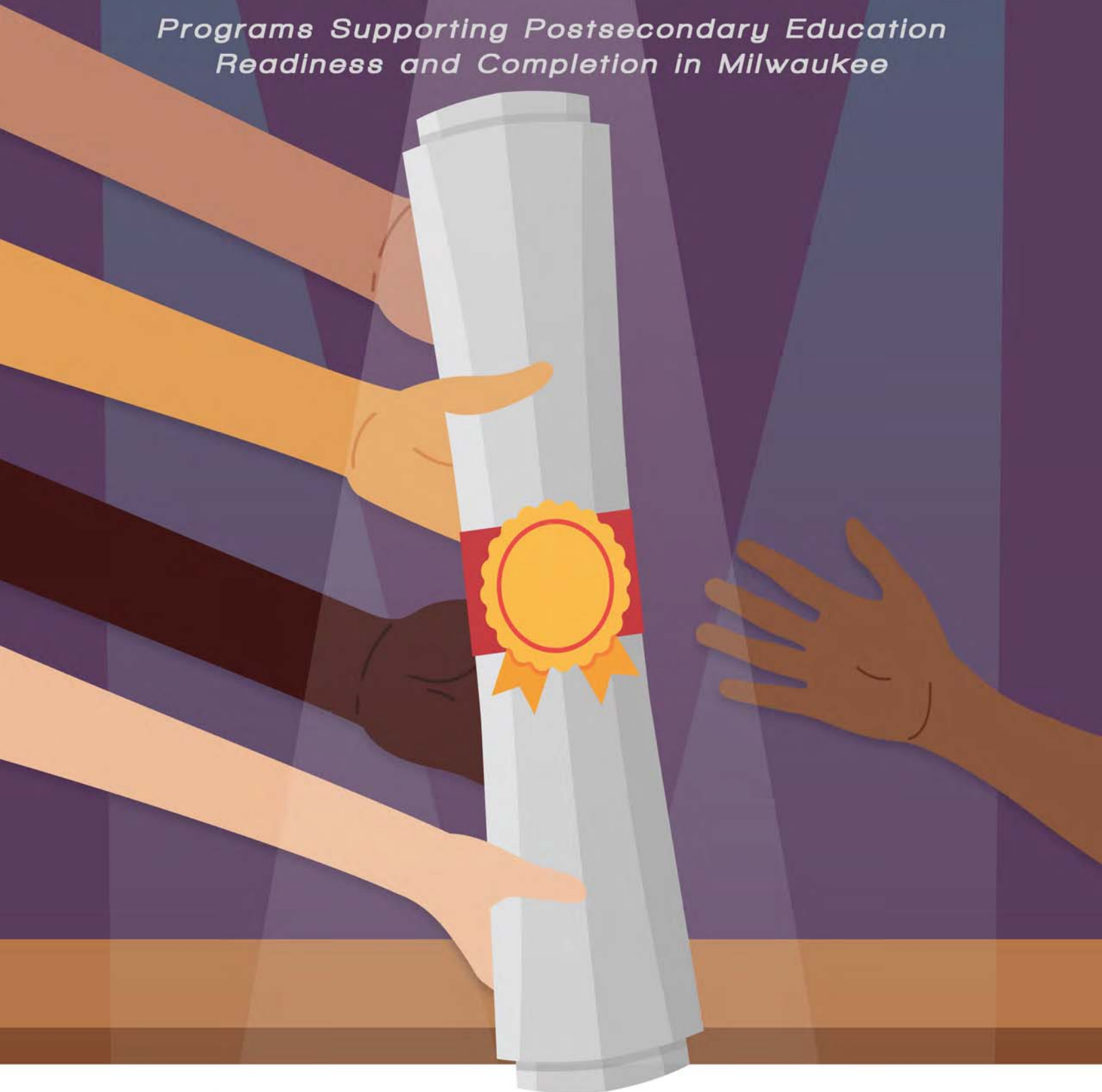


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# COLLEGE MATERIAL

*Programs Supporting Postsecondary Education  
Readiness and Completion in Milwaukee*



WISCONSIN

**POLICY FORUM**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Milwaukee has long been plagued by concerns that its education system is neither serving all youth nor sufficiently growing local talent to sustain the area’s economy. This new analysis by the Wisconsin Policy Forum lends credence to those concerns, revealing that **fewer than half of graduates from public high schools in Milwaukee are enrolling in college immediately after high school completion.**

In response to this shortcoming, a multitude of programs operating outside the traditional school system has arisen over the years to support youth in their pursuit of higher education. Our study first provides a quantitative analysis of the data and trends that suggest the need for such programming, and then examines the characteristics of this programming landscape and potential opportunities for improvement. We find that **some youth are likely underserved by the existing offerings** and that ensuring **greater coordination and a closer alignment between programs and student needs could help more Milwaukee students** to enroll in and graduate from a postsecondary institution.

