

Inequities Persist

Access and Completion Gaps at Public Flagships in the Great Lakes Region

BY: ELEANOR ECKERSON PETERS AND MAMIE VOIGHT

A college education offers people from all walks of life the opportunity to pursue their academic and professional dreams and build a secure future for themselves and their families. Earning a college degree can serve as a catalyst for economic and social mobility for low-income, working class students and students of color, promoting our nation's ideal that by working hard, anyone can succeed. Yet deep racial and economic inequities in access and completion persist within many of our institutions of higher education, including the public flagships in the Great Lakes region. These inequities must be addressed if the millions of students seeking to better their life's circumstances through hard work and a college education are to realize that ideal.

Low-income students attend college at lower rates today than high-income students did forty years ago.¹ For the students who do enroll, their zip code and skin color are often as likely an indication of the college they attend as their intellect and work ethic. The vast majority of White freshmen (82 percent) enroll in the 468 most selective colleges and universities in America.² By contrast, most Black freshmen (68 percent) and Hispanic freshmen (72 percent) enroll in open access institutions with lower graduation rates and fewer resources to support student success.³ And public colleges have sought to recruit greater shares of wealthy students in order to climb in national rankings and increase revenue in the face of state disinvestment in higher education—leaving fewer institutional aid dollars available to low-income students.⁴ Furthermore, graduation rates for students of color and low-income students lag behind those of White and well-resourced students at many colleges across the country.⁵

Public flagship universities were established to provide an excellent education to state residents. These premier, well-resourced institutions are therefore ideally positioned to address the long-standing inequities in college access and completion. With proven histories of tackling societal challenges head-on, such as combating climate change and researching cures for cancer, public flagships should be working to advance social and economic mobility for students in their state.

Instead, public flagships are part of the problem. In the words of Dr. Kedra Ishop, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management at the University of Michigan, **flagships were “founded on the basis of providing a high caliber, intellectual environment for any student intellectually capable of benefiting from it.”**⁶ And evidence shows that students who attend selective institutions are more likely to graduate and experience greater economic success than students who attend less selective schools.⁷ But, flagships in the Great Lakes region have yet to leverage their strength and expertise to become the engines of mobility they can and should be.

This analysis of equity at public flagship universities in the Great Lakes region reveals persistent equity gaps in access and completion for students of color and low-income students (Figure 1). The following equity snapshots present trends in enrollment and graduation rates over time at six Great Lakes flagships:

- Indiana University – Bloomington
- Ohio State University – Main Campus
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- University of Michigan – Ann Arbor
- University of Minnesota – Twin Cities
- University of Wisconsin – Madison

These universities, for the most part, enroll slightly more Black, Hispanic, and low-income students today than they did three decades ago. This progress, however, has not kept pace with the changing demographics in the Great Lakes region, as evidenced by increasing numbers of high school graduates who are students of color. And although graduation-rate gaps have narrowed at most Great Lakes flagships, students of color and low-income students still earn degrees at lower rates than their White and higher-income peers. Furthermore, median test scores and out-of-state enrollments have also increased at the flagships over the last 15 years, indicating their graduation-rate gains may be driven in part by who the universities let in, rather than what the universities are doing to serve students.⁸ At a time when the economic well-being of students, their families, and states requires postsecondary attainment, public flagships must do better.

Indeed, **what institutions do matters.** University policies and practices impact the ability of low-income students and students of color to enroll in and graduate from college. Yet too often these institutional policies preserve long-held White, upper-class privilege. Sometimes this privilege is clear in policies such as legacy admissions that, by definition, advantage non-first-generation college-goers. Other times, it is more inconspicuous, such as in policies that favor students who demonstrate interest in a college through a campus visit—a luxury many low-income students may not have—or in policies of early decision admission that require students to commit to enroll without the opportunity to compare multiple financial aid packages.

