



# ERN

## RENEWING THE WISCONSIN IDEA

By James Murphy

## Executive Summary

**For a century and a half**, the University of Wisconsin System (UW-System) has led the nation with a vision of higher education as an engine for innovation, excellence, and equity. That legacy is in danger today as the UW-System falls behind its peers, particularly at the extremes, where Wisconsin's two public research universities look like photo negatives of each other. The University of Wisconsin-Madison is incredibly successful at graduating the students it enrolls, but fails to enroll a student body that looks like Wisconsin. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee successfully recruits a diverse student body, including large numbers of students from working class, low-income, and racial minority backgrounds, but they graduate at very low rates.

*“The future health of the UW-System and the State of Wisconsin depends on diminishing the inequities inhabiting the very institutions meant to erase them.”*

### Consider these 2017 numbers:

University of Wisconsin-Madison	University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
• <b>87%</b> six-year graduation rate (#2 among peer institutions)	• <b>42%</b> six-year graduation rate (last among peer institutions)
• <b>12%</b> of freshmen received a Pell grant (last among peer institutions)	• <b>36%</b> of freshmen received a Pell grant (#2 among peer institutions)
• <b>12%</b> of freshmen received state aid (last in UW-System)	• <b>40%</b> of freshmen received state aid (#2 in UW-System)
• <b>38%</b> of freshmen recorded zero financial need for assistance (most among UW-System)	• <b>16%</b> of freshmen recorded zero financial need for assistance (last among UW-System)

Source: IPEDS, 2016-17

The future health of the UW-System and the State of Wisconsin depends on diminishing the inequities inhabiting the very institutions meant to erase them. To this end, we propose a **Wisconsin Idea Renewal and Expansion (WIRE)** initiative. The WIRE initiative would push UW-Madison to enroll its fair share of qualified low-income students or provide financial support to help UW-Milwaukee do a better job educating low-income students that UW-Madison should also be serving.

## Introduction

**As long as there has been a State of Wisconsin**, there has been a University of Wisconsin. Since 1848, the state has served the institution and the institution has served the state. This happy partnership is no accident. The Wisconsin Idea (1905) provided a model for the entire nation by reimagining the place of higher education in the economic and civic life in a state: “The boundaries of the university are the boundaries of the state.”<sup>1</sup> While the oldest American universities were designed to serve an elite sliver of society, Wisconsin led the way by making the university an incubator of ideas, innovation, and socioeconomic mobility for all.

When UW President Charles Hise first articulated the Wisconsin Idea, he declared, “I shall never be content until the beneficent influence of the University reaches every family of the state.”<sup>2</sup> Starting in the 1940s, Wisconsin took important steps to realizing that vision, creating UW campuses in Milwaukee, Green Bay, and Parkside, as well as regional campuses for freshmen and sophomores. In 1971, the University of Wisconsin campuses merged with the Wisconsin State University System to create the University of Wisconsin System, which expanded higher education across much of the state and now includes 13 schools, including two R1 research universities granting doctoral degrees, UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee. UW alumni discovered vitamins, started the Sierra Club, and created *The Onion*. UW-Madison routinely ranks among the best public schools in the nation in the *US News and World Report* Rankings. The Barrons’ Profile of American Colleges ranks it as a “Most Selective” school, the highest tier.<sup>3</sup> UW-Wisconsin has become a national leader in research and education.

To this day Wisconsin rightly takes great pride in its university system, but there are serious reasons to worry that the Wisconsin Idea is in trouble. Hise would surely not be content today, and neither should the people of Wisconsin, as the “beneficent influence” of the UW System increasingly is reserved for privileged and pedigreed children at the state’s flagship University of Wisconsin-Madison, while academically talented children of fewer means and underrepresented minorities are in the main only provided access to institutions like the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, whose low graduation rate threatens to leave many students in debt with no degree, arguably worse off than if they had never gone to college at all.