## Disproportionately “Leaky” Pipeline from High School through College

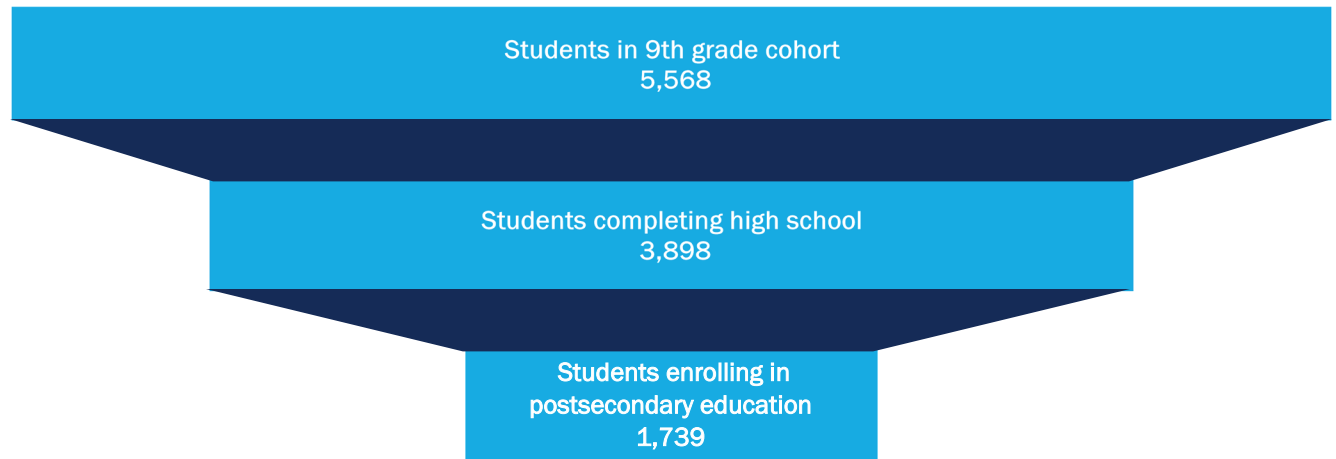
Data on public school students in Milwaukee – at both traditional and charter schools – show the postsecondary readiness pipeline losing students at key stages, from high school completion to college enrollment. Our analysis finds:

- Overall, the rates at which public school students in Milwaukee completed high school within four years increased from 2017 to 2019 by almost seven percentage points (from 63.5% to 70.0%). These promising results appear to have been negatively impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, as completion rates dipped back down to 64.1% in 2021.
- In the same five-year timeframe of 2017 to 2021, 2019 saw the smallest gaps in high school completion rates by race – but the disparities were still startling, ranging from 59.0% of American Indian students completing high school within four years to 81.0% of Asian students. The completion gap between economically disadvantaged students and their non-economically disadvantaged peers hovered around 12 percentage points for each year between 2017 and 2020 before widening dramatically in 2021 to 35.3 points.
- Even as students completed high school at increasingly higher rates prior to the pandemic, postsecondary education enrollment rates dropped every year from 2017 to 2020, from 48.5% in 2017 to 36.1% in 2020. The data suggest that the steady declines from 2017 to 2019 are at least partially due to more students – especially Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students – graduating from high school, but those students then not going straight into college. The largest single-year postsecondary enrollment drop occurred in 2020 and affected nearly all student groups.

The figure on the following page illustrates this “leaky pipeline” by following students from their original ninth grade cohort to high school completion to enrollment in postsecondary education in 2019.



**Fewer than 50% of All High School Graduates Enroll in Postsecondary Education**  
High school to postsecondary enrollment pipeline for Milwaukee public school students completing high school within four years in 2019



Source: Department of Public Instruction. “Students enrolling in postsecondary education” may include some students who completed high school in more than four years.

The picture remains sobering once students arrive at college, although data from the Higher Education Regional Alliance (HERA) show some recent improvements in degree attainment rates.

- Among students attending the 18 southeastern Wisconsin higher education institutions in the HERA consortium, no examined student group completed their degree program within the expected timeframe at rates above 50%. Students who enrolled in a four-year college or university in fall 2015 achieved 40% on-time completion rates, while students who enrolled in a degree or certificate program lasting fewer than four years in fall 2018 saw 15% on-time completion rates.
- Nearly all examined student groups at HERA institutions increased their degree completion rates compared to those in previous HERA data released three years prior. Among bachelor’s degree programs, the largest increases in on-time degree completion came for Black, non-Hispanic students; Asian students; Hispanic/Latinx students; and Pell Grant recipients.
- Despite these improvements, disparities remain concerning. Students enrolled in degree or certificate programs of fewer than four years, Pell Grant recipients, male students, and Black, non-Hispanic or Hispanic/Latinx students continue to experience the lowest degree completion rates of the HERA groups examined.

