

Fewer Wisconsin students completing college financial aid forms

Some students opting for more cost-effective options

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WAUKESHA — A new report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum found fewer high school seniors across the state are completing their FAFSA student aid forms, often the first step for college enrollment. Some of the group opting out, however, may just be choosing alternative options.

“Amid the chaotic conditions of COVID-19, fewer seniors at Wisconsin 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 research states. “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.”

Waukesha North High

School Counselor Jill Werner said college enrollment numbers there are not seeing a decline. She said some students may simply not be completing FAFSA forms because they feel they’ll be ineligible to receive the benefits, for one reason or another. Werner emphasized she does not speak for the district as a whole.

A trend Werner said has emerged in the last couple years is more students choosing to get their post-high school education start at the cost-effective University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee at Waukesha, which is significantly less expensive than other universities and the close-to-home location can offer some insulation from the uncertainty seen in the last year during COVID-19. “We saw more kids stay at home for Waukesha,” Werner said, adding there’s possibly now less stigma for staying at home and less pressure to live on-campus.

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According to estimated costs for the 2021-2022 school year, UW-Waukesha is a fraction of the cost as other schools, at just \$5,163 — UW-Madison is \$22,920.

Although research shows FAFSA completion is associated with a higher likelihood that a student will enroll in a postsecondary institution, the Wisconsin Policy Forum acknowledged completion rates are not “a silver bullet to address postsecondary enrollment declines.”

Not all education path-

ways would require a FAFSA right away, or at all. Justin Kehring, financial aid manager at Waukesha County Technical College, said the school’s two-year associates programs, apprenticeship programs and certificate programs would not need a FAFSA form.

Werner said North has “a lot of students that go the apprenticeship route” and some companies seek out students not planning on attending college right away to offer on-site opportunities. There’s also the possibility some students still plan to go to college, just not right away. “I definitely think the gap year

has gotten some traction lately,” Werner said. “Everyone used to say you won’t go back to school if you don’t go right away, but I think there’s a little less stigma about that these days.”

Kehring said WCTC is making it back to high school campuses this year and making its offerings known in person.

The research concludes by stating although FAFSA completion isn’t a perfect metric, “the relative simplicity of the metric and the promising progress of Wisconsin prior to the pandemic may make FAFSA completion a concrete and useful area of

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focus for school districts, postsecondary institutions, and the state as they seek to allocate federal aid dollars and recover from COVID.”

For those students and families not yet sure what their post-graduation journey should be, Werner advised getting in touch with their school’s counselor. “That’s where they’re going to get all the resources they need,” she said.