

# Rising Tide:

## Do College Grad Rate Gains Benefit All Students?



The Education Trust

### TO THE POINT

- ▶ Many institutions celebrate improvement for all students. But it's important to ask — improvement for whom? Our analysis shows that underneath overall grad rate gains are real improvements for underrepresented students.
- ▶ While we should celebrate these gains, they're not happening nearly fast enough. As a nation, we are nowhere near on track to close long-standing gaps between underrepresented students and white students ... at least not in this century.
- ▶ The data for individual institutions make clear that what institutions do matters ... a lot. Some are achieving the twin goals of gains in overall completion and closing gaps. Others are riding the tide of overall gains while underrepresented students lose ground and gaps widen.

Above all, we want to answer the question: *Are we seeing the kind of progress* that will help close long-standing gaps between groups, gaps that are *hobbling the futures of so many students of color* and threatening the future of our ever-more-diverse nation?

# Rising Tide:

## Do College Grad Rate Gains Benefit All Students?

BY KIMBERLEE EBERLE-SUDRÉ, MEREDITH WELCH, AND ANDREW HOWARD NICHOLS

Twenty-five years ago, Washington State University didn't enroll many students of color. Tucked into the southeast corner of the state, near the Washington-Idaho state line, the population of racially diverse students was small, and the campus did little to engage them.<sup>1</sup> "It wasn't an easy place to be a student of color," admitted Manuel Acevedo, who has worked at WSU since 1991 and is now the director of multicultural student services.

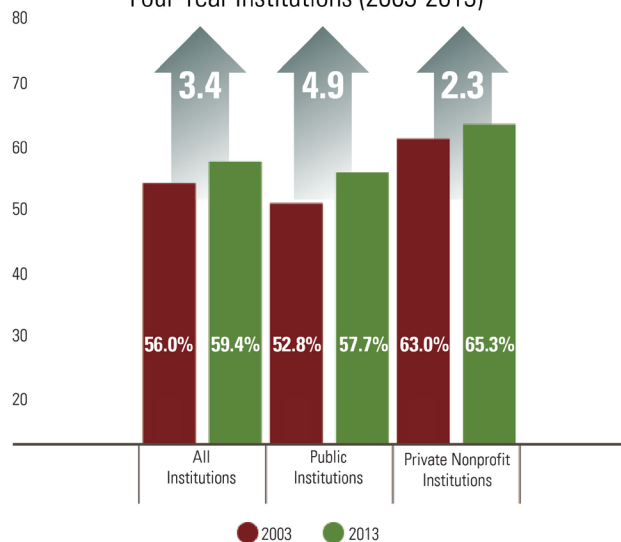
But in the last decade, WSU pivoted. The Board of Regents appointed Elson Floyd, WSU's first black president, who led the campus' efforts to increase diversity.<sup>2</sup> In the years that followed, the university became more intentional about early outreach to students of color and creating a campus community that encouraged success for all students. The objective, Acevedo said, was to make students of color feel welcome — that WSU would be a space to "validate and celebrate" different cultures.

Nowadays, the population of students of color has grown threefold, and there are more than 40 cultural and social student affinity groups. More impressive, the graduation rate for African American, Latino, and Native students has increased by 13 percentage points in the last decade.<sup>3</sup> The graduation rate has also gone up for white students, but the large improvement among underrepresented minority (URM) students has cut in half the gap in graduation rates between these students and their white peers — which was 14 percentage points in 2003. "It's not just asking students to prepare themselves to come to college," Acevedo said, "but the institution preparing itself to meet the students' needs. So the burden and that preparation is not just on the students — it's also on the institution."

How typical is Washington State? Is the new national focus on college completion paying off for young people?<sup>4</sup> If so, are students of color sharing in these improvements?

In this brief, we dig into a decade's worth of data on four-year colleges to understand which are improving and which aren't. At improving institutions, we want to understand which students are benefiting. Above all, we want to answer the question: Are we seeing the kind of progress that will help close long-standing gaps between groups, gaps that are hobbling the futures of so many students of color and threatening the future of our ever-more-diverse nation? Because public institutions enroll almost two-thirds of first-time, full-time students in four-year colleges and — as our data show — have improved graduation rates the most over the past decade, we've focused our analysis mostly on understanding improvements at public four-year institutions.

**Figure 1: Change in Six-Year Graduation Rates at Four-Year Institutions (2003-2013)**



Source: Digest of Education Statistics 2013 Table 326.10 and Digest of Education Statistics 2010 Table 341.

### WHICH INSTITUTIONS ARE IMPROVING — AND HOW MUCH?

Between 2003 and 2013, graduation rates among students at public and private nonprofit four-year colleges increased from 56.0 percent to 59.4 percent. Improvements were larger at public colleges and universities, where enrollments are higher. While graduation rates at public institutions increased 4.9 percentage points over the decade, completion at private nonprofits only improved by 2.3 percentage points (*Figure 1*).

