



Graduation Rates for Postsecondary Students:

A Comparison Across Ethnic and Racial Groups

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About the ERDC

The research presented here uses data from the Education Research and Data Center, located in the Washington Office of Financial Management. ERDC works with partner agencies to conduct powerful analyses of learning that can help inform the decision-making of Washington legislators, parents and education providers. ERDC's data system is a statewide longitudinal data system that includes de-identified data about people's preschool, educational and workforce experiences. In Fiscal Year 2019, ERDC was awarded a five-year Statewide Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) Grant, which involves using our data system to examine educational equity issues in Washington's public educational systems. ERDC is one of 28 grantees across the country who are participating in the FY19 SLDS Grant Program.

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Executive summary

Despite recent efforts to increase accountability in institutions of postsecondary education, ethnic and racial disparities in student outcomes persist at most of the nation's colleges and universities (Bensimon, 2004). The purpose of this study is to explore whether there are disparities in graduation rates from postsecondary institutions between different racial and ethnic groups in Washington state.

This study relied on the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) to estimate postsecondary graduation rates. These graduation rates from postsecondary institutions are examined by comparing rates for three student groups: (1) All Student Group which includes all students, (2) Measurement Group 1, which includes ethnic and racial minoritized students (all racial and ethnic groups minus students reporting their race as white or unknown), and (3) Measurement Group 2, which includes ethnic and racial minoritized students who are more underrepresented in postsecondary institutions (Measurement Group 1 minus Asian students, U.S. nonresident students, and students reporting their race unknown).¹ Comparing these groups can demonstrate if ethnic and racial disparities in student outcomes exist in Washington postsecondary education.

Key findings on postsecondary graduation rates:

- The highest Washington state graduation rate of 73.5% was found for the All Student Group in the private not-for-profit (PNFP) sector. The All Student Group (all 4-year college student students in Washington) in the private for-profit (PFP) sector contained the lowest Washington state graduation rate of 50.8%.
- For Washington institutions, Measurement Groups 1 and 2 had lower graduation rates than the All Student Group among public and PNFP institutions and higher graduation rates for PFP institutions.
- Measurement Group 1 average graduation rates were consistently higher than those in Measurement Group 2 in Washington and nationally with the exception of Washington state PFP institutions.

¹ This report uses the term U.S. nonresident students as adapted from the IPEDS glossary to refer to college students who are foreign nationals or are not American citizens. IPEDS collections have previously to these students as “nonresident alien” students. Additionally, IPEDS does not provide detailed race and ethnicity data. The Asian and U.S. nonresident student categories cannot be further disaggregated which may mask differences among these different populations and perpetuate the model minority myth. For more on data aggregation and its relationship to the model minority myth, see Museus & Kiang (2009) and Reddy, Lee, & Siqueiros (2022).

When looking at the percentage point differences between Washington state and national averages:

- Washington state exceeded national six-year graduation rates across all racial and ethnic groups for public, PFP and PNFP institutions of postsecondary education.
- The public sector depicts the greatest difference for the All Student Group, followed by Measurement Group 1, and Measurement Group 2.
- The PNFP sector shows an equal difference of 5.8 percentage points for both the All Student Group and Measurement Group 2, with a much lower 1.8 percentage point difference in Measurement Group 1.
- The PFP sector shows a very wide 36.5 percentage point difference for Measurement Group 2, and a very similar and still wide difference for the All Student Group and Measurement Group 1 at 23.0 percentage points, and 22.8 percentage points, respectively.

Background

It is important to recognize that student access and success are inextricably linked to equity. Racial inequality is typically referred to the unequal distribution of resources, power, and economic opportunity across races. Although this discussion is typically focused on economic inequality, racial inequality is exhibited in numerous ways, which alone and collectively impact the well-being of all Americans. Such ethnic and racial disparities include the areas of employment and wealth, housing and health, rates of incarceration, education, etc. Such “inequitable structural arrangements mean that children of color are much more likely to grow up in poverty, attend underfunded and under-resourced schools (Ostaand and Vasquez, n.d., p. 3),” which limit both academic access and success.

