

FREE-FALLING FAFSAS

The percentage of Wisconsin high school seniors completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) plummeted during the pandemic, which may signal a concerning trend in college enrollment. The declines hit underserved groups the hardest, eroding previous years' progress toward closing FAFSA completion gaps.

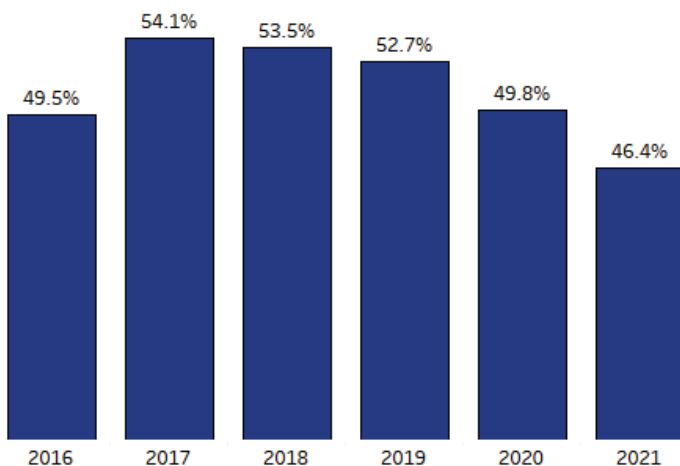
Amid the chaotic conditions of COVID-19, fewer seniors at Wisconsin's public high schools filled out a key federal financial aid form, with the number of completions falling by 6.3% from 2019 to 2020 and 12.2% from 2019 to 2021. The declines were greater than the national drops of 3.2% from 2019 to 2020 and 7.8% from 2019 to 2021, according to our analysis of data published by the Federal Student Aid Office at the U.S. Department of Education.

Completion rates also fell: 52.7% of Wisconsin's public high school class of 2019 filled out a FAFSA, compared to 49.8% of the class of 2020 and 46.4% of the class of 2021 (see **Figure 1**).

These declines carry ominous implications since the FAFSA is a crucial first step for many students toward

Figure 1: FAFSA Completion Rates Decline Sharply During COVID-19

Percentage of Wisconsin 12th graders completing FAFSA by June 30th, by graduation year



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Department of Public Instruction. *Does not include private schools or schools with fewer than five FAFSAs completed per year.

Raw completion numbers reported here reflect completions by 12th graders at all public high schools and at private high schools participating in the U.S. Department of Education's Private School Survey. Reported completion rates exclude private schools to pair FAFSA data with school geographic, enrollment, and demographic data. Available FAFSA data do not include student-level demographic data; our analysis therefore relies on overall 12th grade student characteristics at the schools in question. References to a school's completion rate should be interpreted as the completion rate of the 12th graders within the school. Undocumented students are included within the count of 12th graders but are not eligible to fill out the FAFSA. All FAFSA completions reported are as of June 30 in the reporting year.

securing the financial aid necessary to attend college. The completed form is a prerequisite for federal grants, work-study, and loans, and other entities also use FAFSA information to determine aid eligibility. [Research](#) shows FAFSA completion is associated with a higher likelihood that a student will enroll in a postsecondary institution.

In interviews, school and district officials pointed to different explanations for the sharp decline since the start of the pandemic. At some schools, restricted in-person interactions meant fewer meaningful opportunities for school personnel to engage with families and students and therefore less awareness of FAFSA, weaker relationships, and less trust. These tend to be necessary components for a process involving families' financial information, students' plans for the future, and frequent misconceptions about financial aid. FAFSA may also have received less attention during the pandemic because schools and families prioritized other pressing needs.

The decline in FAFSA completion rates may also reflect some students' decreased intent to attend college.



School counselors referred to students who took jobs during remote learning and found it difficult to justify walking away from current earnings and potentially taking on student debt instead to go to college. Other students may have been reluctant to pay full cost for a pandemic-impacted college experience, especially after the challenges of high school remote learning. Still others may have balked at the cost of college given the pandemic's impact on the economy, particularly for low-income families.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON UNDERSERVED GROUPS

Wisconsin FAFSA completion rates during the pandemic declined across all distinct groups we examined but dropped disproportionately among students from historically underserved groups (see **Figure 2**).

Wisconsin experienced a 13.2 percentage point drop from 2019 to 2021 in the FAFSA completion rate of students who attended schools with a majority of students of color, compared to a 5.2-point drop for students attending schools with a majority of white students.

Over the same time period, the FAFSA completion rate for students attending schools with an English Learner enrollment of 10% or greater dropped by 9.3 percentage points, compared to a 6.1-point drop for students attending all other schools. Similarly, the FAFSA completion rate for students attending schools with a majority of students from low-income households dropped by 12.7 points, while the rate for students attending schools without such a majority dropped by 4.7 points.