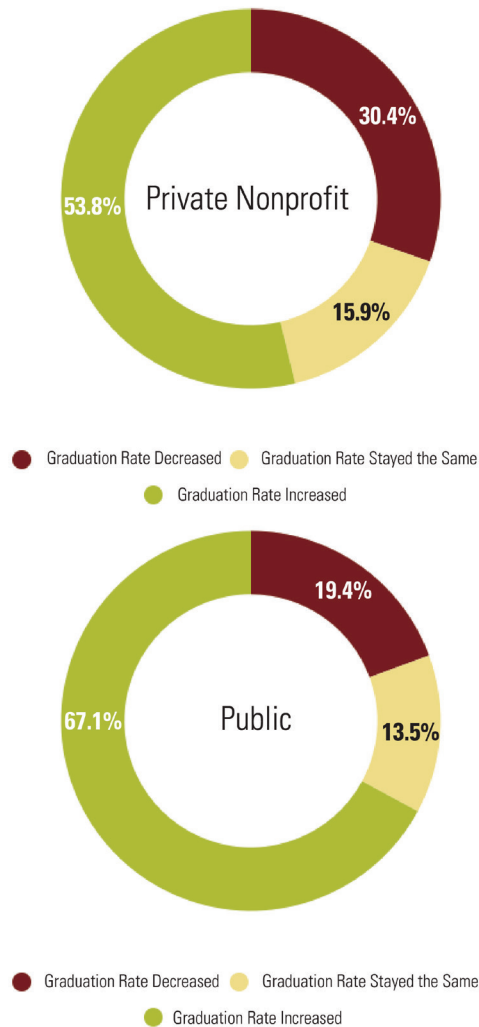
But graduation rates didn't improve uniformly across the 489 public and 820 private nonprofit institutions we examined. Some made huge gains, while others still graduate students at nearly the same rate they did 10 years ago. And in the worst cases, student completion is now lower. Among private nonprofit universities, just over half improved student success over the decade, while 30 percent backslid (*Figure 2*).

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Among public colleges, success was more widespread, with more than two-thirds (or 328 institutions) improving student success over the decade (*Figure 2*).<sup>5</sup> The average improvement of those institutions with rising rates was 6.4 percentage points, but the improvement affected a lot of students. Almost 80 percent of students enrolled at the public institutions we examined were at colleges and universities that experienced gains in completion.

While these findings show that many public institutions have improved completion rates for their students, far too many failed to do so. One in 5 saw actual declines in their completion rates, with the average decrease being 5.9 percentage points. The 161 institutions that didn't improve were smaller on average, but they still enrolled 20 percent of all students at the 489 public institutions we studied.

**Figure 2:** Percentage of Four-Year Institutions, Improving Graduation Rates (2003-2013)



Note: Analysis includes 1,309 institutions (489 publics and 820 private nonprofits). Decrease in graduation rate is defined as less than -1 percentage point, and an increase in graduation rate is defined as more than 1 percentage point.  
Source: Education Trust analysis of IPEDS graduation rate data.

## WHO BENEFITED FROM THE IMPROVEMENTS?

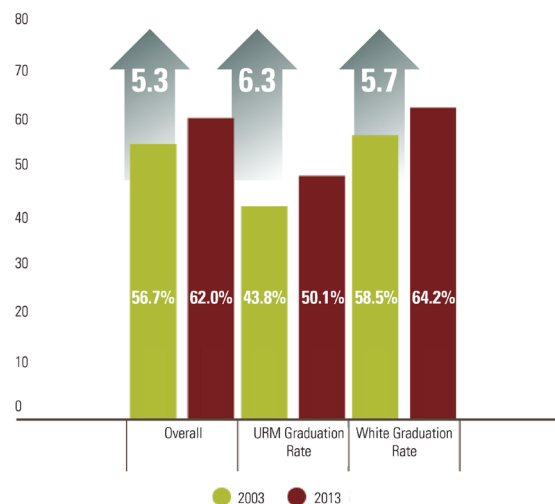
In any improvement effort, it is critical to understand who benefits — including whether improvement efforts are helping to close long-standing gaps separating black, Latino, and Native students (underrepresented minority students or URMs) from white students.

Of the 328 public colleges and universities that improved their graduation rates, we took a closer look at the 255 that had sizeable enrollments of underrepresented students.<sup>6</sup> Among the 255 gainers, the graduation rate for underrepresented students increased slightly more than the rate for white students (6.3 versus 5.7 percentage points, *Figure 3*). Improvements were greatest for Latino students (with an increase of 7.4 percentage points) and smallest for black students (with an increase of 4.4 points). Native students saw an increase of 6.4 points.<sup>7</sup>

Although underrepresented students gained more than white students at the institutions that improved, those gains were hardly at a pace needed to close the outcome gap — at least not in this century. In over a decade, the gap between white students and underrepresented students at the improving institutions narrowed by slightly more than half a percentage point (0.6), leaving a 14-point completion gap.