According to researchers Ostaand and Vasquez (n.d.), “When these students, who have very likely had less experienced teachers, larger class sizes, and fewer extracurricular and enrichment activities score below state standards, the discourse that accompanies this fact most often focuses on what “extra” supports are needed for these students as if the problem is somehow located in the student and not in the material conditions of their educational experiences. The structural arrangement produces the outcomes (low achievement for student of color), but the outcomes produce and reinforce associations in our minds between students of color and lower academic performance (p. 3).”

The term ‘educational equity’ means that each student receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential. For educational equity to work,

within the U.S. and the state of Washington, there must be not only a firm recognition of the need for the equitable allocation of resources, such as financial support for tuition and education related expenses, but also the fair and just implementation of educational programs and services which foster success for students of all ethnic and racial minoritized groups, economic classes and cultural backgrounds.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore whether there are disparities in graduation rates from postsecondary institutions between different ethnic and racial minoritized groups in Washington state. More specifically, the research questions are:

1. How do national postsecondary graduation rates compare to Washington postsecondary graduation rates for ethnic and racial minoritized students?
2. How do Washington postsecondary ethnic and racial minoritized student graduation rates compare among institutional sectors?

Data and analytical approach

The graduation rate data for this report comes from IPEDS, a system of interrelated surveys conducted annually by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). IPEDS gathers information from every college, university, and technical and vocational institution that participates in the federal student financial aid programs. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, requires that institutions which participate in federal student aid programs report data on enrollment, program completions, graduation rates, faculty and staff, finances, institutional prices and student financial aid.

IPEDS developed specialized reporting formats for three different types of postsecondary education providers. These formats, known as "institutional sectors" — Public, PNFP and PFP — accommodate the varied operating characteristics, program offerings, and reporting capabilities of different types of institutions to compare them more accurately.

This study contains 10 years of IPEDS graduation rate data from 2011-2020. The graduation rate data comes from all degree-granting, primarily baccalaureate or above institutions of postsecondary education. The data for Washington includes 30 institutions: eight public institutions, 19 PNFP institutions and three PFP institutions. This study only included data on a student's first four-year baccalaureate degree. If a student received more than one degree or received a certificate, two-year degree or an advanced degree, it is not included in this analysis.

This study employed descriptive analysis to determine whether there are disparities in graduation rates from postsecondary institutions between different ethnic and racial minoritized groups. This study examines six-year graduation rates by institutional sector over time. It also includes a breakout exploration by ethnic and racial subgroups - Measurement Group 1 which excludes white students and students who report their race as unknown, and Measurement Group 2 which excludes white students and students who report their race as unknown, as well as U.S. nonresident and Asian students, both of which are traditionally high achieving and tend to have high graduation rates (e.g., see Park 2019; Hsin & Xie, 2014; Anderson, 2021).

The list of IPEDS race and ethnic categories and the constructed measurement groups are:

Table 1. Graduation Rate Measurement Groups

All Student Group	Measurement Group 1 (Minus White & Unknown)	Measurement Group 2 (Minus White, Unknown, Asian, & U.S. nonresident)
1. American Indian or Alaska Native	1. American Indian or Alaska Native	1. American Indian or Alaska Native
2. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	2. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	2. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
3. Black or African American	3. Black or African American	3. Black or African American
4. Hispanic or Latino	4. Hispanic or Latino	4. Hispanic or Latino
5. Two or more races	5. Two or more races	5. Two or more races
6. Race unknown	6. U.S. Nonresident	
7. U.S. nonresident	7. Asian	
8. Asian		
9. White		

Washington state versus the national average

As shown below in Table 2, 2020 average graduation rates for postsecondary students in Washington state exceeded national graduation rates within each of the three groups and within all three sectors for six-year rates.

