



THE STATE OF STUDENTS OF COLOR IN WISCONSIN

New research from Rise and Change Research documents the experiences of students of color in higher education in Wisconsin.

Rise is a student-led nonprofit organization dedicated to free college and youth civic participation.

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Report Background

This report presents new research examining the state of higher education for students of color in Wisconsin. Rise and our partners at [Change Research](#) collected quantitative and qualitative data from more than 750 survey respondents statewide (additional details on the sample breakdown are below). Through this research, Rise documented many specific incidents of racism as well as systemic barriers that students of color face in their journey to and through college. The purpose of this report is not to cast blame on any one individual or institution. The experiences students shared with Rise demonstrate widespread failures to adequately welcome, protect and support students of color across institutions. To address those shortcomings, this report also provides recommendations to begin remedying the harm that students of color currently experience. This is challenging work and will require the buy-in of stakeholders at all levels including elected officials, campus leaders and students themselves to create a system of higher education that truly works for all. Rise would like to acknowledge and thank the [Joyce Foundation](#) and all of our partners across Wisconsin for their support in making this research and report possible.



Jason, a Rise student organizer, at a recent event.

“I feel looked at differently, I feel expected to be a certain way, I am not. I get dismissed or looked at as stupid because I am a Black woman. I shouldn't even have to describe the experience, like I'm literally a Black woman living in Wisconsin, that should sum everything up.” — Wisconsin Community College student

The creation of this report emerged from the experiences of Rise's student advocates. Over and over, Rise heard anecdotes from students of color experiencing racism on campus. As incidents arose, especially during the Movement for Black Lives during the summer of 2020, Rise worked to be responsive to students' needs through direct student support and advocacy. For example, Rise partnered with students such as Rise Fellow Breanna Flowers, who championed a series of reforms at Marquette University, in her role as the President of Marquette's Black Student Council. In 2021, at UW-Madison, Rise co-hosted a listening session with the BIPOC Coalition (BIPOC is an acronym for Black, Indigenous and People of Color) and 20 elected officials and state leaders. During the event, students shared directly how racism, college affordability, homelessness, and food access impact their daily lives and overall education. Their collective stories highlighted the need to better understand the experiences of students of color in Wisconsin through original research. In this report, Rise has anonymized students' stories to protect their identities, and only identified their college or institution-type to demonstrate the widespread nature of these experiences.

Summary Findings

Rise's research found that students of color were much more likely to experience racial discrimination as well as basic needs insecurity while college affordability and mental health challenges were a near universal concern among respondents.



- Over half (52%) of BIPOC students say they have experienced or witnessed discrimination from students or faculty on campus.
- 10 times as many BIPOC students (11%) as white students (1%) report a faculty member discriminated against them based on their ethnicity or race.
- 92% of BIPOC students reported that the cost of college is one of the biggest challenges students face and 77% said student loan debt is one of the biggest challenges.
- Nearly half (47%) of Black respondents in Wisconsin think that colleges in Wisconsin are doing a poor job of meeting the needs of students of color.
- Nearly one third (28%) of Black respondents experienced food insecurity and 16% of Black respondents experienced housing insecurity (three times the rate for white respondents).
- 95% of all respondents report challenges with their mental health such as anxiety or depression over the last year.

These findings emerged from research conducted by Change Research on behalf of Rise surveying 682 Wisconsin adults between June 2nd and June 9th of 2021. Of the adults surveyed, 96% were 18-26 years old. The majority of respondents were current college students including 8% of current students who are older than 26. Among the non-student sample, many were former college students.

The data collected by Rise, as well as existing data sets, demonstrate broad failures to address equitable student representation, campus climate and inclusion as well as threats to students' safety. These disparities remain even after national media attention from [*The New York Times*](#) and others has documented racist incidents across Wisconsin campuses. One student attending a four-year university in Wisconsin full-time captured many of the experiences shared with Rise by students:

“A Native American student had slurs written on her dorm door, and the football team had a group chat on Snapchat talking about wanting to be like the KKK. There have also been homophobic and racist protestors on campus multiple times. Whenever these experiences happen, the administration sends out a short email denouncing the acts, but does not do anything to change the campus climate.”