Some of the improvers made more progress than others in boosting results and narrowing gaps between underrepresented students and their peers. Of the 255 improvers, more than 1 in 5 didn't achieve any improvement for underrepresented students (*Figure 4a*). Among the nearly 80 percent that did improve rates for such students, roughly 45 percent narrowed gaps between them and their white peers by an average of 4.6

**Figure 3:** Average Graduation Rates for Underrepresented (URM) and White Students at Four-Year Public Institutions That Have Improved (2003-2013)



Notes: This analysis includes 255 institutions that showed overall improvement in graduation rates over the past decade and had at least 50 first-time, full-time underrepresented and 50 first-time, full-time white students.  
Source: Education Trust analysis of IPEDS graduation rate data.

## WAS IMPROVEMENT A BYPRODUCT OF MORE SELECTIVE ADMISSIONS PRACTICES?

There are many ways to increase graduation rates. Unfortunately, one of those is to adopt more selective admissions criteria, admitting only students who are more likely to complete. So we wanted to understand whether changes in who these institutions were serving might explain the patterns we saw.

We compared the institutions that improved with colleges and universities where graduation rates remained flat or declined. While we found entering students at public institutions were, in general, marginally better prepared at the end of the decade than they were in the beginning, there were no significant differences between institutions that improved and those that did not.<sup>8</sup> The same is true for enrollment changes of Pell or underrepresented students. In general, access for these students at public institutions increased over the course of the decade, but, again, there was no significant difference between improvers and the non-improvers — suggesting, at the very least, that improved completion rates were not simply a by-product of enrolling students who were more likely to complete.

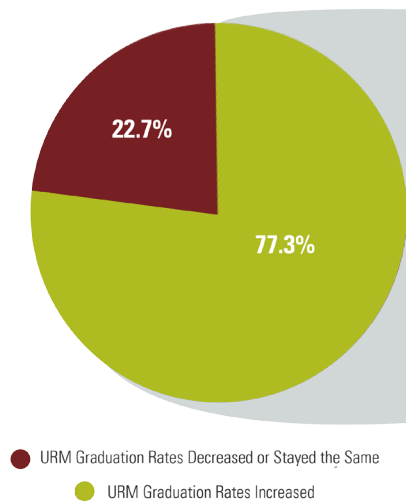
percentage points (*Figure 4b*). But nearly 55 percent made no progress toward closing gaps.

### INDIVIDUAL COLLEGES: THE GOOD AND THE BAD

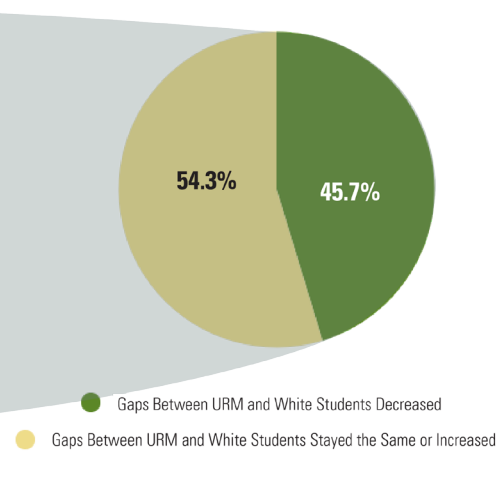
Underneath these overall patterns are a set of colleges and universities that have made great strides for underrepresented students and have a lot to teach the rest of us. We found 26 high-performing institutions that exhibited exceptional improvements in graduation rates and diminished gaps. On the other end of the spectrum, we found 17 institutions that represent exactly what our country doesn't need: declining graduation rates for students of color and increased gaps.

Certainly, some will wonder whether both the unusual successes and the unusual failures are more about the students than the institutions. So we dug into the database of similar colleges in *College Results Online* ([collegeresults.org](http://collegeresults.org)) and found examples of institutions that serve similar students but had divergent trends over the past decade, reminding us — once again — that demographics shouldn't be an excuse for outcomes. What institutions do turns out to matter ... a lot.

**Figure 4a:** Percent of Four-Year Public Institutions That Increased Graduation Rates for Underrepresented (URM) Students (2003-2013)



**Figure 4b:** Percent of Four-Year Public Institutions That Decreased Gaps Between Underrepresented (URM) and White Students



Notes: Analysis includes 255 institutions that showed overall improvement in graduation rates over the past decade and had at least 50 first-time, full-time underrepresented and 50 first-time, full-time white students. Decrease in graduation rate is defined as less than -1 percentage point, and an increase in graduation rate is defined as more than 1 percentage point.  
Source: Education Trust analysis of IPEDS graduation rate data