What Wisconsin needs is a plan that demands both institutions do better by the people of the state. We recommend a **Wisconsin Idea Renewal and Expansion** (WIRE) initiative that pushes UW-Madison to enroll its fair share of qualified low-income students or provide financial support to help UW-Milwaukee do a better job educating the type of low-income students that UW-Madison should be serving. Specifically, we submit that as a condition of participation in Wisconsin Higher Educational Aids Board grants and scholarship programs UW-Madison must either increase its share of Pell Grant recipients in enrolled classes to at least 20 percent or transfer funds that would be spent serving those missing students to the UW-Milwaukee in order to help the latter’s many more under-resourced students with extra grant aid and research-based interventions designed to increase retention and graduation. **Wisconsin can enact this plan to live up to the core principles of the Wisconsin Idea without imposing any new taxes or incurring any additional costs.**

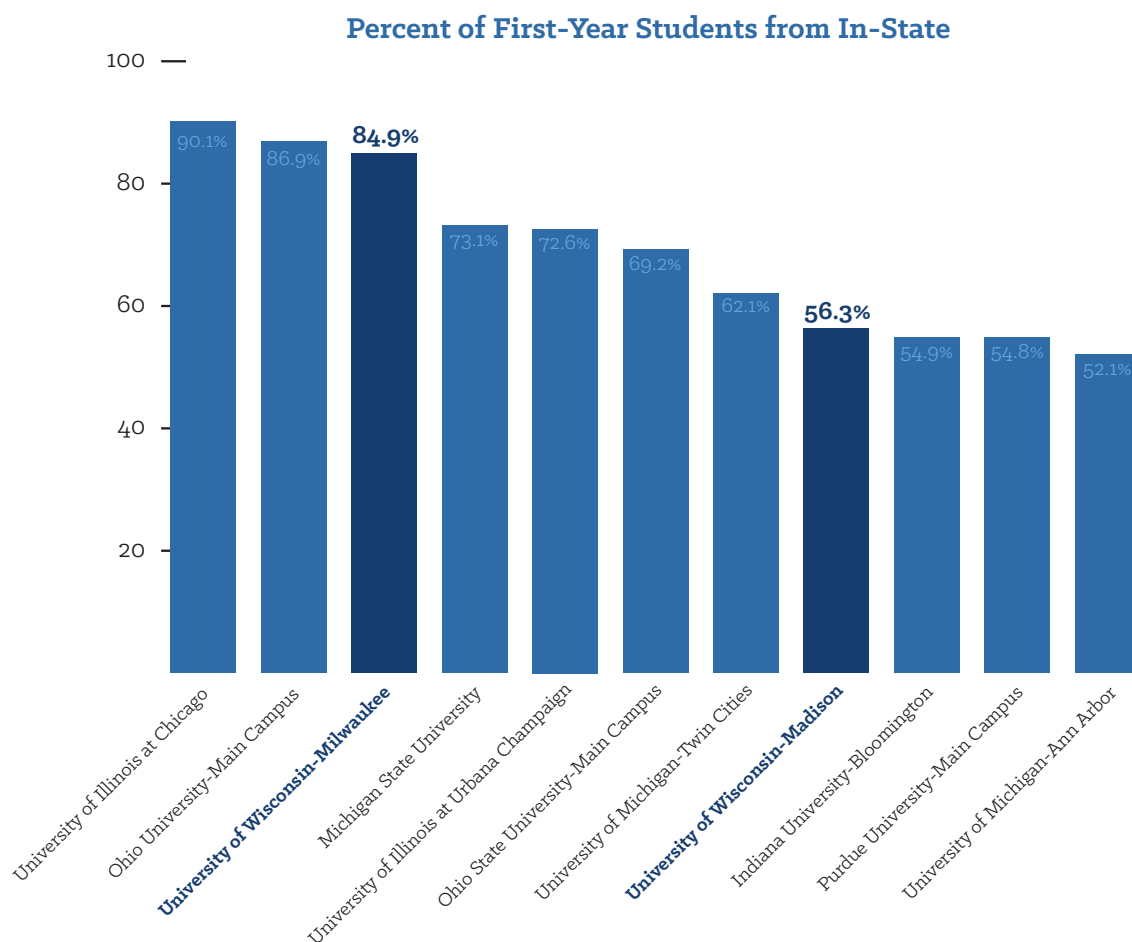
While the inequity in the UW-System is widespread, the proposed WIRE initiative is focused on rectifying the disparities between UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee, since the latter is the second largest and among the most diverse universities in the UW-System. There is a danger in redirecting revenue from UW-Madison across the entire system, rendering it too diffuse to have any real impact. Better to use generated revenue to redress the dearth of resources and supports at the school where it is likely to have the greatest impact. If the outcomes are as positive as expected, then new methods for expanding this program can be explored. If UW-Madison improves its enrollment of working class and low-income students to levels seen at peer institutions like the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities that have a similar median SAT score among enrolled students as UW-Madison, all the better.