Rise organizer Bre Flowers sharing a list of students' demands with Marquette University's administration as part of the Black Student Council's campaign for racial justice on campus.

Systemwide Failures

The racial disparities in Wisconsin's higher education system are stark, and emblematic of broader segregation in Wisconsin. Of the two largest cities with institutions of higher education, Milwaukee was identified as the most racially segregated metropolitan area in 2019, and Madison was ranked as the worst place nationally to raise Black children. Looking more closely at the student population, Black students comprise 10% of Wisconsin's high school graduates, but account for just 2% of undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the state's public flagship institution. The University's own data is clear that Black students are not only excluded from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, but across the entire University of Wisconsin system comprising 26 campuses. Within the University of Wisconsin system, Black students have never accounted for more than 3% of total enrollment during any academic year over the last decade.

The survey research conducted by Change Research indicates that college affordability is a near universal concern among Wisconsin students (88% of all respondents said it was one of the biggest challenges), but especially for BIPOC students. While about one in five students reported skipping meals because of difficulty accessing or affording food, 1.5 times as many Black respondents (32%) as white respondents (20%) reported food insecurity. Worse still, three times as many Black respondents (16%) reported experiencing housing insecurity as white respondents (5%). These findings build on rigorous research that has documented that students of color face disproportionate burdens when it comes to paying for college. The Real College Survey conducted by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice identified that these challenges have been especially severe during the pandemic with nearly 3 in 5 students experiencing basic needs insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in an “alarming exodus” of low-income students and students of color from college. While college affordability plays a clear role in the exclusion of students of color from higher education, the data presented here document additional barriers beyond affordability that students of color face.

Representation & Belonging

Our research shows that students are not only being denied access to institutions of higher education, but are also experiencing discrimination and exclusion when they do attend. Multiple students reported that their white peers excluded them from group work, as well as classroom and campus activities because of their ethnicity or race. The data also show discrepancies in the perception of the magnitude of the problem. About one in five survey respondents described racism and discrimination as being a major barrier in college, but the number was twice as high for Black respondents (40%) as white respondents (20%). Furthermore, 15% of BIPOC students surveyed described that they had seen a faculty member discriminate against a student based on their ethnicity and race. That finding was validated by a student at Marquette University (a private University) who told Rise that their professor believed that “I’m not as intelligent as my white counterparts.”

Students reported professors asking students of color to be “spokespeople for the oppressed communities they identify with” while another student described a professor who would “act as if I’m not as smart as other students” and assign negative grades while giving white students full credit for similar work.

Another LatinX student attending UW—Madison told Rise:

“Based on my appearance, I have consistently had my name mispronounced and misspelled to conform to the ethnic identity white students and faculty believe me to have. Meanwhile, other white students with the same name in my classes do not have this issue. I have been excluded from group work, especially in mostly male groups. I have also had my intellect called into question by male peers. Prior to attending school at UW, I did not experience these situations, and similar situations, to the extent that I have at my previous institution, which was more racially diverse with individuals from various socioeconomic backgrounds.”

Other research has established a close link between feelings of belonging on campus and students’ academic outcomes. While these incidents may seem relatively minor in comparison to the incidents of hate speech and violence that Rise also documented, excluding students of color from academic and non-academic activities not only harms their overall wellbeing, but also contributes to their ability to succeed in postsecondary education. Eliminating campus cultures that allow this racism to continue will be a prerequisite for institutions of higher education in Wisconsin that are seeking to close racial gaps not only in college enrollment, but also completion.

At a community college, a student reported that “white students avoid students of color” altogether.

Representation & Belonging Cont.

