

Focus

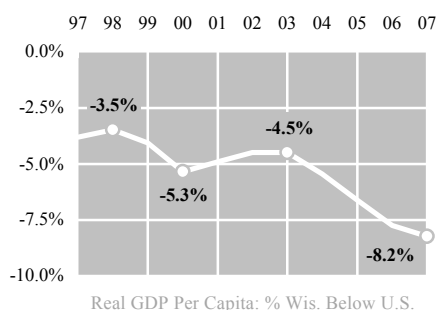
1 Aug 2008 • No. 17

In brief

Wisconsin high school seniors have the second-highest average ACT scores in the U.S. However, ACT finds that only 29% of those tested have a 50% chance of earning a B or a 75% chance of earning a C in each of four college freshman courses: English composition, algebra, social sciences, and biology. Among African-American students, that chance is 4%.

Capitol notes

■ U.S. Commerce Dept. figures show that Wisconsin's real GDP per capita was 3.5% below the national average 10 years ago and 4.5% below it five years ago. It was 8.2% below the nation last year.



■ The state investment board, which manages public retirement funds, reports that it allocated \$200 million to its Venture Capital Portfolio over the past eight years.

■ Former Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Roland Day, originally appointed to the court in 1974, passed away in Madison at 89.

ACT study of 2007 Wisconsin high school seniors:

State test scores show college-readiness "gap"

Over 25,000 Wisconsin freshmen arrive on college campuses around the state this fall. New students often wonder whether they are adequately prepared to do college work. Although these young people consistently have some of the nation's highest average ACT scores (22.3 vs. 21.2, U.S.), their concern is real.

College ready? State vs. U.S.

In studying 2007 high school graduates, ACT found that only 29% (boxed in table below) of 46,430 Wisconsin students tested met college-readiness benchmarks in four core subject areas; the national percentage was even lower (23%). In its report "College Readiness: Rigor at Risk," the ACT testing service concluded that "our high school graduates are in danger of entering college or the workforce without sufficient academic preparation."

ACT defined college readiness as having a 50% chance of earning a B or higher in a subject, or a 75% chance of obtaining a C or better. Based on these percentages, the testing firm set benchmark scores (see table, first row) in each subject area that would ensure those chances. For example, a student with an ACT reading score of 21 or more would have a 50% - 50% chance of a B in a college social science class, or a 75% - 25% chance of a C.

State students were

more likely to be college ready in one subject than in all four. More than three-fourths (77% vs. 69% nationally) of high schoolers were prepared for a college English composition course. However, that percentage was lower in the three other areas: social science (60% vs. 53%), college algebra (53% vs. 43%), and college biology (37% vs. 28%). Combining all four subject areas yielded the 29% figure for four-course readiness.

Wisconsin readiness varies

Overall college readiness statistics mask considerable variability by gender and ethnicity (see table).

□ *Gender.* While 29% of students taking the ACT in 2007 were prepared for likely success in all four subjects examined, the percentage was higher for men (34%) than for women (26%).

This difference was due mainly to math and science. Men had a 61%-48% edge over women in math and a 43%-32% edge in science. By smaller margins, women were better prepared for English composition (79%-76%) and social sciences (61%-60%).

How Many Wis. HS Grads Ready for College?

Pct. Students' 2007 ACT Scores = or > Benchmarks

| Subject | Eng. Comp. | Read. Soc. Sci. | Math Algebra | Sci. Biology | Overall 4 Subj. |
|---|------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Benchmark | 18 | 21 | 22 | 24 | na* |
| Avg. ACT | 21.6 | 22.4 | 22.2 | 22.4 | 22.3 |
| <i>Pct. Students at/above Benchmark ("College Ready")</i> | | | | | |
| All Students | 77 | 60 | 53 | 37 | 29 |
| Male | 76 | 60 | 61 | 43 | 34 |
| Female | 79 | 61 | 48 | 32 | 26 |
| African-Amer. | 36 | 22 | 11 | 6 | 4 |
| Asian | 52 | 36 | 39 | 22 | 17 |
| Caucasian | 81 | 64 | 57 | 39 | 32 |
| Hispanic | 61 | 44 | 33 | 19 | 15 |
| Native Amer. | 61 | 49 | 39 | 26 | 19 |

* Students exceed benchmarks in all four subjects.