These numbers are especially troubling given the explicit design of FAFSA: to make federal student aid and therefore college more accessible to students regardless of income level. It appears that the students most likely to benefit from FAFSA were also the ones for whom COVID-19 most negatively impacted FAFSA completions.

FAFSA COMPLETION RATES PRE- AND POST-COVID

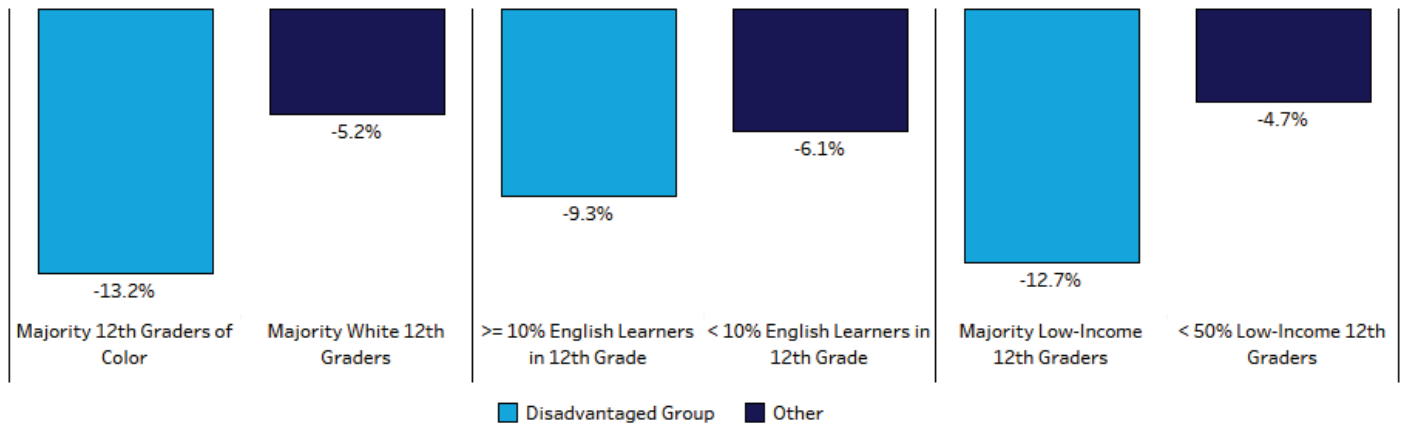
FAFSA completion rates for high school seniors may rise again when the pandemic subsides, which could mitigate longer-term damage. There is cause for concern, however, that these lower rates will linger.

Wisconsin's completion rates began slipping before the pandemic. The share of the state's public high school seniors completing the FAFSA dropped from 54.1% in 2017 to 53.5% in 2018 and 52.7% in 2019.

Postsecondary enrollment rates reported by the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) mirror this decline: 60.6% of seniors in 2017 enrolled in college the fall after high school graduation, compared to 59.4% in 2018 and 58.4% in 2019. These numbers suggest that restoring FAFSA completion rates may not be as simple as reinstating pre-COVID efforts.

The statewide data show that students with comparative advantages drove the pre-COVID declines: FAFSA completion rates from 2017 to 2019 dropped 2.1 percentage points for students attending schools serving a majority of white students, 1.7 points for students attending schools with an English Learner enrollment of less than 10%, and 2 points for students

Figure 2: Fewer FAFSAs for Students at Disadvantaged Schools
2019-2021 percentage-point decline in FAFSA completion rates, by 12th grade class



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Department of Public Instruction. *Does not include private schools or schools with fewer than five FAFSAs completed per year.



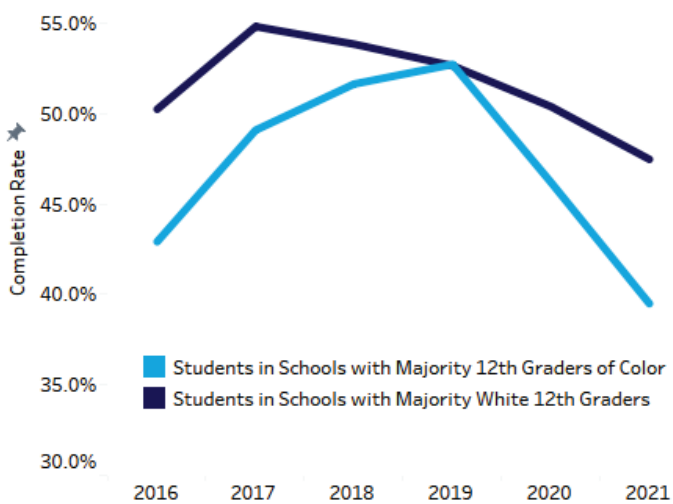
attending schools with a majority of students not from low-income households. Postsecondary enrollment rates for white students, English Proficient students, and students not from low-income backgrounds declined by similar amounts over the same time period.