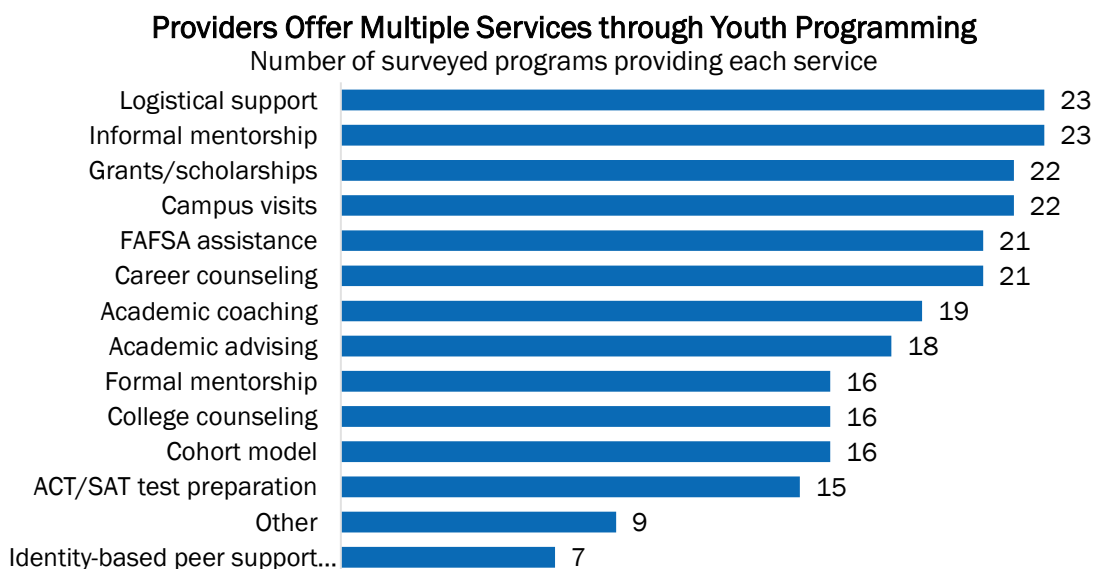
These postsecondary completion data suggest that historically marginalized students attending college are more likely to experience success than their predecessors, but their overall odds of completing are still discouragingly low. Combined with the previous student outcome data, they indicate that programming to provide postsecondary readiness services both for high school students and for those who have matriculated at higher education institutions could fill critical gaps.



## Milwaukee Postsecondary Readiness Programs

To learn what out-of-school programming does exist to assist students with postsecondary readiness, we conducted a survey of providers to capture a snapshot of the landscape and then supplemented the survey with key informant interviews. We found that:

- Postsecondary readiness programs are generally run and staffed by nonprofit organizations or higher education institutions. Almost four-fifths (79.3%) of programs surveyed are not affiliated with a national organization and only operate locally. Almost three quarters (72.4%) of survey respondents have operated in Milwaukee for seven or more years.
- Programming is often organized around key milestones in students' educational journey and designed to address common needs for students: academic readiness, financial limitations, and sense of belonging. Providers offer a range of services to accomplish those goals.



Source: WPF survey. The 29 surveyed providers could select more than one answer.

- The average program surveyed selects students for participation using at least two eligibility requirements. Need factors into many but not all of these criteria. The most common is the student's school (as many programs target specific high schools or colleges), followed by household economic status and grade point average (GPA).
- In total, the 29 programs surveyed serve approximately 24,800 high school-age students and 9,100 college-age students per year (although these counts include duplicates). Among surveyed programs, those serving students of high school age tend to either have fewer than 100 participants or more than 1,000 participants per year. Programs serving students of college age are somewhat more likely to have fewer than 100 participants per year.
- Surveyed programs' annual budgets range from less than \$20,000 to \$3.5 million. Local philanthropy is the most frequent source of primary funding, as selected by 34.4% of

