

College graduation rates lag in Michigan



Kim Kozlowski, The Detroit News 11:22 p.m. EDT April 26, 2015

When Mark ten Haaf graduated from high school, he began working with his father in construction. He was good at it, and made good money. That's why it wasn't easy to convince himself to go to college.

But he finally enrolled when he was 27, and Saturday, he donned a cap and gown during commencement exercises at Grand Valley State University. It took him six years to earn a degree in classics, which began at a community college and included many sacrifices made by his wife and three children.

"I am a first-generation college student," said ten Haaf, who plans to earn a master's degree, "and it was important for me to get through and maybe set a precedent for other family members to do the same thing."

With college commencement season underway, ten Haaf is among a group of students reaching an elite milestone in higher education: He not only went to college, but he's also graduating.

Every year, about 300,000 students enroll in Michigan's 15 public universities. But overall, only about half make it to the finish line.

Though many public universities tout enrollment numbers, only one-third of Michigan schools are graduating enough students in six years to top the national average, which is about 59 percent. While the national focus on higher education has been on accessibility and affordability, universities are expanding their priorities to make sure students get their degrees.

"Enrollment and graduation are critical aspects of the college pipelines," said Daniel Hurley, associate vice president for government relations and state policy at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. "Access is important, as well as success. And ultimately, that is graduation."

Studies have shown college graduates earn more, on average, than those who lack a degree, and that their unemployment rate is lower.

Graduation rates are part of the need to hold public institutions accountable, Hurley said. There's also a recognition that students who do not graduate have paid tuition, likely taken on debt and used taxpayer dollars without achieving a positive outcome for themselves or society.

"It's a social equity issue and economic development issue," said Hurley, who this summer will become the executive director of the Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan. "We need to do a better job of getting a greater proportion of traditionally underrepresented student population through to the graduation line ... for their earnings capacity and participation in the middle-class lifestyle and a stronger workforce which leads to greater economic prosperity for states."

The National Center on Education Statistics collects data to reflect the graduate rate of first-time, full-time undergraduate students at four-year institutions after six years. In Michigan, five of 15 public universities exceed the national average.

The top five include the University of Michigan, with a 90 percent graduation rate, followed by Michigan State University, with a 78 percent rate. The other universities with a graduation rate above the national average are Grand Valley State University (70 percent), Michigan Technological University (66 percent) and Central Michigan University (59 percent).

WSU has lowest rate

Wayne State still has the lowest graduation rate among the state's public universities, at 32 percent.

Many higher education experts note that the data used by the federal government for graduation rates are limited. They do not reflect part-time students, those who transfer to another institution or those who transfer from another school into the institution and graduate. A recent study by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center showed that 20 percent transfer to another university.

That's why there has been a movement to get a more comprehensive picture of an institution's success through the Student Achievement Measure.

Degrees of success

Six-year graduation rates vary widely among Michigan's 15 public universities, and among Big Ten universities.

Michigan public universities	Graduation rate*
Michigan-Ann Arbor	90
Michigan State	78
Grand Valley State	70
Michigan Technological	66
Central Michigan	59
Western Michigan	55
Michigan-Dearborn	52
Ferris State	49
Northern Michigan	48
Oakland	43
Lake Superior State	42
Saginaw Valley State	39
Eastern Michigan	38
Michigan-Flint	38
Wayne State	32

Big Ten universities	Graduation rate*
Northwestern	94
Michigan-Ann Arbor	90
Pennsylvania State	85
Illinois at Urbana	84
Maryland-College Park	84
Ohio State	83
Wisconsin-Madison	83
Rutgers	79
Michigan State	78
Indiana-Bloomington	77
Minnesota-Twin Cities	75
Purdue	70
Iowa	70
Nebraska-Lincoln	67

*Bachelor degree within 6 years. Data are from August 2013, the latest available.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

The Detroit News

For instance, according to the federal data, Ferris State University's six-year graduation rate is 49 percent, below the national average. But the Student Achievement Measure shows that 12 percents of its students transferred and graduated at other institutions, 5 percent are still enrolled at Ferris State, and 8 percent transferred to other institutions.

There's also a separate chart showing the graduation rate of students who transferred to and graduated from Ferris, which is 69 percent.

But even with alternative reporting that better captures student success, many agree that more needs to be done to help students graduate from college.

"If the U.S. wants to continue to remain a global economic leader, it needs a well-educated population," said Jeff Lieberman, spokesman for the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities.

"A college degree is not appropriate for everyone, but it provides a significant amount of opportunities for people. It can create upward economic mobility. Greater earning potential contributes to more tax revenues in communities. People with college degrees often are more involved with their community, have lower health care costs, (commit) less crimes."

Colleges reach out

Several initiatives are underway at the federal and state level, and a lot of research is being done, to help improve student retention and graduation rates.

Michigan universities are using a variety of strategies to reach students when they might be struggling and help them get back on track.

For instance, in 2013, CMU opened an Office of Student Success, which offers services such as peer mentoring, tutoring and success coaching, said Steven Johnson, vice president of enrollment and student services. The university also uses its academic, college-based and faculty advisers to communicate regularly with students and annually monitors student records to spot and intervene with those who may be struggling.

Meanwhile, Grand Valley has invested about \$1 million annually since 2008 on a program that offers students a \$1,000 incentive in their senior year if they have taken 90 credit hours by the end of the junior year.

"It's to reduce their costs of tuition and to reward those students who came and got out of here in four years," said Lynn Blue, vice provost and dean of Grand Valley's Academic Services and Information Technology. "This isn't supposed to be a place where you come to live. It's a place where you come to get your bachelor's degree and get on with the next chapter of your life."

That is the goal for students like Kyle Yarusso, who will graduate from Michigan Tech on Saturday with a degree in applied ecology and environmental science. He plans to work for a year with the

Student Conservation Association, which is teaming up with the National Park Service to increase volunteerism.

Yarusso, who will be Michigan Tech's student commencement speaker, knows the value of getting a degree.

"It does give us a leg up," said Yarusso, who is from a suburb of St. Paul, Minn. "It gives us a decent living wage and puts us in society as a functioning member. If you don't graduate from college, that might be harder to achieve."