Firsthand experiences with racism are also not limited to Black students. While other racial and ethnic student groups may have greater parity with Wisconsin's overall population, the data Rise collected makes it clear that racism on campus goes beyond anti-Blackness. Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students reported being called slurs as a result of the racist myths about Asians and COVID-19. These reports coincide with [media reports documenting](#) anti-AAPI graffiti and hate speech at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. While the university held a town hall to discuss the incidents, it is unclear what additional actions or steps it has taken to combat this racism on campus. Further, the data make it clear that these incidents are not confined to one campus. At a community college, a student reported that "white students avoid students of color" altogether. A Jewish student at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater reported experiences of antisemitism including having their "Happy Hanukkah" sign vandalized. Taken together, these incidents show that across Wisconsin, there is a disturbing pattern of students being singled out and discriminated against because of their ethnicity or race.

Threats to Students' Safety

In addition to exclusion and slurs, students also reported incidents that escalated into violence and threats to physical safety. Angelica Euseary, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin Madison, [has documented](#) the longstanding physical threats to Black women in particular at the university and in Madison more broadly. The violence chronicled in Euseary's research is consistent with several of the accounts from students in Rise's research. One student at the University of Wisconsin Whitewater explained an incident in which fellow students wrote "Die n*****" on their dorm room door. Another student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison told Rise:

"Last semester, 3 drunk white boys attempted to run me over while yelling the word n** at me."***



Students marching during the 2020 protests.

At the University of Wisconsin–Parkside, a former student described being racially profiled by campus police. "Unfortunately, when I notified the school about the situation," the student told us, "nothing was ever done." One consistent factor across these terrifying anecdotes is a lack of faith among students of color that their campus administrators or leaders would hold individuals accountable for racist acts. Student reports indicate that campuses were not psychologically or physically safe places for them, and in certain instances, personnel associated with the college were responsible for the harm done.

Threats to Students' Safety Cont.

One survey respondent described an incident in 2015 when police “raided and destroyed the dorm room of my Black friend looking for weed. Nearly every other student on the floor they were searching was white and did not have their rooms raided.” This kind of racial profiling was reiterated by several students in both Change Research and Rise surveys who described being followed, profiled, and otherwise discriminated against by police or security. In addition to the students' experiences, Change Research found that one in six survey respondents described campus police or security as being the group that contributes most to racism on campus.

The threats and violence against students of color, and especially against Black students, are undermining the purported efforts of institutions of higher education to increase ethnic and racial diversity. For example, the [University of Wisconsin—Madison](#) describes “diversity as a source of strength” and their goal of “creating a welcoming and inclusive community...” Similar sentiments are expressed on the websites and in statements across institutions of higher education in Wisconsin. But the data suggest that Black students in particular have a much different experience. Among survey respondents, 7% of Black respondents said they left college or chose not to attend in the first place because of discrimination based on ethnicity and race. Among white students in the sample, zero percent reported leaving or foregoing college because of discrimination.

Taking Action on Racial Justice

Remedying the harm students of color experience will require sustained action from every level of leadership including college leaders, faculty, policymakers, law enforcement and students. These recommendations were culled from students' experiences and input, evidence-based practices from colleges and universities, and experts focused on promoting diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education. Below is a summary of action steps outlined in more detail on page 7:

- **Assess and publish results of campus climate surveys and focus groups on a regular basis to better understand students' experiences with racism.**
- **Mandate antiracist trainings and create transparent guidelines for reporting and responding to racist incidents including disciplinary measures.**
- **Use evidence-based strategies to increase college enrollment among students of color to reflect the Wisconsin population.**
- **Create or strengthen platforms for student leaders meaningfully address campus climate and racial justice issues on campus.**

Action Steps for Racial Justice

These are preliminary steps for Wisconsin colleges and universities to begin addressing racism that students experience. Each campus and community has a unique set of circumstances that will require tailoring solutions to the college's context. Rise welcomes potential partnerships with students faculty, college leaders and other stakeholders seeking to address these challenges.

Assessment & Accountability: Community colleges and universities in Wisconsin should conduct campus-wide assessments of racial bias and discrimination on at least a semi-annual basis. These assessments should ask quantitative and qualitative questions about students' experiences with ethnic and racial bias, discrimination, and violence, and seek students' input on potential solutions. Complementing these survey instruments, institutions of higher education should host focus groups, workshops and regular opportunities for students, faculty and other stakeholders on strategies for improving campus climate. As part of a commitment to transparency, colleges should also make the findings of this research publicly available, so that students and stakeholders can hold institutions accountable for progress.