Table 2. 2020 National and state average postsecondary 6-year graduation rates by sectors and groups

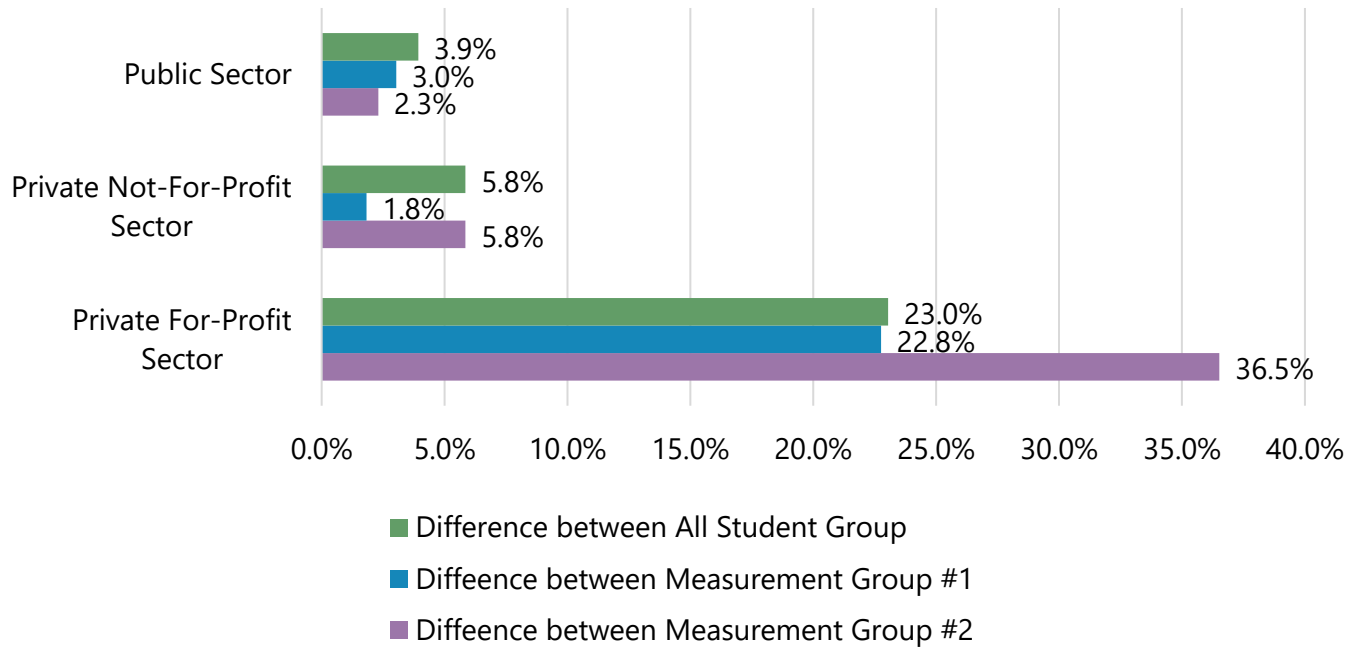
	National All Student Group	Washington All Student Group	National Measurement Group 1	Washington Measurement Group 1	National Measurement Group 2	Washington Measurement Group 2
PUBLIC	63.4%	67.3%	56.8%	59.9%	50.4%	52.7%
PNFP	67.6%	73.5%	62.8%	64.6%	56.5%	62.4%
PFP	27.8%	50.8%	33.4%	56.2%	24.1%	60.7%

Note: IPEDS weights graduation rates for institutional size.

The highest Washington state graduation rate of 73.5% was found in the All Student Group, PNFP sector. The All Student Group, PFP sector contained the lowest Washington state graduation rate of 50.8%.² Measurement Group 2 has the lowest graduation rates across all sectors both nationally and in Washington, except at PFP institutions in Washington where they have the highest graduation rates.

² The terms 'completion rates' and 'graduation rates' are synonymous and are often used interchangeably depending on the source. Both represent a calculated rate, based on the number of full-time, first-time freshman from a given cohort who complete degrees. IPEDS uses the term graduation rates, which is also used within this study.

Figure A. Difference between 2020 National and Washington state six-year graduation rates by sectors and groups.