*Wisconsin’s  
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# The University of Wisconsin Is Falling Behind Its Peers

***It is a testimony to the Big Ten's reputation*** as a leader in research and education that so many of its public universities draw students from across the United States and the world.

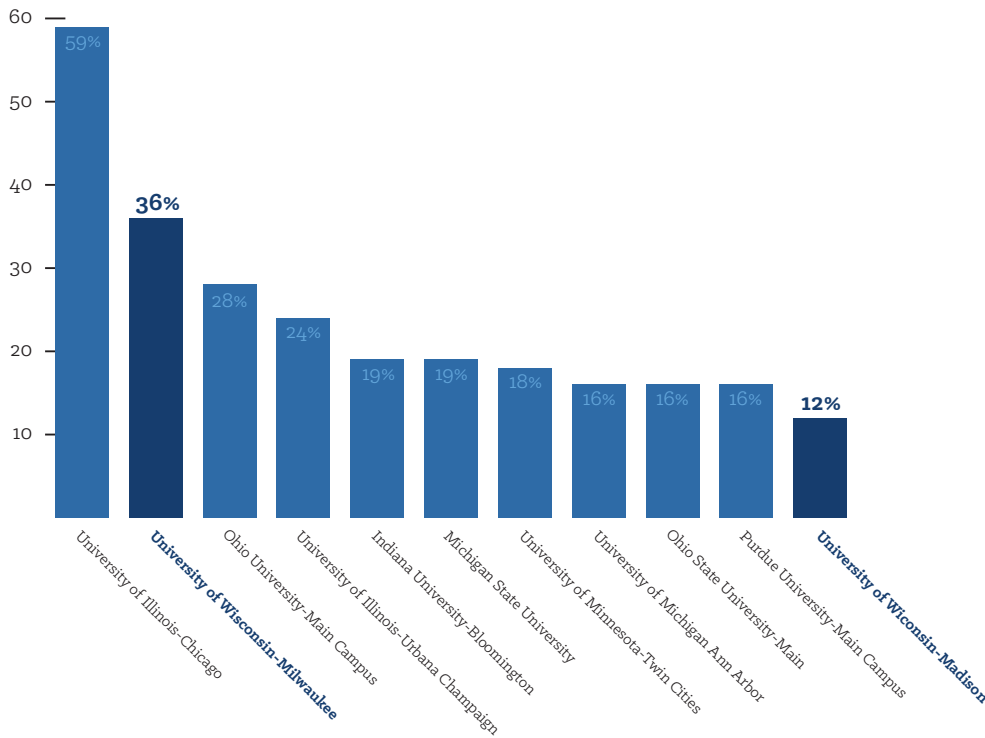
“UW-Madison enrolls a smaller percentage of Pell Grant recipients than any other Big 10 or regional public university”



Source: IPEDS, 2016-17

***When it comes to serving students in its own state, however,*** UW-Madison lags behind many of its peers. It enrolls a significantly smaller share of students receiving Pell Grants, typically reflective of those coming from households with less than \$60,000 a year in income. The UW-Madison enrolls a smaller percentage of Pell Grant recipients than any other Big 10 or regional public university. In fact, UW-Madison has the lowest Pell enrollment rate among all its peers, even though it has a higher rate of admission than three of them.