□ Ethnicity.

By group, all five shown in the table were best prepared for college success in English. However, the percentage attaining the score benchmark (18) ranged from 81% for Caucasians to 36%

for African-Americans. Percentages for both Native Americans and Hispanics were 61%.

Readiness for college social science was second to English. But the span of percentages was broad, ranging from 64% for Caucasians and 49% for Native Americans to 36% for Asians and 22% for African-Americans.

Both overall and by ethnic group, Wisconsin high schoolers were least prepared for college math and science. Among whites, 57% were ready for college algebra (math benchmark, 22) and 39% were ready for college biology (science benchmark, 24). The percentage of students likely to succeed in college algebra ranged from a high of 57% (Caucasians) to 11% (African-Americans). The other three groups fell in a range from 33% (Hispanics) to 39% (Asians and Native Americans).

Wisconsin students taking the ACT were least prepared to take a course in college biology. Less than two in five (39%) Caucasians met the science benchmark (24). The other groups followed: Native Americans (26%), Asians (22%), Hispanics (19%), and African-Americans (6%).

Given the low science percentages, it is not surprising that the share of stu-

ACT: “More Courses Not Enough; Rigor Needed”
Pct. Meeting Benchmarks with Core & “Max” Courses

| Core | Yrs. | "Core Plus" | Yrs. | % Meet B'mark | |
|--------------------------------|------|------------------|------|---------------|--------|
| | | | | Core | Core + |
| English 9-12 | 4 | Added English | 4 + | 76 | 82 |
| Algebra 1/2, Geom. | 3 | Trig./Calculus | 4 | 25 | 78 |
| U.S./World History & Am. Gov't | 3 | ≥ 1 yr. soc. st. | 4 + | 52 | 65 |
| Gen. Sci., Bio., Chem. | 3 | Physics | 4 | 25 | 47 |

dents deemed college ready in all four subject areas was lower: 32% (Caucasians); 15-19% (Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans); and 4% (African-Americans).

Course choice, rigor matters

The ACT testing service has urged high schools to offer—and students to pursue—core curricula of sufficient depth and rigor to ensure college success. The minimum core (detailed in the table above, col. 1) includes four years of English and three years each of social studies, math, and science.

Unfortunately, ACT has found that the current “quality and intensity—in other words *rigor*—of the high school curriculum” is not adequate to prepare students for college unless they take courses beyond the core. Calling that “neither realistic nor justifiable,” ACT says it is “essential” that we “improve the quality of core courses that *really* matter in preparing students for college and work.” The testing firm goes on

to observe that much of the loss in momentum toward college readiness “appears to be occurring during the last two years of high school.”

Data in the table support ACT’s concern. The first four columns show the “core” curriculum, as well as a maximal course load (“core plus”) that includes math through calculus. The final two columns show the percentages of Wisconsin-tested students who met the readiness benchmarks, having pursued one of the two curricula.

The need for rigor in all high school courses is reflected in the “college-ready” percentages of Wisconsin students taking four or more years of classes in all areas (“core +”). Despite taking classes well beyond the core (supposedly sufficient for college success), between one- and two-fifths of the most advanced students were not college ready: English (18%), math (22%), social studies (35%), and science (43%). Wisconsin students test well, but not well enough.

If these findings were only ACT’s, they would be less eye opening. However, a group created in 2005 by U.S. governors and business leaders, as well as the College Board (the SAT firm) and several regional educational consortia, all express similar concerns.

Focus is published by the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, 401 N. Lawn Ave., Madison, Wisconsin, three times monthly during March through June and semimonthly during other months. Subscriptions are \$49 for one year and \$99 for three years. WISTAX contributors of \$75 or more receive a free copy. Media reprinting is encouraged with credit to WISTAX requested.