Public flagships have a responsibility to ensure their policies enhance equity rather than perpetuate privilege. Meeting that responsibility requires more than simply checking a box to implement a specific policy. It requires unwavering leadership and an institution-wide commitment to closing gaps in access and completion for underserved students. The institutional policies summarized in the following six snapshots are examples of those that can either help, or hurt, low-income students and students of color seeking to enter and succeed at their state flagship university. Institutional leaders should pay close attention to these and related policy choices. And, as was made clear in interviews with Great Lakes flagship administrators, leaders must maintain a high level of commitment to improving equity at their universities if there is to be real, sustained change.

Public flagships can lift more individuals up the ladder of economic mobility and enhance racial equity by opening opportunities to hardworking students from all backgrounds. But to do so, **they must commit to enroll and graduate more low-income students and students of color**—the very students who stand to benefit most from a flagship education.

Figure 1.

Racial and Socioeconomic Equity Gaps in Access and Completion at Public Flagships in the Great Lakes Region, 2016

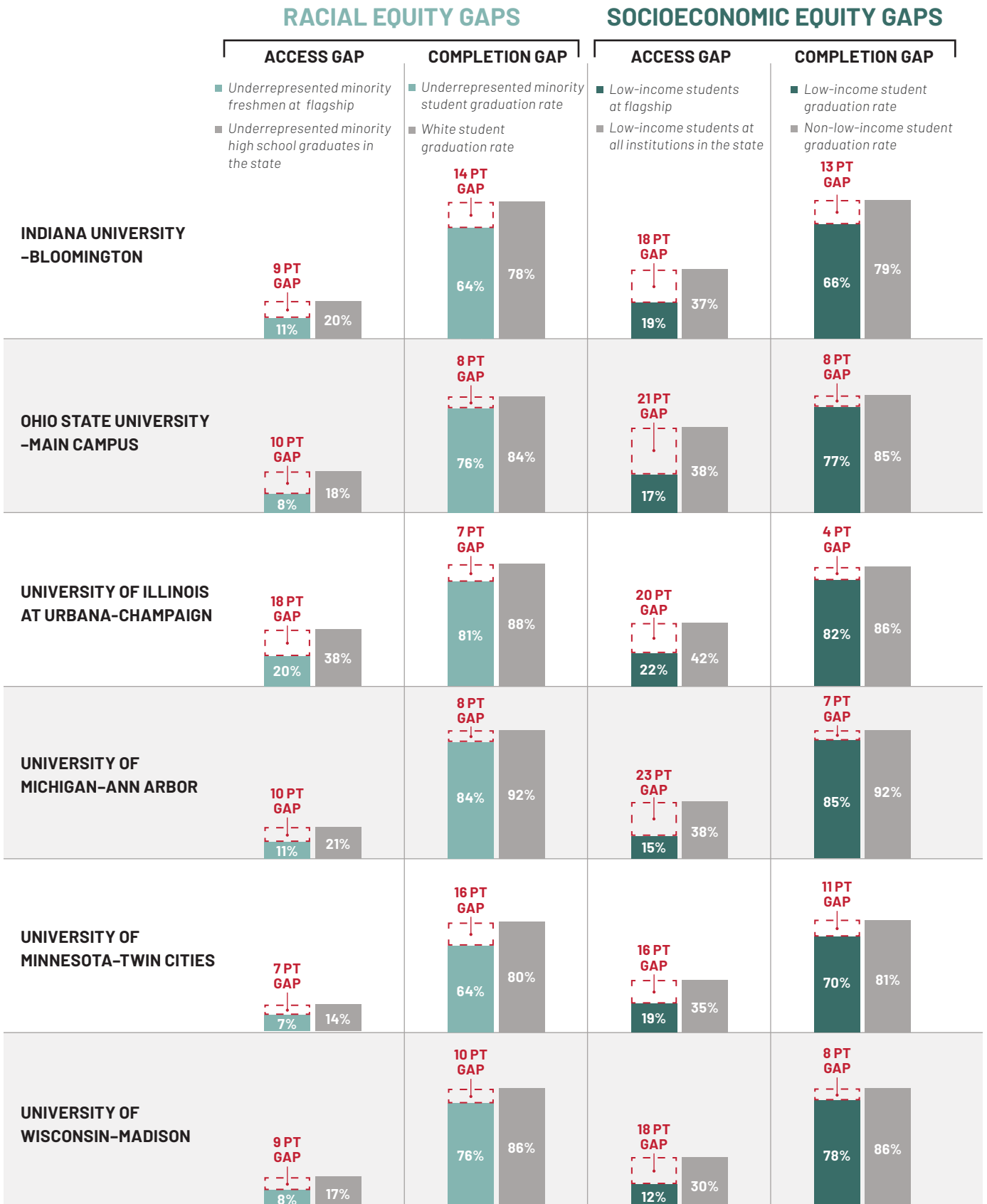


Figure 1 Source

Racial equity gaps: IHEP analysis of first-time, full- and part-time undergraduate fall enrollment, 2016 IPEDS data and public high school graduates 2015–16 Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) data retrieved from <https://knocking.wiche.edu/data>; IHEP analysis of first-time, full-time undergraduate six-year graduation rate by race/ethnicity, 2016 IPEDS data.

Socioeconomic equity gaps: IHEP analysis of first-time, full-time undergraduates receiving Pell Grants at each Great Lakes public flagship and at public, private not-for-profit, and for-profit two- and four-year Title IV participating institutions in their respective states, 2015–16 IPEDS data; IHEP analysis of first-time, full-time undergraduate six-year graduation rate by Pell receipt, 2016 IPEDS data.

Endnotes

1. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education* (2010: pp. 208, 210) and (2017 pp. 234–235). Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2010028> and <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017144>.