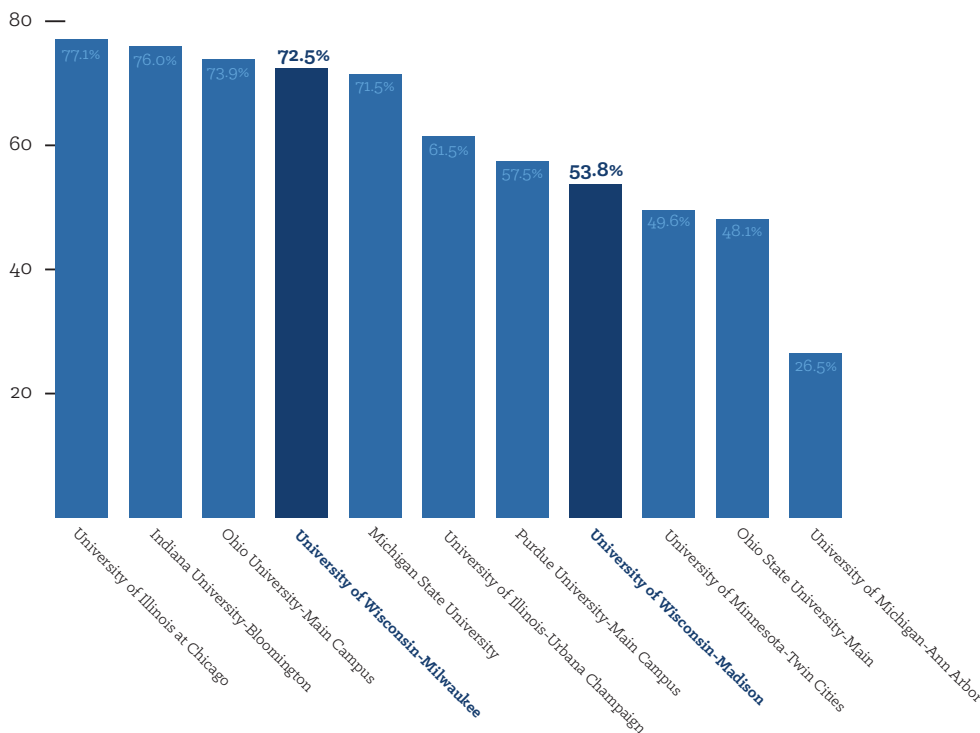
Percent Pell for Freshmen 2016-17 (Peer Institutions)



Source: IPEDS, 2016-17

**Compare UW-Madison with the University of Michigan.** The University of Michigan is one of the most selective schools in the nation and even though it could fill its class with students able to pay full non-resident tuition, it maintains a near 50% stronger commitment to serving Pell recipients than does UW-Madison. Some 32% of college students in America received Pell Grants in 2017, but at UW-Madison less than 12% did.<sup>4</sup>

Admit Rate (Peer Institutions)



Source: IPEDS, 2016-17

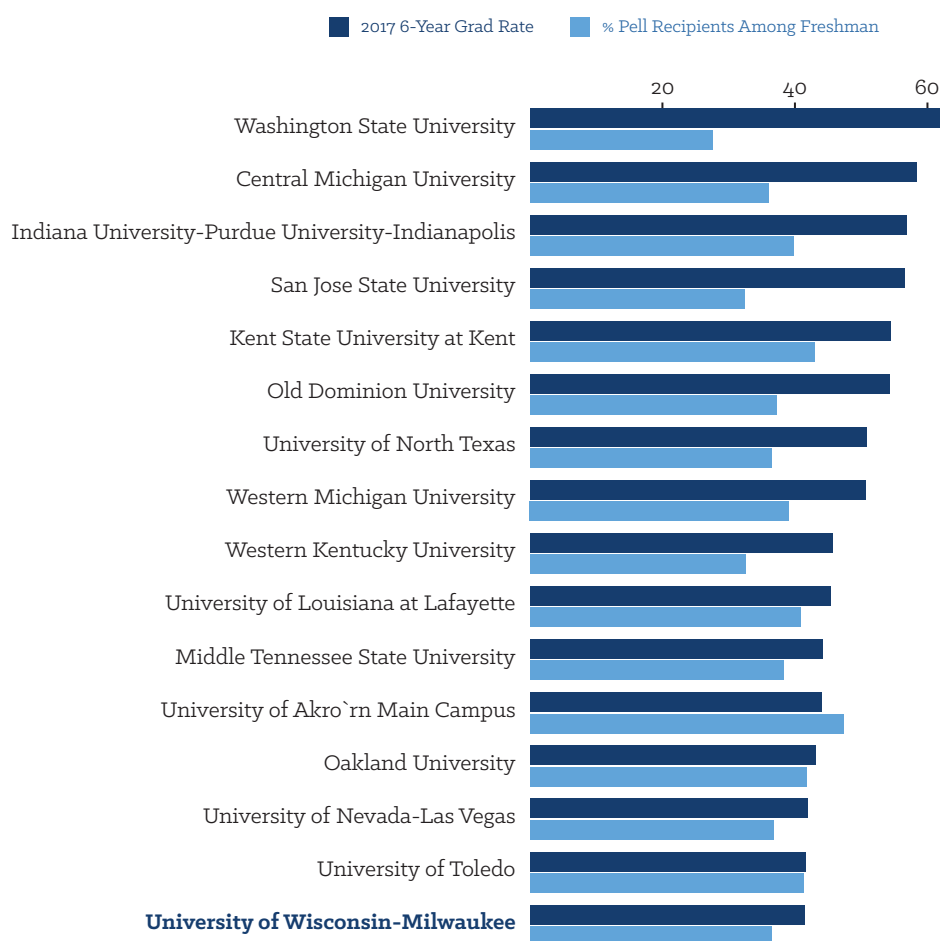
“32% of college students in America received Pell Grants in 2017, but at UW-Madison less than 12% did.”

