

Wisconsin's Education Pipeline

Education is vital to a thriving economy and the economic well-being of people. Not only are more highly educated people open to a wider range of employment opportunities, but they are imperative to innovation which drives economic growth and development. One way to look at the education of Wisconsin's labor force is to look at current educational attainment. Compared to our neighboring states, Wisconsin's current educational attainment most closely matches Iowa (Figure 1). For both states the share of the population age 25 and over that has a high school degree and no college is about 32.5% which is higher than the other neighboring states. But when compared to neighboring states in terms of those age 25 and over that have at a minimum some college, Wisconsin falls slightly behind Iowa (58.4% vs. 58.8%) as well as the other states, particularly Minnesota (65.9%). Wisconsin also falls below the regional average for people that have at least a bachelor's degree (27.4% vs. 29.1%).

Perhaps a more insightful way to explore the Wisconsin labor market as it pertains to educational levels is to examine flows of new people that are either entering or soon to be entering the labor force. In terms of simple high school graduation rates, Wisconsin does well compared to neighboring states (Figure 2). Wisconsin has also seen an increase in people age 18 to 24 that are enrolled in college or graduate school (Figure 3). We have also seen an increase in the six year graduation rate for those seeking a bachelor's degree (Figure 4).

But there is a pattern here. Wisconsin's high school graduation rate is strong, and initial admission to higher education is solid, but then levels of success taper off. Taken together the relatively strong high school graduation rates, trailing enrollment in college and graduate school, and relatively low six-year graduation rate, indicate that Wisconsin is facing challenges related to a supply of highly educated workers.

Figure 1: Share of Population Age 25+ by Educational Attainment (2014 five year ACS estimates)