2. Carnevale, A.P., & Strohl, J. (2013), *Separate and unequal: How higher education reinforces the intergenerational reproduction of White racial privilege*. Georgetown University. Retrieved from: <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/separate-unequal/#full-report>
3. Ibid.
4. Burd, S. (2016), *Undermining Pell: Volume III*. New America. Retrieved from: <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/undermining-pell-volume-iii/>
5. Lynch, M., & Engle, J. (2010), *Big gaps, small gaps: Some colleges and universities do better than others in graduating African-American students*. The Education Trust. Retrieved from: <https://edtrust.org/resource/big-gaps-small-gaps-in-serving-african-american-students/>; Kelchen, R. (2017), *A look at Pell Grant recipients' graduation rates*. Brookings. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/10/25/a-look-at-pell-grant-recipients-graduation-rates/>; Whistle, W., & Hiler, T. (2018), *The Pell divide: How four-year institutions are failing to graduate low- and moderate-income students*. Third Way. Retrieved from: <https://www.thirdway.org/report/the-pell-divide-how-four-year-institutions-are-failing-to-graduate-low-and-moderate-income-students>
6. IHEP interview with Dr. Kedra Ishop, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management at the University of Michigan on August 2, 2018.
7. Carnevale, A.P., & Strohl, J. (2013), *Separate and unequal: How higher education reinforces the intergenerational reproduction of White racial privilege*. Georgetown University. Retrieved from: <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/separate-unequal/#full-report>; Chakrabarti, R., & Jiang, M. (2018), *Education's role in earnings, employment, and economic mobility*. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Retrieved from: <http://libertystreeteconomics.newyorkfed.org/2018/09/educations-role-in-earnings-employment-and-economic-mobility.html>
8. Burd, S. (2015), *The out-of-state student arms race: How public universities use merit aid to recruit nonresident students*. New America. Retrieved from: <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/policy-papers/out-of-state-student-arms-race/>; Posselt, J.R., Jaquette, O., Bielby, R., & Bastedo, M.N. (2012), *Access without equity: Longitudinal analyses of institutional stratification by race and ethnicity, 1972–2004*. *American Educational Research Journal*, 49(6), 1074–1111.