*“UW-Milwaukee and UW-Madison lie just 80 miles apart, but they might as well be on different planets when it comes to access and outcomes.”*

**Worse,** UW-Madison’s percentage enrollment of Pell Grant recipients is not just lower than the University of Michigan’s, it’s lower than all of the 74 public research universities in the United States that enroll undergraduates. In fact, UW-Madison’s Pell share is lower than that of many private national universities, which arguably do not have the same mandate to serve the public as UW-Madison does, never mind responsibility to live up to the Wisconsin Idea.

UW-Milwaukee and UW-Madison lie just 80 miles apart, but they might as well be on different planets when it comes to access and outcomes. UW-Milwaukee is much more successful at enrolling a diverse student body, including three times the share of freshmen with Pell-grants (36%) than UW-Madison, but its 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time students (42%) is less than half of UW-Madison’s. Its graduation rate is particularly low for African-American (16%) and Latinx (28%) students. Compared to 16 schools with similar demographics and test scores, UW-Milwaukee comes in dead last with respect to its 6-year graduation rate.

**2017 6-Year Grad Rate and % Pell Recipients Among Freshman at UW-Milwaukee and Peer Institutions**



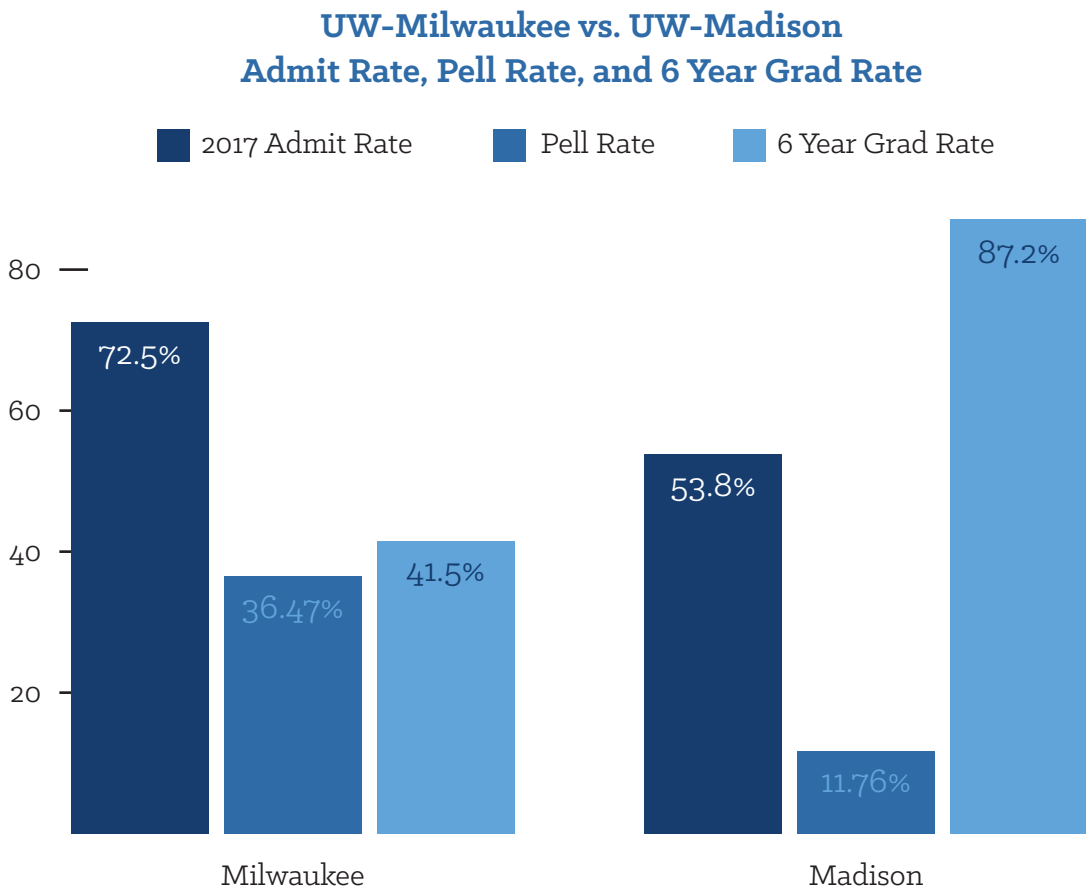
Source: College Results Online (2017)

