Madison, La Crosse, Eau Claire Remain Most Selective UW Campuses
WISTAX Releases Comparative Guide to UW Schools for College Applicants, Parents

MADISON—Madison, La Crosse, and Eau Claire are the most selective campuses in the UW System, according to “Comparing UW Campuses: A Guide for Applicants, Parents.” The new report from the nonpartisan Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (WISTAX) compares the state’s 13 four-year public universities on selectivity, size, and retention. Now in its 80th year, WISTAX is a nonprofit research organization dedicated to citizen education.

“Choosing a college is confusing for high school juniors and seniors, and their families. Yet students and their parents have relatively little information with which to compare the UW campuses most residents will attend. We prepared this report to help students find the college that best fits them,” said WISTAX President Todd A. Berry.

Admission rates, high school class rank, and average freshman admission test (ACT) scores are all measures of campus selectivity. For the fall 2010 semester, Madison, La Crosse, and Eau Claire had the lowest freshman admission rates and also the highest percentage of new freshmen in the top quarter of their high school classes. At Madison, 93% of new first-year students graduated in the top quarter; at La Crosse and Eau Claire, more than 50% did. Stevens Point, Oshkosh, River Falls, and Platteville had at least one in three students ranked in the top quarter. Stout, Milwaukee, and Parkside were the only campuses to have this percentage at less than 30%.

Madison (28.3), La Crosse (24.7), and Eau Claire (24.4) freshmen also had the highest average ACT scores. New freshmen at Milwaukee, Parkside, Stout, and Superior averaged 22 or less. According to WISTAX researchers, although ACT scores of Wisconsin high schoolers have changed little over the past 10 years, the average score of incoming freshmen has risen. Madison (+1.5 points), Parkside (+0.8), and Eau Claire (+0.8) reported the largest 10-year gains in average freshmen ACT scores. Except at River Falls, the average freshman score increased at all of the state’s public universities during this time.

In one of the more interesting findings, WISTAX researchers reported a strong correlation between average ACT scores and freshmen drop-out rates—those who did not return to their original campus for the second year and did not transfer to another UW school. Schools with the highest dropout rates were those with the lowest
average ACT scores. Because ACT scores are one measure of student preparation for college work, ACT scores may help identify students most likely to find the first year of college difficult, WISTAX said.

Graduation rates are another factor students might consider when choosing a college to attend. Madison (81%) had the highest percentage of freshmen graduating within six years, while La Crosse, Eau Claire, and Stevens Point all reported graduation rates exceeding 60%. Parkside, Superior, and Milwaukee graduated fewer than half of freshmen within six years.

Last fall, 25,768 new freshmen enrolled at one of the state’s 13 four-year UW campuses, the smallest number since 2006. Applicants wanting a small or large school should know that freshman class sizes vary from 5,927 in Madison and 3,872 in Milwaukee to much smaller numbers at Superior (380) and Parkside (805). During 2000-10, enrollment gains were largest—in percentage terms—at Platteville (59.9%), Milwaukee (28.5%), and Stout (20.7%). Five campuses (Superior, Green Bay, Parkside, Whitewater, and Eau Claire) enrolled fewer freshmen in the fall of 2010 than in fall 2000.

“Comparing UW Campuses: A Guide for Applicants, Parents” is included in WISTAX’s December issue of The Wisconsin Taxpayer, “Postrecession Snapshot: Total Taxes in 2011.” Both reports are available by visiting www.wistax.org; e-mailing wistax@wistax.org; calling 608.241.9789; or writing WISTAX at 401 North Lawn Ave., Madison, WI 53704-5033. ☐

(Editor’s Note: An electronic version of this release is available at www.wistax.org.)