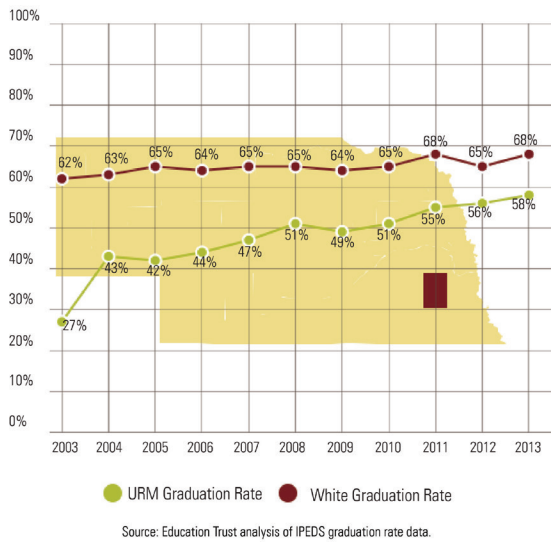
## Public Colleges and Universities Making Big Gains for All Students

If more institutions are to produce gains in overall completion and also close long-standing gaps between groups, we need to learn from institutions that are leading the way. Washington State University is not alone: Across the country, there are institutions whose efforts show us that these twin goals are achievable. There are 26 institutions that, over the past decade, have:

- Increased the graduation rate for underrepresented students by 12 or more percentage points (i.e., two times the average increase for all institutions in the sample); and
- Reduced the graduation rate gap between underrepresented and white students. (Table 1)

One of our top-performing institutions is the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, which improved graduation rates for all students, made larger gains for underrepresented students, and significantly narrowed its gap (Figure 5). Much of this can be credited to the university’s increased focus on retention and

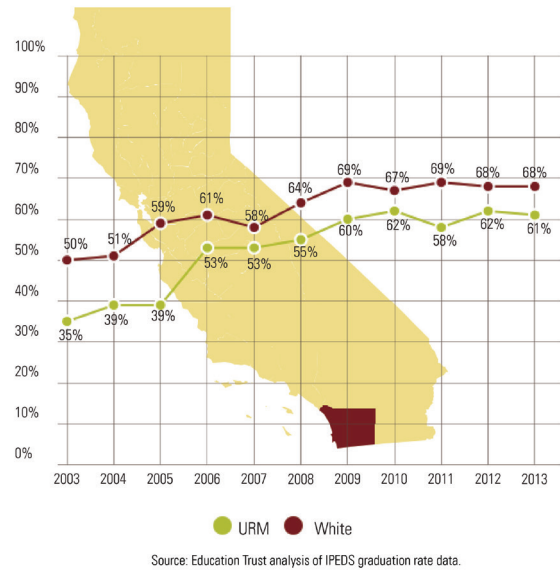
**Figure 5:** Graduation Rates for Underrepresented (URM) and White Students at University of Nebraska-Lincoln (2003-2013)



getting students to a degree sooner, officials say. In the last few years, the campus has been more proactive in advising and degree-planning, creating communities for first-year students, and using data to improve curricula. UNL also created its first diversity taskforce, which aims to make the campus more inclusive and give underrepresented students a greater sense of belonging. Through these efforts, UNL increased graduation rates for underrepresented students by more than 30 points in 10 years and cut its gap by 25 points — while also increasing its population of underrepresented students.<sup>9</sup>

Another big gainer is San Diego State University, which saw vast improvements for underrepresented students — so much so that the campus cut its gap in half, from 15 percentage points to 7 points (Figure 6).<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the university

**Figure 6:** Graduation Rates for Underrepresented (URM) and White Students at San Diego State University (2003-2013)



increased its underrepresented student population from roughly one-quarter to one-third. San Diego State officials credit partnerships with neighboring school districts that seek to identify high-achieving, underrepresented students as early as seventh grade in order to connect them with college early on. School districts in turn train teachers to prepare students for college-level work. If students still are not ready for college-level work, San Diego State asks them to start taking remedial courses in the summer before fall semester. The university also pushes all students to carry a minimum load of 15 credit hours. “Taking care of students doesn’t mean asking them to do less,” said Geoff Chase, dean of undergraduate studies at San Diego State. Their hard work shows. In the last decade, graduation rates have climbed 26 percentage points for underrepresented students and 18 points for white students.