# Restoring Balance to the UW-System

## In order to restore the UW-System's two main public research universities

to the front of the Big Ten, Wisconsin needs to address the state's great disparity in college access (i.e. the ability of students to enroll in college, regardless of region, race, or wealth) and success (i.e. the high likelihood of completing college with a reputable degree and manageable levels of debt). Between them, UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee cover both ends of the access and success spectrum, but neither does both well.

We recommend a WIRE initiative to push and help both institutions improve. UW-Madison admits relatively few low-income students, but it has one of the highest graduation rates in the region. UW-Milwaukee admits a deeply diverse student body, in terms of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity, but it has a low graduation rate.



Source: IPEDS, 2016-17

“UW-Madison has a high graduation rate and low Pell share...The reverse is true at UW-Milwaukee.”

Graduation rates are outputs that are strongly affected -- but not solely determined -- by inputs. Wealthier students tend to have more cultural capital and family resources than most low-income and first-generation students, which means that they have greater know-how about what it takes to succeed in college and stronger support when they don't. As a result of these advantages, wealthier students are more likely to complete college, particularly when surrounded by a well-resourced, supportive institution.

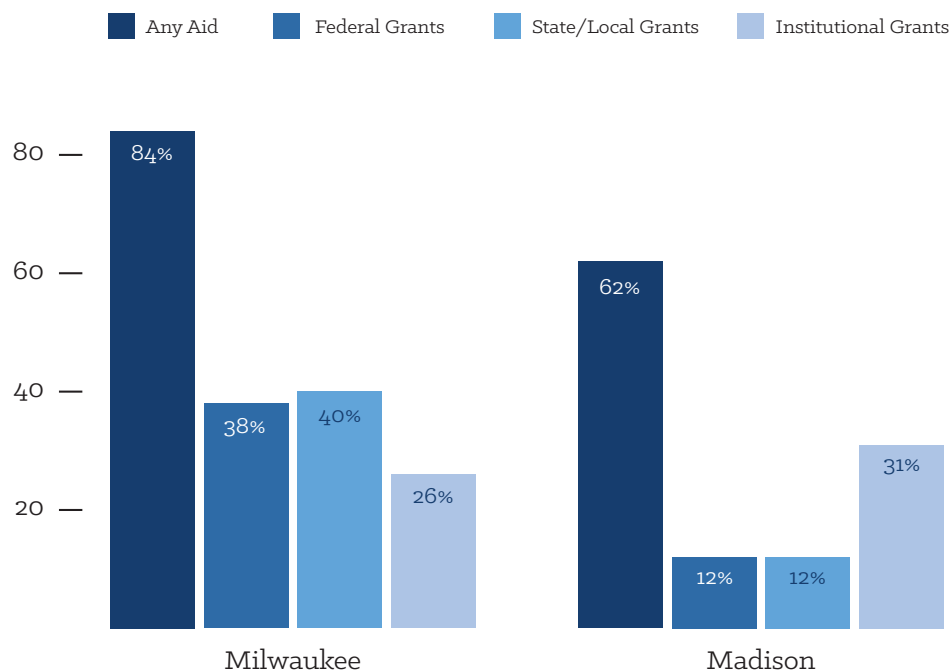
*“There are a number of resources and practices, supported by research and recommended by the United States Department of Education, that can boost completion of college.”*

**At UW-Madison**, more than a third of all enrolled students come from families so wealthy they have zero recorded need for financial assistance. Only 12% of UW-Madison students receive state or local grants.<sup>5</sup> Compare that percentage to UW-Milwaukee, where 84% of students receive aid, including 40% who receive state grants.<sup>6</sup> Increased funding of grants and loans to low-income students and underrepresented minorities who are qualified to attend to the UW-Milwaukee would likely boost its graduation rate.