Campus Climate: Colleges and universities should mandate that students, faculty and institutional leaders complete ongoing antiracist and implicit bias training similar to the trainings mandated for sexual violence under the Campus Save Act. Colleges should accelerate efforts to increase the ethnic and racial diversity of administrators, faculty and staff, and invest in equitable learning spaces including dedicating physical spaces for affinity groups. Campuses must also create transparent guidelines for reporting and responding to incidents of racism or discrimination on campus or affecting students. When campuses lack capacity, they should welcome experts and external partners to campus to provide training and technical assistance to faculty and staff in antiracism and campus climate. Lastly, colleges should oppose legislative efforts that threaten freedom of speech by banning the teaching of critical race theory and other curriculum.

Diversity & Enrollment: Colleges should leverage evidence-based strategies for increasing student racial diversity and specifically among Black and Indigenous students. At the center of those efforts should be advocacy for more public resources that help students of color afford college without basic needs insecurity or student loan debt. Campus and community-based strategies should include expanding equity-focused dual enrollment programs, investing in recruitment from Title 1 high schools (e.g., through peer mentoring programs), and expanding (public or private) financial aid to students of color to attend college tuition- and debt-free. Additionally, colleges can improve the retention of students of color by working to address basic food and housing needs as well as critical issues such as mental health and access to counseling.

Student Leadership: Colleges should hire and promote students into paid leadership positions to address campus climate and racial justice issues. College presidents and trustees should treat students as co-equal stewards of their campus climate and accept their recommendations for improving it. One of the most concerning portions of this research is the lack of meaningful response to incidents of racism on campus. By actively engaging with and seeking out students' recommendations, colleges can begin mending the cultures and systems in place that are currently harming the physical and psychological wellbeing of students of color.

Appendix: About This Report

Methodology: Rise partnered with Change Research to survey 682 Wisconsin adults between June 2nd and June 9th, 2021. Among the sample, 96% were ages 18-26 years old. The quantitative data in this report is principally derived from this research as well as additional data sources cited throughout the report. Change Research fielded their survey through SurveyMonkey using targeted digital advertising and other methods to reach adults living in Wisconsin (for more information on survey methodology, email Info@RiseFree.org). Additionally, Rise fielded its own survey tool to collect qualitative data from Wisconsin students, capturing anecdotes and additional information on these topics. The total number of respondents surveyed by both entities exceeds 750 statewide in Wisconsin.

About Rise: Rise is a student-led nonprofit organization dedicated to making college free and promoting youth civic participation. This student-led work includes a commitment to addressing all students' basic food and housing needs as well as racial justice in higher education. Across programs dedicated to supporting students directly through case management, policy advocacy, and youth civic participation, Rise hires (at \$15/ hour or more) and trains students and youth to be effective leaders. Rise has student participants at 36 Wisconsin high schools, community colleges, and public universities including:

UW SYSTEM	COMMUNITY COLLEGES	OTHER COLLEGES	HIGH SCHOOLS
UW—Milwaukee—Washington	Fox Valley Tech	Cardinal Stritch	Rufus King HS
UW—Milwaukee	Madison Area Tech	Marquette University	North Pines HS
UW—Parkside	Moraine Park Tech	Alverno College	Homestead HS
UW—Oshkosh	Northwest Wisconsin Tech	Carroll University	Fond du Lac HS
UW—Stevens Point	Waukesha County Tech	Carthage College	Carmen SE HS
UW—LaCrosse	Milwaukee Area Tech	St. Norbert College	Waukesha S HS
UW—Eau Claire		Mount Mary University	Madison E HS
UW—Whitewater		Edgewood College	Pius Catholic HS
UW—River Falls		Concordia University	Madison W HS
UW—Madison		Ripon College	
UW—Green Bay			

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