**TABLE 1: TOP-GAINING FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS**

Institution	State	3-Year Average Graduation Rate for URM Students (2013) <i>(Percentage)</i>	10-Year Change in URM Student Graduation Rates (2003-2013) <i>(Percentage Point)</i>	3-Year Average Overall Graduation Rate (2013) <i>(Percentage)</i>	10-Year Change In Overall Graduation Rate (2003-2013) <i>(Percentage Point)</i>	3-Year Average Graduation Rate for White Students (2013) <i>(Percentage)</i>	10-Year Change in White Student Graduation Rates (2003-2013) <i>(Percentage Point)</i>	10-Year Change In Gaps Between White and URM Students (2003-2013) <i>(Percentage Point)</i>
University of Nebraska-Lincoln	NE	56.2	▲ 18.8	66.0	▲ 4.5	67.0	▲ 3.6	▼ 15.2
Armstrong Atlantic State University	GA	36.9	▲ 22.1	33.1	▲ 13.0	31.7	▲ 10.1	▼ 12.0
University of Massachusetts Lowell	MA	47.4	▲ 17.7	52.8	▲ 8.2	54.2	▲ 8.1	▼ 9.6
Ohio State University-Main Campus	OH	74.2	▲ 25.2	81.9	▲ 17.7	82.8	▲ 17.0	▼ 8.2
San Diego State University	CA	60.3	▲ 22.7	65.9	▲ 18.3	68.3	▲ 14.9	▼ 7.8
East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania	PA	42.8	▲ 15.1	57.3	▲ 7.7	59.2	▲ 7.5	▼ 7.6
Washington State University	WA	60.5	▲ 13.0	66.5	▲ 5.3	67.8	▲ 5.4	▼ 7.5
University of North Carolina at Wilmington	NC	64.0	▲ 14.3	68.9	▲ 7.4	69.6	▲ 7.1	▼ 7.3
Bridgewater State University	MA	46.1	▲ 12.4	54.7	▲ 6.4	55.6	▲ 5.2	▼ 7.2
North Carolina State University	NC	64.5	▲ 12.0	72.6	▲ 5.6	74.2	▲ 4.8	▼ 7.2
San Francisco State University	CA	42.9	▲ 14.5	46.4	▲ 6.7	44.8	▲ 7.7	▼ 6.8
Rutgers University-Newark	NJ	59.5	▲ 12.7	65.3	▲ 10.7	66.2	▲ 6.0	▼ 6.7
University of Wisconsin-Madison	WI	68.3	▲ 12.2	82.2	▲ 6.0	84.7	▲ 5.5	▼ 6.6
CUNY Brooklyn College	NY	44.4	▲ 14.1	51.1	▲ 10.4	56.1	▲ 7.6	▼ 6.5
Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania	PA	48.9	▲ 17.4	61.2	▲ 10.7	62.8	▲ 11.2	▼ 6.2
University of Maryland, College Park	MD	75.6	▲ 13.8	82.7	▲ 9.2	84.7	▲ 7.7	▼ 6.1
Buffalo State SUNY	NY	45.7	▲ 13.2	48.0	▲ 8.1	49.7	▲ 7.8	▼ 5.4
University of South Carolina-Columbia	SC	67.4	▲ 12.3	71.8	▲ 8.5	72.6	▲ 7.1	▼ 5.2
University at Buffalo	NY	60.2	▲ 15.7	71.1	▲ 12.6	71.3	▲ 10.6	▼ 5.2
University of West Georgia	GA	42.5	▲ 12.5	39.7	▲ 8.8	38.6	▲ 7.4	▼ 5.1
University of Louisiana at Lafayette	LA	33.1	▲ 12.8	43.4	▲ 9.9	45.6	▲ 7.7	▼ 5.0
Georgia State University	GA	53.1	▲ 16.1	50.5	▲ 13.1	47.1	▲ 11.9	▼ 4.2
Virginia Commonwealth University	VA	53.9	▲ 15.5	55.4	▲ 13.2	55.0	▲ 12.2	▼ 3.3
SUNY Oneonta	NY	65.6	▲ 23.1	67.8	▲ 18.6	70.1	▲ 20.7	▼ 2.4
Nicholls State University	LA	26.6	▲ 14.3	40.6	▲ 12.9	44.5	▲ 11.9	▼ 2.3
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis	IN	30.4	▲ 15.3	38.0	▲ 13.9	38.7	▲ 14.0	▼ 1.3

▲ Indicates an increase in graduation rates from 2003-2013.

▼ Indicates a decrease in gaps between white and URM students from 2003-2013.

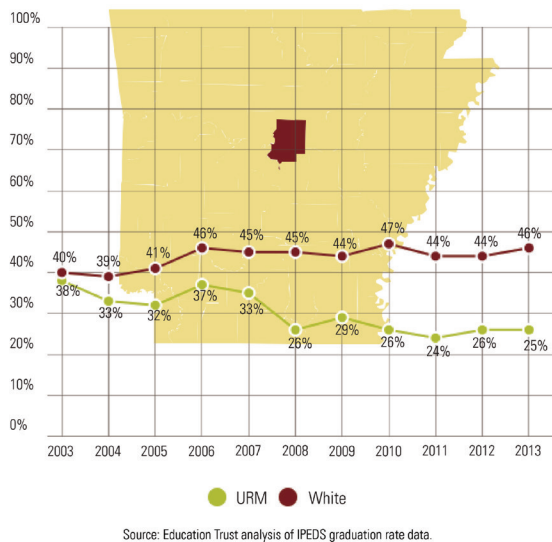
## Public Colleges and Universities With Widening Gaps

