

Question:

What are the demographics of students using free and reduced community college programs?

Response:

Tennessee is the only state that has enacted and enrolled students in a free community college program to date. In the fall of 2015, 74 percent of Tennessee Promise recipients were white, 14 percent were African American, and four percent were Hispanic. Fifty-six percent were female. This information request details the background of free community college proposals across the country and provides further information about the demographics of students enrolled in the Tennessee Promise program.

Over the past few years, nearly half of the states have considered plans to provide free or reduced community college for its residents. Tennessee was the first state to enact such a plan in 2014. However, other states have been quick to follow. In 2015, Oregon passed 'Oregon Promise' legislation to provide free community college to Oregon residents. Along with Tennessee and Oregon's comprehensive programs, Minnesota enacted a pilot program in the state. Overall, 23 states have considered 38 pieces of legislation, with 3 bills enacted, 25 bills currently pending, and 10 bills which died.

Tennessee Promise is a last-dollar scholarship, offered to every graduating high school senior in the state to attend a two-year college degree program. Tennessee Promise began in the 2015-16 academic year, so it is the only state with data related to the recipients of the program. Also, only one fall term of data are available. For the fall 2015, 16,291 students enrolled in a Tennessee Promise program. Of these students, 85% went to community colleges, 13% enrolled in Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs), and 2% enrolled in a private, not-for-profit institution (TICUA).

At the end of November 2015, The Tennessee Higher Education Commission [presented](#) an update on Tennessee Promise, which includes information about the demographics of the participants. Some selected demographic information from this presentation is included below.

Tennessee Promise Demographics

The table below describes the racial, gender, and academic background of community college students before and after the implementation of the Tennessee Promise in the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 academic years.

Additional data & links

The [Tennessee Higher Education Fact Book](#) contains statistics on student enrollment in all of Tennessee's institutions of higher education.

This [presentation from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission](#) gives details on the demographic breakdown of Tennessee Promise participants.

	Fall 2014 Prior to TN Promise Community College Students straight out of high school	Fall 2015 Year 1 of TN Promise Community College students Enrolled in TN Promise	Fall 2016 Preliminary Data Applications Received as of Nov. 2015
White	70%	74%	67%
African American	19%	14%	<i>Not yet available</i>
Hispanic	5%	4%	<i>Not yet available</i>
Female	56%	56%	50%
Average ACT	18.7	19.1	<i>Not yet available</i>
Average GPA	3.04	3.05	<i>Not yet available</i>
Number of Tennessee Promise Applications	n/a	58,000	59,621

Overall, changes to the racial, gender, and academic makeup of the first class of Tennessee Promise students appear relatively small when compared to the preceding entering class. Importantly, however, researchers have not studied any causal impacts from the Tennessee Promise program to date. This means that we do not yet know if the presence of the program explains any of the small differences in the makeup high school students matriculating directly into community college.

Overall, Tennessee [enrolled more students](#) in community college in the 2015-2016 academic year than initially anticipated. A projection made in the fall of 2014 estimated that 13,000 students would enroll in community college through the Tennessee Promise program the following year. In reality, over 16,000 students enrolled. The extent to which this increase in enrollment is attributable to the Promise is not clear. Additionally, we do not know if the program encourages or discourages students from enrolling in an eligible institution for Promise versus an ineligible institution. While first-time freshmen enrollment increased in Promise-eligible institutions in Tennessee in the fall of 2015, more research is needed to understand the role that Promise may or may not have played in students' enrollment decisions.

For more information or if you have other questions, please feel free to contact Emily Parker at Education Commission of the States at eparker@ecs.org or 303-299-3662.