When looking at the percentage point differences between Washington state and national averages (see Figure A):

- The public sector depicts the greatest difference in the graduation rate for the All Student Group, followed by Measurement Group 1, and Measurement Group 2.
- The PNFP sector shows an equal difference of 5.8 percentage points for both the All Student Group and Measurement Group 2, with a much smaller 1.8 percentage point difference in Measurement Group 1.
- The PFP sector shows a very wide 36.5 percentage point difference in Measurement Group 2, and very similar and still wide differences between the graduation rates for the All Student Group and Measurement Group 1 at 23 percentage points and 22.8 percentage points, respectively. As cited earlier this particular sector, Washington PFP only includes three institutions.

10-year (2011-2020) Washington state post-secondary graduation rates

10-year graduation rates are presented as trendlines to provide an accurate account of these measures even if fluctuations occurred during some years. This gives a clear view of graduation rates over time.

Similar to the above 2020 State/National Average data in Table 2, this 10-year historical data also shows graduation rates, which are consistently higher in Measurement Group 1 than in Measurement Group 2, with the notable exception of the PFP sector where Measurement Group 2 graduation rates exceed those of Measurement Group 1 in some years (Figure B.3). However, it should be noted that major differences in PFP ethnic and minoritized graduation rates may also be reflective of the aforementioned small number of Washington institutions (three in total) and specific nature of these types of institutions.

The data in Figures B.1, B.2, and B.3 resemble findings from the NCES in 2020. More specifically, they show that PNFP institutions had the highest six-year graduation rates when compared to the other sectors among ethnic and racial minoritized groups for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor’s degree at four-year degree-granting institutions over time.