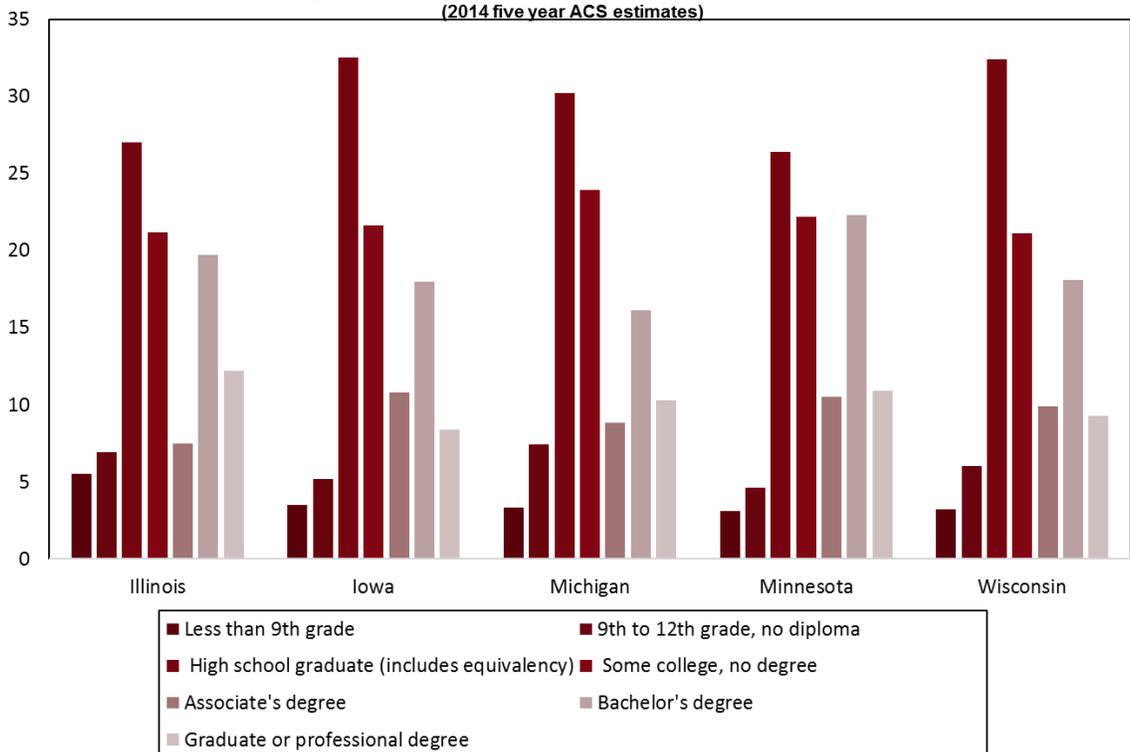


Figure 2: High School Graduation Rate Class of 2013

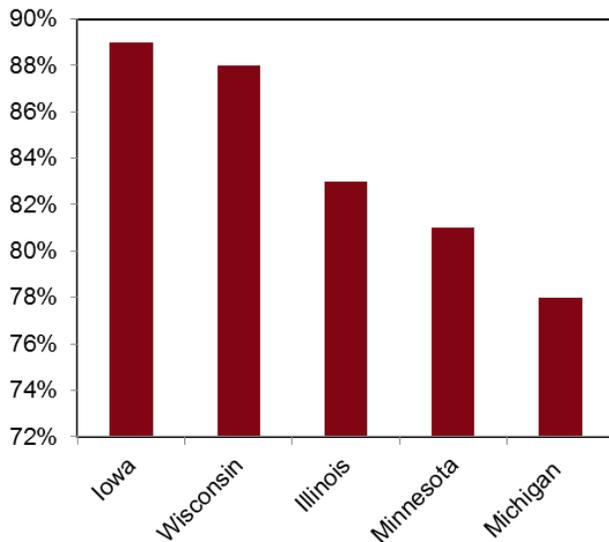


Figure 3: Share of Population Age 18-24 Enrolled in College or Graduate School

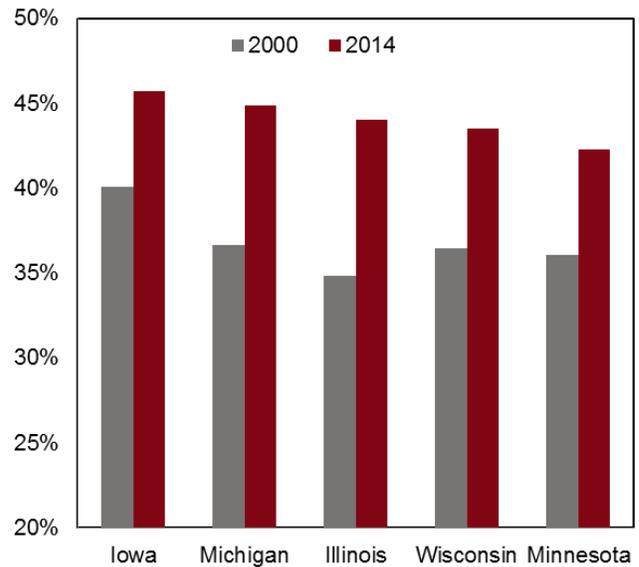
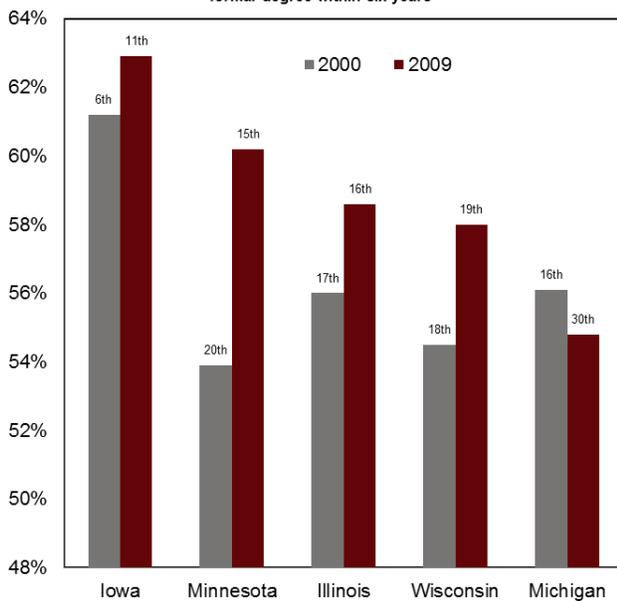


Figure 4: Six-Year Higher Education Graduation Rate
First-time full-time bachelor's degree seeking students earning any formal degree within six years



Some of the key observations from our analysis include:

- Wisconsin successfully graduates a large share of high school students compared with both regional neighbors and all other U.S. states.
- Consistent with neighboring states, nearly 45% of the population age 18-24 is enrolled in college or graduate school.
- The college or university six-year graduation rate is relatively low compared to other Midwestern states.
- In Wisconsin, 27.4% of the workforce has a bachelor's degree or higher, a small share compared to other Midwestern states.

With the goal of fostering economic development and growth and the overall well-being of its residents, Wisconsin must think through whether its educational policies are aimed at simply meeting the needs of today's employers or are those policies aimed at better positioning the state for a stronger more robust economy of tomorrow.