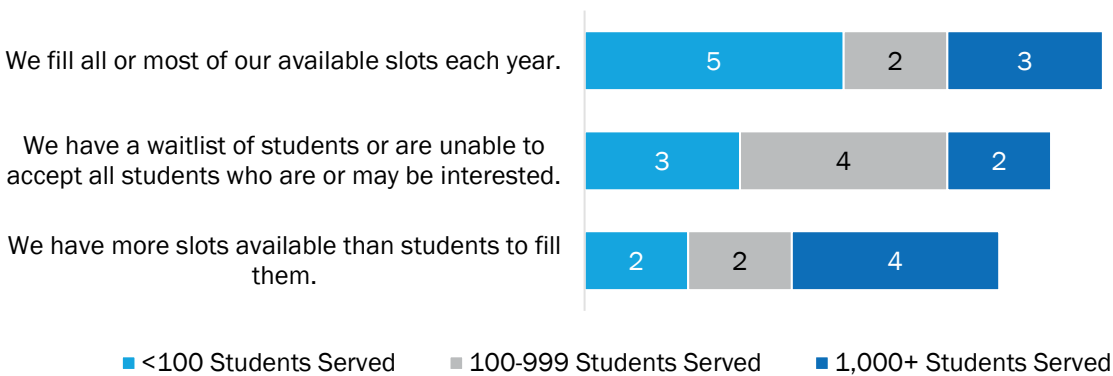


respondents. Responses did not identify competition for local resources as a constraint, although some did name financial capacity overall as a barrier to potential expansion.

- In addition to funding, staffing and student program enrollment emerged as impediments to expanding these programs. Survey responses on supply and demand demonstrate some apparent current mismatches between participant numbers and the landscape’s capacity for service. Some programs (32.1% of those surveyed) see evidence that they could fill additional slots were they available. Another 28.6% of survey respondents, however, answered that they have more slots available than they have students to fill them. Underutilization is concentrated amongst the largest programs.

### Fewer Than Half of Programs See Student Demand Exceed Supply

Number of programs selecting each self-description (out of 28 survey respondents)



Source: WPF survey. Only one selection allowed per respondent.

## Insights and Opportunities

To increase access to postsecondary readiness programming to all Milwaukee youth who would benefit from such programming, students and providers may benefit from the following suggestions:

- **Minimize competition in student recruitment.** Our analysis revealed evidence of overlap among some programs’ recruitment efforts, which stemmed from their targeting the same specific schools or student groups. This may overstretch some students who may participate across several programs at the same time, although simultaneous participation may also provide them with effective wraparound support if providers intentionally align services.
- **Expand and diversify recruitment.** Overlapping recruitment also may leave demand from other students untapped. Available data indicate that likely students currently underserved by programming include students who will struggle to afford college despite not qualifying as “low-income” according to some eligibility measures; students not immediately identified as “higher-achieving” whose likelihood of attending and succeeding in college will nonetheless increase if granted additional support; college-aged students; and undocumented students.
- **Ensure students perceive programming as valuable.** Analyzing program metrics can reveal if a provider needs to adjust services or employ a more effective communication and recruitment strategy to improve its reach with youth.



The following opportunities can further inform programs' continuous improvement:

- **Financial literacy and mental health needs are frequently unmet.** Multiple interviewees reported witnessing program participants struggling not only with the financial considerations associated with attending college but also with overall financial life skills. Interviewees also noted a spike in mental health needs among students, especially through the COVID-19 pandemic, and their programs' current limitations in meeting those needs.
- **Access to appropriate physical space is critical.** Interviewees highlighted that students' easy access to their programs and affiliated spaces was valuable for purposes of initial recruitment, ongoing usage of services, and sense of welcome and belonging.
- **Program partnerships hold promise for greater student support.** Students' engagement with even a single program can have a multiplying effect on their access to other supports and services if the initial program acts as a connector. Meanwhile, program partnerships built around "warm handoffs" aim to minimize the risk that a student will fail to receive the necessary support through transitions into a new program, institution, or life stage.

Finally, providers, host institutions, and funders might undertake some initial action steps to move toward the goals listed above:

- **Host an annual summit of similar programs for strategic collaboration.** Such a gathering could center on coordination across programs to reduce the duplication of recruiting efforts and instead "spread the wealth" of available resources to underserved schools and students.
- **Hold regular smaller provider meetings to promote ongoing partnership and coordination.** Meetings may focus on opportunities for providers to partner with one another to learn from and complement each other's areas of expertise; further plug the "leaky pipeline" through more warm hand-offs; and address currently unmet student needs.
- **Build and maintain resource lists to increase awareness of available program services.** To successfully connect students with appropriate programs and services, providers, school-based staff, and families must first know what resources exist. Providers and stakeholders could work to develop a resource catalog in a simple list format or as a more sophisticated database that allows for sorting and suggesting programs based on characteristics like students' interests, GPA, and demographics.
- **Enhance data collection.** Programs that are driven by data and publish their results increase their value to students and the landscape. DPI may also wish to consider collecting and reporting more comprehensive high school completion data for private schools and more easily interpretable postsecondary enrollment data to further inform the landscape.

None of these actions taken on their own will fully plug the holes of Milwaukee's "leaky pipeline," nor should we expect out-of-school postsecondary readiness programs to solve these challenges on their own. Still, we hope these observations and analyses will provide both insight and an invitation for reflection and improvement for postsecondary readiness providers, their funders, and the students who depend upon them.