In some cases, however, gains in overall graduation rates don't translate into gains for everyone on campus. This often leads to widening gaps, as rates for white students continue to grow while rates for underrepresented students flatline or worse. There are 17 institutions that, over the past decade, have:

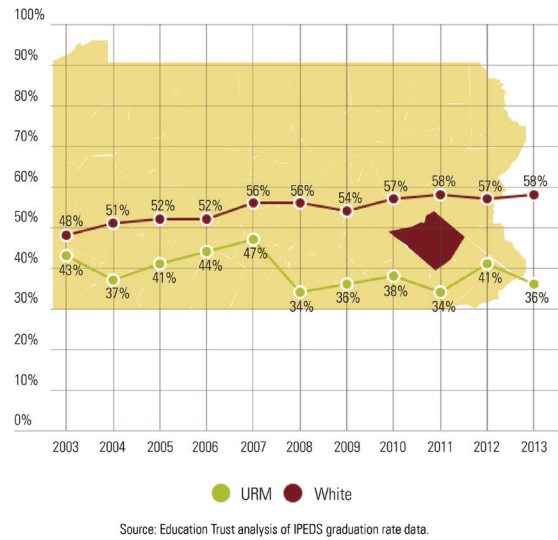
- Declining graduation rates for underrepresented students; and
- Graduation rate gaps between white and underrepresented students that widened by at least 7 percentage points (i.e., the average gap increase for schools with declining graduation rates for underrepresented students). (*Table 2*)

The University of Central Arkansas is one such institution.<sup>11</sup> At UCA, the current graduation rate for underrepresented students (24.9 percent) is more than 10 points lower than it was in 2003 (Figure 7). But graduation rates for white students increased over the same time period, widening the gap from 2 percentage points in 2003 to 21 points.

**Figure 7:** Graduation Rates for Underrepresented (URM) and White Students at the University of Central Arkansas (2003-2013)



**Figure 8:** Graduation Rates for Underrepresented (URM) and White Students at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania (2003-2013)



Another such institution is Kutztown University of Pennsylvania.<sup>12</sup> At Kutztown, graduation rates for white students are 10 percentage points higher than in 2003 (Figure 8). Although graduation rates for underrepresented students slightly rose through 2007, they saw a considerable decline in the years to follow. Currently, the graduation rate for underrepresented students is 36 percent (down from 43 percent in 2003), leaving a gap of more than 20 percentage points — compared with only a 5-point gap a decade ago.

“Taking care of students doesn't mean asking them to do less.”

— Geoff Chase  
Dean of undergraduate studies at San Diego State



**TABLE 2: FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS WITH INCREASING GAPS**

Institution	State	3-Year Average Graduation Rate for URM Students (2013) <i>(Percentage)</i>	10-Year Change in URM Student Graduation Rates (2003-2013) <i>(Percentage Point)</i>	3-Year Average Overall Graduation Rate (2013) <i>(Percentage)</i>	10-Year Change In Overall Graduation Rate (2003-2013) <i>(Percentage Point)</i>	3-Year Average Graduation Rate for White Students (2013) <i>(Percentage)</i>	10-Year Change in White Student Graduation Rates (2003-2013) <i>(Percentage Point)</i>	10-Year Change In Gaps Between White and URM Students (2003-2013) <i>(Percentage Point)</i>
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga	TN	28.0	▼ 11.9	38.2	▲ 2.0	41.4	▲ 6.8	▲ 18.7
Texas A & M University-Commerce	TX	31.4	▼ 7.1	39.8	▲ 4.0	45.1	▲ 10.1	▲ 17.2
University of Missouri-Kansas City	MO	33.0	▼ 6.0	47.3	▲ 3.6	50.4	▲ 9.4	▲ 15.3
University of Central Arkansas	AR	24.9	▼ 9.5	40.9	▲ 1.5	44.7	▲ 4.3	▲ 13.8
Auburn University at Montgomery	AL	21.8	▼ 7.2	30.1	▲ 1.0	34.9	▲ 5.7	▲ 13.0
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania	PA	36.7	▼ 3.6	54.5	▲ 4.6	57.6	▲ 7.2	▲ 10.8
Auburn University	AL	48.3	▼ 5.4	67.5	▲ 2.8	71.0	▲ 5.1	▲ 10.4
University of Alabama in Huntsville	AL	41.1	▼ 5.7	47.1	▲ 3.1	47.0	▲ 4.6	▲ 10.3
University of Southern Mississippi	MS	38.0	▼ 5.5	47.3	▲ 0.5	52.6	▲ 4.4	▲ 9.9
Weber State University	UT	23.6	▼ 6.4	43.5	▲ 1.9	46.1	▲ 3.5	▲ 9.9
Boise State University	ID	25.3	▼ 4.9	34.4	▲ 4.2	35.2	▲ 4.8	▲ 9.7
Millersville University of Pennsylvania	PA	38.2	▼ 5.1	63.2	▲ 0.5	69.8	▲ 4.0	▲ 9.1
Citadel Military College of South Carolina	SC	55.2	▼ 7.1	68.4	▲ 1.2	70.6	▲ 1.8	▲ 8.9
Wright State University-Main Campus	OH	26.9	▼ 5.8	40.9	▲ 0.6	44.3	▲ 2.4	▲ 8.2
The University of Montana	MT	29.1	▼ 3.5	49.4	▲ 3.9	50.8	▲ 4.5	▲ 8.0
University of Toledo	OH	23.6	▼ 2.0	46.3	▲ 3.0	52.1	▲ 5.5	▲ 7.5
University of Arkansas at Little Rock	AR	13.3	▼ 3.6	22.2	▲ 0.4	27.1	▲ 3.6	▲ 7.1