Scholars increasingly have recognized that graduation rates are often a product of non-academic factors, such as income, the need to work full-time, food scarcity, social service needs, and the true cost of college beyond tuition at least as often as they reflect academic preparation.<sup>7</sup> There are a number of resources and practices, supported by research and recommended by the United States Department of Education, that can boost completion of college.<sup>8</sup>

The UW-System recognizes the power that big data interventions have had to increase retention and graduation rates at Georgia State University, among other institutions, which is why it recently made a \$10.8 million investment in EAB's Navigate system, that tracks students' grades, coursework, schedules, and more and puts it into the hands of student affairs officers who can anticipate and prevent or resolve setbacks. But UW-Milwaukee has been using Navigate for several years.

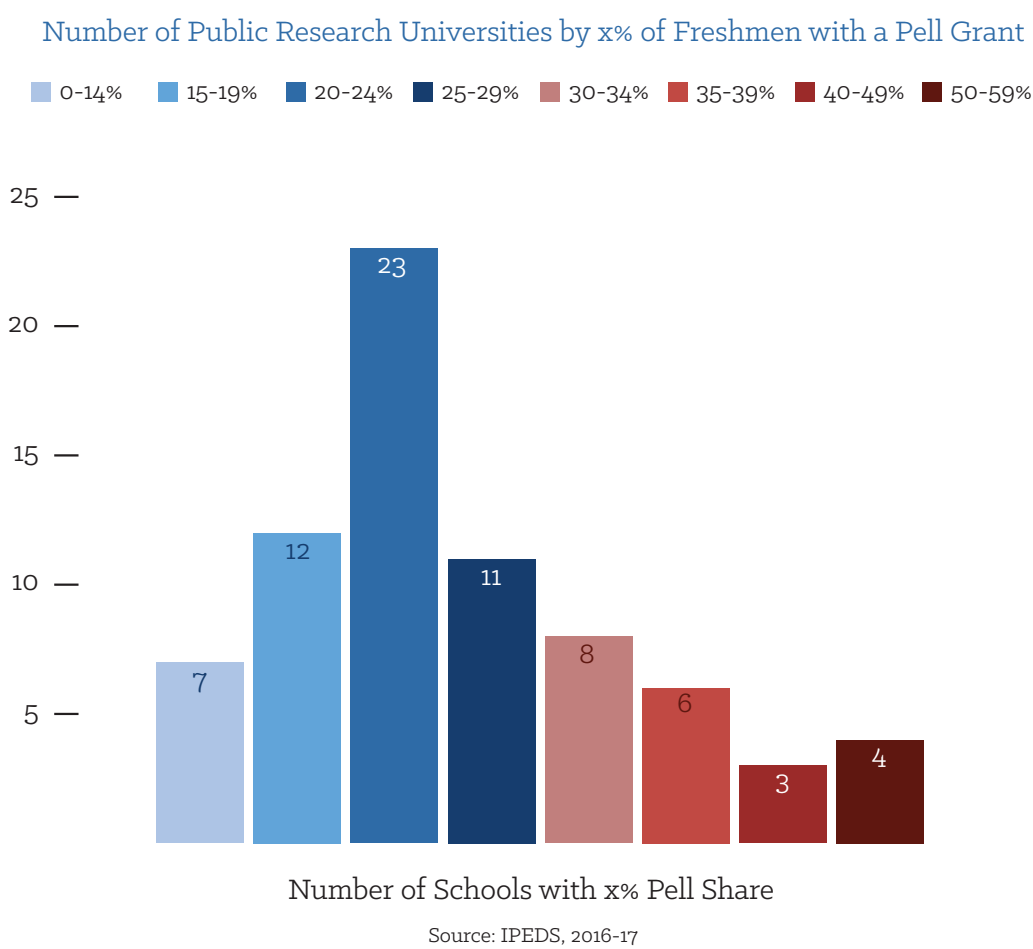
**Share of WI-System Students Receiving Aid by Type**