Figure B.1 Six-year Washington state graduation rates by group and sector

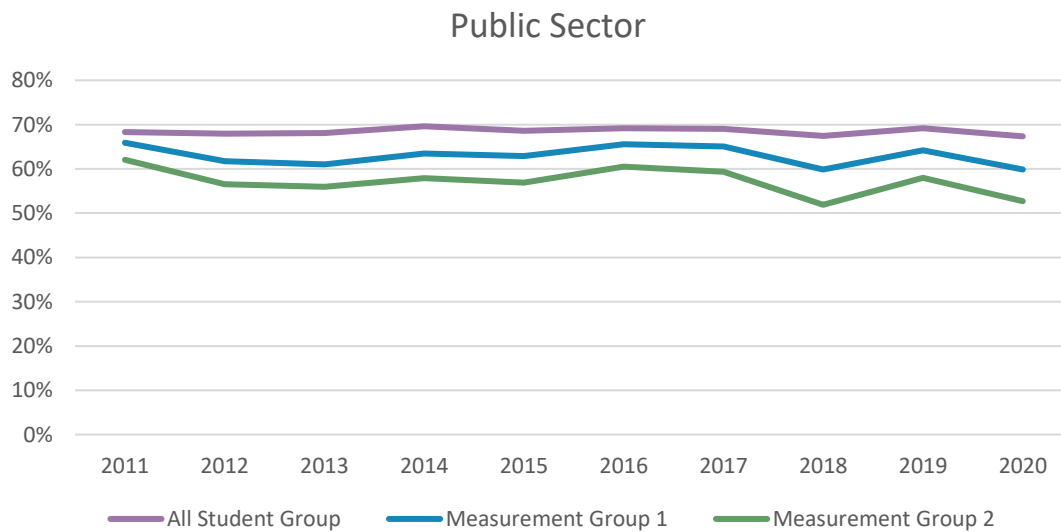


Figure B.2 Six-year Washington state graduation rates by group and sector

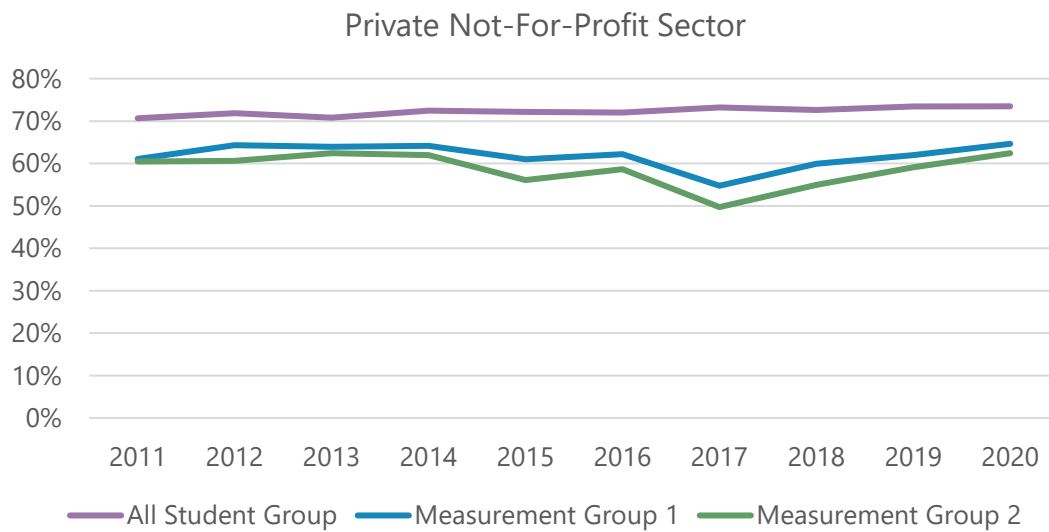
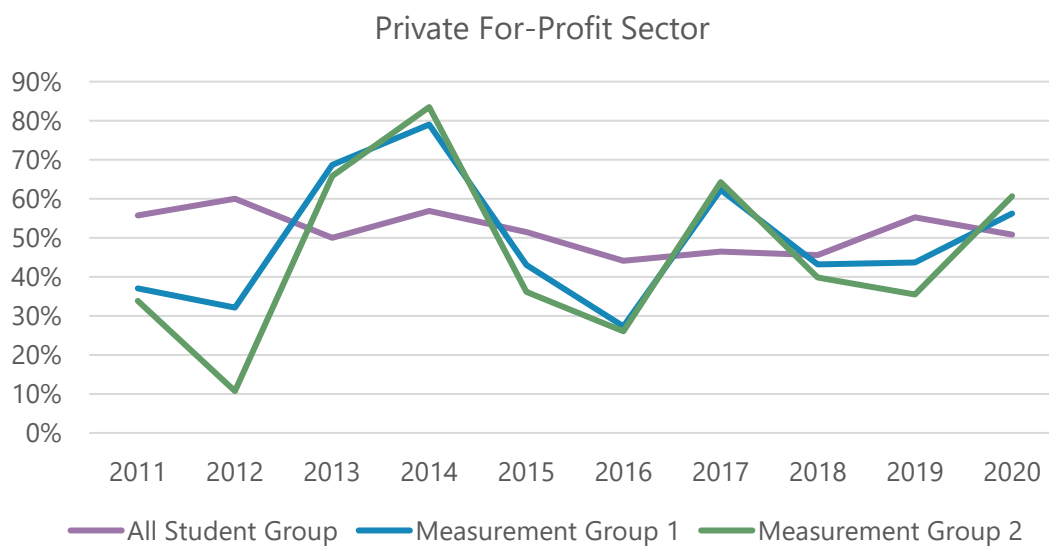


Figure B.3 Six-year Washington state graduation rates by group and sector



Over the 10-year span, as seen in Figures B.1-B.3, the public and PNFP sectors experienced notable decline in 2018 and 2017 respectively for both measurement groups, while the All Student Group had little or no decline over the entire 10-year period. However, the PFP sector experienced its most substantial decline for Measurement Group 2 earlier in 2012, followed by multiple declines for both measurement groups in 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2019. Both measurement groups rebounded in 2020 within the PNFP and PFP sectors, while the rates for the public sector for this same year was in decline relative to preceding 2019 rates.

What did we learn from this study?

Washington state graduation rates were consistently higher than the national average, in each institutional sector and measurement group. Within Washington state, and nationally, average graduation rates for ethnic and racial minoritized groups were below the graduate rates for the All Student Group.

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