▲ Indicates an increase in graduation rates from 2003-2013.

▼ Indicates a decrease in URM graduation rates from 2003-2013.

△ Indicates an increase in gaps between white and URM students from 2003-2013.

## SIMILAR COLLEGES CAN HAVE DIFFERENT OUTCOMES

Throughout the years, our work has shown that institutions serving similar students can have wildly disparate outcomes. Again, the findings in this analysis reaffirm this.

For example, North Carolina State University and Auburn University are very similar institutions that enroll similar students (*Table 3*). Both have:

- Similar admission scores for their students;
- Roughly similar percentages of underrepresented students; and
- An enrollment of more than 15,000 students.

	North Carolina State University	Auburn University
Carnegie Classification	Research Very High	Research High
Median SAT/ACT SCORE, 2013	1,181	1,217
Full-Time Equivalent Undergrad Enrollment, Fall 2013	22,825	19,024
Percent of Pell Recipients Among Freshmen, 2013	22.5%	13.0%
Percent of underrepresented students, 2013	12.3%	10.7%
White Graduation Rate, 2003	69.3%	65.9%
White Graduation Rate, 2013	74.2%	71.0%
Underrepresented Student Graduation Rate, 2003	52.4%	53.7%
Underrepresented Student Graduation Rate, 2013	64.5%	48.3%
Change in Gap Between White and Underrepresented Students	▼ 7.2	▲ 10.4

Note: Graduation rates are based on three-year averages. See Methods for details. Source: Education Trust analysis of College Results Online database.

- ▼ Indicates a decrease in gaps.
- ▲ Indicates an increase in gaps.

While both institutions improved their graduation rates for white students in the last decade, they had very different trajectories for their underrepresented students. NC State drastically improved its success for underrepresented students, bumping up graduation rates by 12 points and cutting the gap between them and white students by almost half. Meanwhile, graduation rates for underrepresented students at Auburn declined, and the gap grew to more than 20 points.

This comparison is especially impressive as NC State is slightly more racially and socioeconomically diverse, with almost 10 percent more of their students receiving Pell Grants than at Auburn, and it continues to make considerable strides for all of its students. NC State officials credit a handful of initiatives on campus aimed at increasing success, including peer mentoring programs, higher GPA expectations, and substantive need-

based financial aid. Every time tuition goes up, a portion of that additional revenue is funneled toward need-based aid. In the last five years, that aid has nearly doubled, from \$24.6 million to \$45.3 million. “We try to keep debt loads low,” said Louis Hunt, vice provost of enrollment management, to keep college affordable and attainable.

## INSTITUTIONS MUST BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT SUCCESS

Since we began our higher education work more than a decade ago, graduation rates have improved, particularly at public institutions. Although the average improvement has been modest, it is certainly good news that more than two-thirds of public institutions are increasing student success.

It seems clear, however, that both policymakers and institutional leaders must pay more attention to who benefits from the increased focus on completion. Our data make it clear that overall institutional improvement doesn’t always translate into gains for underrepresented students that match those for white students — much less close long-standing gaps.

That takes deliberate action from institutions, much like what Washington State has done in the last 25 years. “When you’re working with this population, you have to be very intentional. It’s not just, ‘We’ll build it and they will come,’” said Lucila Loera, assistant vice president for the Office for Access, Equity, and Achievement at WSU. Institutional leaders should look at their data, find the troublesome trends, and engage faculty, staff, and students themselves in identifying ways to best support all students toward success.

“It’s one thing to get students in the door,” Loera said, “but it’s another thing for them to thrive and have an enriching educational experience.” ■

## NOTES

1. Phone conversation with Manuel Acevedo and Lucila Loera, Washington State University.
2. <http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/wsua-picks-new-president/>
3. Native students include American Indian and Alaska Native.
4. President Barack Obama aims to ensure the United States has the highest proportion of college graduates globally by 2020. See: <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/meeting-president-obamas-2020-college-completion-goal>
5. See Methods to learn how these institutions were identified.
6. These 255 institutions showed improvement in their graduation rate over the past decade and had at least 50 first-time, full-time underrepresented and 50 first-time, full-time white students.
7. These increases were calculated using a weighted average of the graduation rates for Latino, black, and Native students at the 255 public institutions that showed improvement in overall graduation rates over the past decade.