There have been some positive FAFSA trends in Wisconsin, including a rise in statewide completion rates in 2017 for all student groups, particularly for underserved students. 2017 marked the first year in which the U.S. Department of Education allowed students to [file the FAFSA starting in October](#) rather than January and to do so using tax information from an earlier tax year. These changes better aligned the FAFSA’s timing with state aid and college admissions deadlines and made it easier for families to complete the form with the required income information. The changes remain in effect.

Schools serving a majority of students of color or 10% or more English Learners continued to see gains in completion rates through 2019, even as the statewide rate declined. In 2019, the FAFSA completion rate for students attending schools serving a majority of students of color slightly surpassed that of students attending schools serving majority white students (see **Figure 3**). For these schools and students, COVID appears to have reversed a promising upward trajectory.

Figure 3: Progress Lost for Schools with Majority Students of Color

FAFSA completion rate, by year and type of school



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Department of Public Instruction. *Does not include private schools or schools with fewer than five FAFSAs completed per year.

In Milwaukee, home to the most students of color in the state, district and charter officials credit the city’s pre-COVID gains to coordinated and data-driven efforts grounded in relationships with students and families and supported by external entities such as private donors, the Milwaukee Succeeds collaborative, higher education partnerships like the M³ initiative, and nonprofit organizations like College Possible, College Goal Wisconsin, and National College Attainment Network. Milwaukee Public Schools also opened 20 school-based College and Career Centers and leveraged a state Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant. FAFSA completion rate gains have not yet translated into higher average postsecondary enrollment rates for the city’s students, according to DPI data [aggregated](#) by Milwaukee Succeeds.

RESTORING AND ADVANCING COMPLETION RATES

[Research suggests](#) that families receiving assistance in completing the FAFSA are more likely to submit it, secure more financial aid, and enroll in college. School systems, associated nonprofits, and government entities can provide such assistance directly through workshops and consultations or through supporting activities such as raising community awareness, setting completion goals and tracking progress, training trusted adults, and offering gift cards or meals as incentives. Federal pandemic aid is available to support these efforts.

Further data sharing between higher education institutions and high schools may allow for more targeted efforts. DPI has worked with the Higher Educational Aids Board to provide [student-level data and data resources on FAFSA completions](#) to schools in January of each year. If feasible, earlier release of these data would position schools to more effectively and efficiently reach students with missing FAFSAs before college application and scholarship deadlines. Relationships between individual school districts and colleges allow district officials to see where the [FAFSA verification process](#) has stalled students’ applications.

Text “nudges” have been associated with students’ [overcoming postsecondary financial aid barriers](#), including FAFSA, and [increasing college matriculation](#). These [low-cost interventions](#) can be implemented by school districts, postsecondary institutions, and states (as [Arizona](#) and [Washington](#) have done).



Six states have made FAFSA completion a requirement and provided accompanying supports. Louisiana implemented a high school graduation requirement for the class of 2018 and paired it with a 78% increase in the number of statewide FAFSA workshops. That year, Louisiana achieved a [double-digit percentage point increase](#) in its FAFSA completion rate and dramatically [narrowed the completion rate gap](#) between school districts serving high and low numbers of students from low-income backgrounds. It now [ranks](#) number one nationally for FAFSA completion rates (Wisconsin ranks 41st). The Louisiana Department of Education [Data Center](#) also shows high school graduation rates trending upward since implementation, suggesting that the new requirement has not prevented students from graduating.

prior to the pandemic may make FAFSA completion a concrete and useful area of focus for school districts, postsecondary institutions, and the state as they seek to allocate federal aid dollars and recover from COVID.

Examples from other states include [California](#), which puts the onus on districts to confirm that students have completed the FAFSA or an alternative aid application for undocumented students; and [Colorado](#), which provides additional funding for districts with a FAFSA graduation requirement. All state requirements thus far allow students to opt out, making it less of a mandate and more of an attempt to shift the default mindset of students and staff. Still, some worry that the opt-out clauses may not adequately protect students from unintended consequences. Policymakers may wish to further review both FAFSA completion rates and graduation rates in these implementing states to better understand the impacts of their policies.

CONCLUSION

Nationally, fall 2020 college enrollment for the high school graduating class of 2020 dropped by 6.8% from the previous year, an “unprecedented one-year decline,” according to the [National Student Clearinghouse](#). Recently released DPI data show an even greater drop for Wisconsin students over the same time frame, although later enrollees may mitigate this number over time. Even before the onset of COVID, Wisconsin faced falling postsecondary enrollment rates, as [previously reported](#) by WPF. These declines carry significant negative implications for students, higher education institutions, and the workforce.

Focusing on FAFSA completion rates is not a silver bullet to address postsecondary enrollment declines and should be seen as merely one potential lever and concern among many. However, the relative simplicity of the metric and the promising progress of Wisconsin