Source: IPEDS, 2016-17

More vigorous, hands-on interventions like those used by the CUNY ASAP (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs) program or Tarrant County, Texas' lower cost *Stay the Course* initiative are likely needed to increase completion rates. The proposed WIRE initiative could help offset the expense of fully implementing proven programs like ASAP that couple use of big data with heightened resources for students, a *Stay the Course*-like initiative, or other completion efforts at UW-Milwaukee without increasing taxes, tuition, or fees. Each has shown the power of coupling additional resources with data-driven reforms. They have led to a doubling of completion rates where implemented.<sup>9</sup>

**We suggest** UW-Madison contribute funds to UW-Milwaukee either voluntarily or at the state legislature's insistence until UW-Madison raises its share of Pell grant recipients to 20% of the admitted freshman class. In 2017, the share of admitted freshmen at almost three-quarters of public research universities was at least 20%. The suggested WIRE initiative threshold would require UW-Madison merely to place itself in the middle of the pack, but that's much better than trailing far in the back as it is now, tied for last with the University of Virginia. If anything, 20% might be a little under ambitious, given the fact that at the end of 2018, the UW-Madison endowment (\$2.9 billion) was more than 2500% larger than the UW-Milwaukee endowment (\$113.9 million).



“UW-Madison’s contribution would produce approximately 1,000-3,000 more UW-Milwaukee students per year.”

**Specifically, under the proposed WIRE initiative,** UW-Madison would pay a contribution to UW-Milwaukee equivalent to in-state tuition and fees for each missed student below the 20% Pell threshold. Since the UW-Madison deems that amount an appropriate price tag for the excellent education it provides, it is appropriate to reallocate that revenue to UW-Milwaukee, where those same funds would likely have an even larger impact, given that institution’s lack of resources. To illustrate, in 2017 UW-Madison was approximately 525 students short of the recommended 20% Pell enrollment share. Tuition and fees for Wisconsin residents were \$10,533.60. The WIRE initiative would have required **UW-Madison to transfer just over \$5.5 million to UW-Milwaukee** (525 x \$10,533.60). Given the cost and effectiveness of proven completion initiatives like *Stay the Course* that run approximately \$1,800 per student, UW-Madison’s contribution would produce approximately 1,000-3,000 more UW-Milwaukee students per year.

## Conclusion

*“There are a number of resources and practices, supported by research and recommended by the United States Department of Education, that can boost completion of college.”*

*Wisconsin’s flagship public university, UW-Madison, is one of the least accessible public four-year colleges in the country, measured by Pell Grant student enrollment. It’s photo negative sibling, UW-Milwaukee, barely 80 miles away enrolls one of the highest rates of working-class and low-income students among Big Ten research universities but generates the lowest graduation rates among its peer institutions nationwide that serve a similarly academically qualified group of students. Both institutions need to improve.*

*We recommend a “resources and reform” strategy to help and push Wisconsin’s top public research universities improve with a three-year phase in particular to give UW-Madison sufficient time to improve access or set-aside resources for UW-Milwaukee. The Wisconsin Idea is a noble idea, but it means little if it remains just an idea. The time has come to make the Wisconsin Idea a reality for all Wisconsin families.*

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## Endnotes

1. <https://www.wisc.edu/wisconsin-idea/>
2. <https://www.wisc.edu/wisconsin-idea/>
3. Barron's Profiles of American Colleges 2019, 35th ed.
4. <https://trends.collegeboard.org/student-aid/figures-tables/undergraduate-enrollment-and-percentage-receiving-pell-grants-over-time>
5. IPEDS, 2016-17
6. IPEDS, 2016-17
7. <https://eab.com/insights/daily-briefing/student-success/7-reasons-other-than-cost-that-students-dont-graduate/4/>
8. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/college-completion-toolkit.pdf>
9. See Scrivener, Susan, Michael J. Weiss, Alyssa Ratledge, Timothy Rudd, Colleen Sommo, and Hanna Fresques. 2015. "Doubling Graduation Rates: Three Year Effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs for Developmental Education Students". (MDRC: New York, New York). <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/doubling-graduation-rates>. See also Evans, William, Melissa Kearney, Brendan Perry, and James Sullivan. 2017. "Increasing Community College Completion Rates Among Low-Income Students: Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial Evaluation of a Case Management Intervention". (National Bureau of Economic Research: Cambridge, MA). <http://www.nber.org/papers/w24150.pdf>.