8. Preparation was based on the estimated median standardized test scores of entering students.
9. The population of underrepresented students at UNL increased from 4.2 percent (2003) to 6.9 percent (2013). Currently, the underrepresented population is 2.2 percent black, 4.4 percent Latino, and 0.3 percent Native.
10. At San Diego State, 32.9 percent of students are from an underrepresented group (3.8 percent black, 28.9 percent Latino, and 0.3 percent Native).
11. At UCA, 21.3 percent of students are from an underrepresented group (17.5 percent black, 3.2 percent Latino, and 0.6 percent Native).
12. At Kutztown, 13.2 percent of students are from an underrepresented group (7.1 percent black, 6 percent Latino, and 0.2 percent Native).

- Enrolled students both in academic year 2002-03 and 2012-13, and
- Had a fall 2007 freshman class in which at least 40 percent were initially enrolled full-time.

## METHODS

For the colleges and universities included in this report, we calculated the change in six-year graduation rates from 2003 to 2013. We took several measures to minimize the impact of large year-to-year fluctuations in graduation rate data for institutions with smaller cohorts. First, we used three-year averages to assess institutional graduation rate change instead of solely relying on the difference between the 2003 and 2013 graduation rates. We defined the 2003 graduation rate for an institution as the weighted average of its 2003, 2004, and 2005 graduation rates.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, we defined the 2013 graduation rate as the weighted average of the 2011, 2012, and 2013 graduation rates.<sup>2</sup> Institutional change over the decade was calculated by subtracting the weighted average of the 2003, 2004, and 2005 graduation rates from the weighted average of the 2011, 2012, and 2013 graduation rates. Although this results in a more conservative estimate of change over time, it minimizes the impact of outliers on graduation rate performance, which could unfairly skew results.

As a second means of diminishing the impact of large year-to-year fluctuations in graduation rates, we only included institutions that had an average three-year graduation rate cohort size of 50 or more in 2003 and 2013.

Together, these measures, along with the additional criteria listed below, limited our sample to 1,309 institutions (489 public and 820 nonprofit private). But these provisions also ensured that we were able to most fairly assess graduation rate improvement and avoid the effect of unusual variations in the data.

The institutions in this study:

- Are categorized as four-year public or private nonprofit bachelor's degree-granting institutions.<sup>3</sup>
- Received Title IV financial aid dollars,
- Are located within the 50 states or the District of Columbia,

The 1,309 colleges and universities in this study represent 65 percent of all four-year public and private nonprofit institutions. Collectively, these institutions served more than 1.3 million first-time, full-time undergraduate students in 2013, which was about 88 percent of all first-time, full-time students enrolled at public and nonprofit private institutions. Of these students, 923,168 were enrolled at public institutions, and 447,106 were at private nonprofit institutions. Additionally, these institutions enrolled about 82 percent of all first-time, full-time underrepresented students (304,032 students) at public and private nonprofit institutions. Public universities enrolled 217,154 first-time, full-time underrepresented students, and private nonprofit colleges enrolled 86,878.

Although 328 public institutions in our study were found to have improved their graduation rates over the past decade, much of the analysis in this study focused on graduation gaps at a smaller group of 255 public institutions, which collectively enrolled 701,432 first-time, full-time students in academic year 2012-2013. These 255 were the only institutions from that group of 328 improvers that had at least 50 underrepresented students and 50 white students in their graduation cohorts. In the analyses that included these institutions, the graduation rates for white and underrepresented students were constructed in the same way as described above (i.e., using three-year averages) and institutions with small cohort sizes and/or missing data were excluded from the analysis.<sup>4</sup> Because our purpose was to look at success gaps, we excluded Historically Black Colleges and Universities from the group of 255 improvers for further analysis.

The data used for this analysis was pulled from IPEDS in March 2015. Any changes to the data made afterward are not reflected in this report.

1. The three-year weighted average graduation rate for 2003 was calculated by dividing the sum of all students in the 2003, 2004, and 2005 completer cohorts by the sum of all students in the 1997, 1998, and 1999 entering cohorts.
2. Institutions that had missing data for more than one of the three years included in the weighted average calculation for the 2003 and 2013 institutional graduation rates were not included in the sample.
3. Institutions that were classified as special interest (Carnegie Classification of 24 or 32) or service schools (Geographic Code = 0) were excluded due to their specialized or nontraditional academic offerings.
4. Additionally, institutions were only included if they had at least two of three years of graduation rate data for both underrepresented and white students and at least 50 underrepresented and 50 white students in their graduation rate cohorts.

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