

CROWE: Report aggregate earnings rankings mask major differences in Wisconsin

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MADISON, Wisconsin, February 6, 2026 – The Center for Research on the Wisconsin Economy (CROWE) releases a report on Degrees of Deception: UW-Madison Leads Where Earnings Matter Most.

“Recent headlines have painted a misleading picture of college earnings in Wisconsin, ranking UW-Madison fourth behind institutions like Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE) and Marquette

University,” said Ananth Seshadri, Mary Sue and Mike Shannon Distinguished Chair & CROWE Director. “When you look beyond aggregate medians and focus on fields of study, UW-Madison dominates, leading in 48 out of 72 majors and all 15 high-earning fields where median earnings are above \$96,000.” In the report, CROWE researchers draw on U.S. Department of Education data to compare earnings by major across Wisconsin institutions, highlighting variations masked by simplistic rankings.

The report finds that

- UW-Madison graduates outearn peers in most overlapping fields, surpassing MSOE in 6 of 7 shared majors and Marquette in 17 of 28, particularly in lucrative areas like computer engineering (\$139,079 median earnings four years post-graduation) and industrial engineering (\$113,005).
- Aggregate rankings overlook major concentrations and offerings, with specialized schools like MSOE benefiting from a focus on high-paying engineering fields, while UW-Madison excels across a broader spectrum,

including all top earners.

- With significantly lower tuition and net prices—\$16,131 average net price in 2013-14 compared to \$22,019 at MSOE and \$32,900 at Marquette—UW-Madison delivers a superior return on investment for most fields, making it a better value for students and families.

“Our findings highlight the limitations of aggregate rankings and support more informed college decisions especially with the new FAFSA earnings disclosures,” said Professor Seshadri. “Students should prioritize both institution quality and major choice, recognizing UW-Madison’s edge in high-value degrees to maximize future earnings and minimize costs.”