

Examining Free College in Tennessee: A Student-Level Analysis

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RESEARCH
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Introduction

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization. We seek to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved students. Our work is designed to strengthen public schools and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and the public at the local, state, and national levels; and enrich the civic and community dialogue about public education

Acknowledgement

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Introduction

- **Tennessee Promise** officially launched in 2014 and enrolled its first cohort of students in 2015.
- Program includes FAFSA and college application support, last-dollar financial support, and mentoring.
- RFA partnered with the Tennessee Board of Regents to examine early outcomes for Promise students enrolled at community colleges (only), and particularly for Black and Hispanic students and students from lower-income households and communities.

Conceptual Framework

Applied the [Statewide College Promise Framework](#) (Callahan et al., 2019).



Design Features of Tennessee Promise Program

Framework components	Design features of Tennessee Promise
Access	Students: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. must be Tennessee residents;2. must enroll in college immediately after high school graduation;3. may not have an associate degree already; and4. must attend two community meetings before enrollment.
Affordability	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Students must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).2. Promise provides a last-dollar scholarship after all eligible federal and state grant aid is applied.3. Promise provides scholarship at any Tennessee public community colleges and technical colleges.
Success	Students: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. must be continuously enrolled full time until a terminal event;2. must retain a 2.0 GPA while attending and meet Satisfactory Academic Progress3. must complete 8 hours of community service or job shadowing4. will be matched with a community mentor

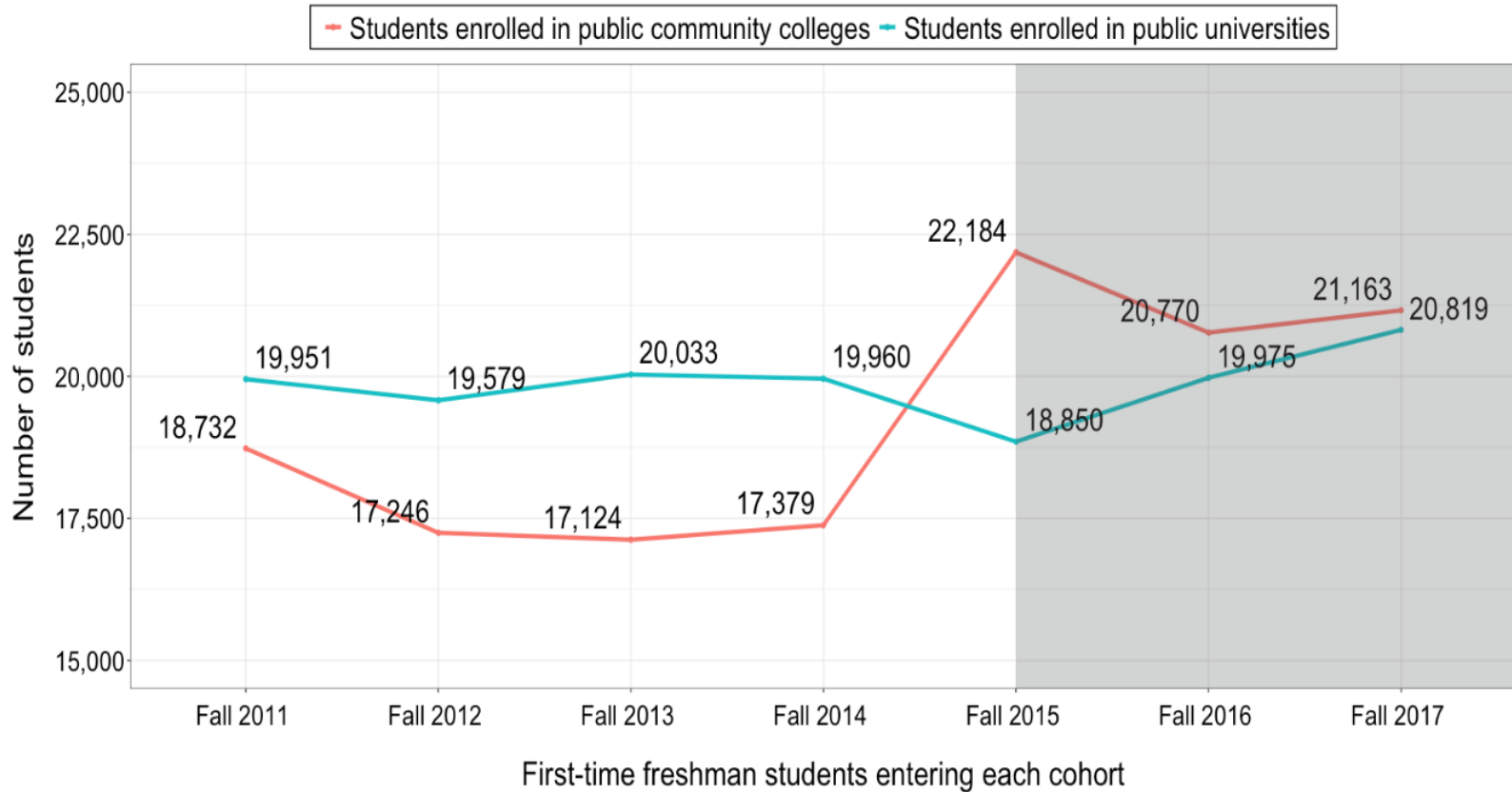
Research Questions

Tennessee Promise's effects on driving or restricting:	Research Questions
Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How has first-time, full-time, student enrollment in Tennessee's public community colleges and universities changed since the implementation of Promise?• How has the composition of racial and ethnic identities of first-time full-time students changed over time at public community colleges?• Who is participating in Tennessee Promise?
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How have statewide FAFSA completion rates changed in relation to the launch Tennessee Promise?• Who is receiving a last-dollar scholarship from Tennessee Promise?
Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How many Promise students persisted into their second semester and second academic year?• Does student persistence vary by race and ethnicity?• How many Promise students earned an associate degree in two and three years?

Access:

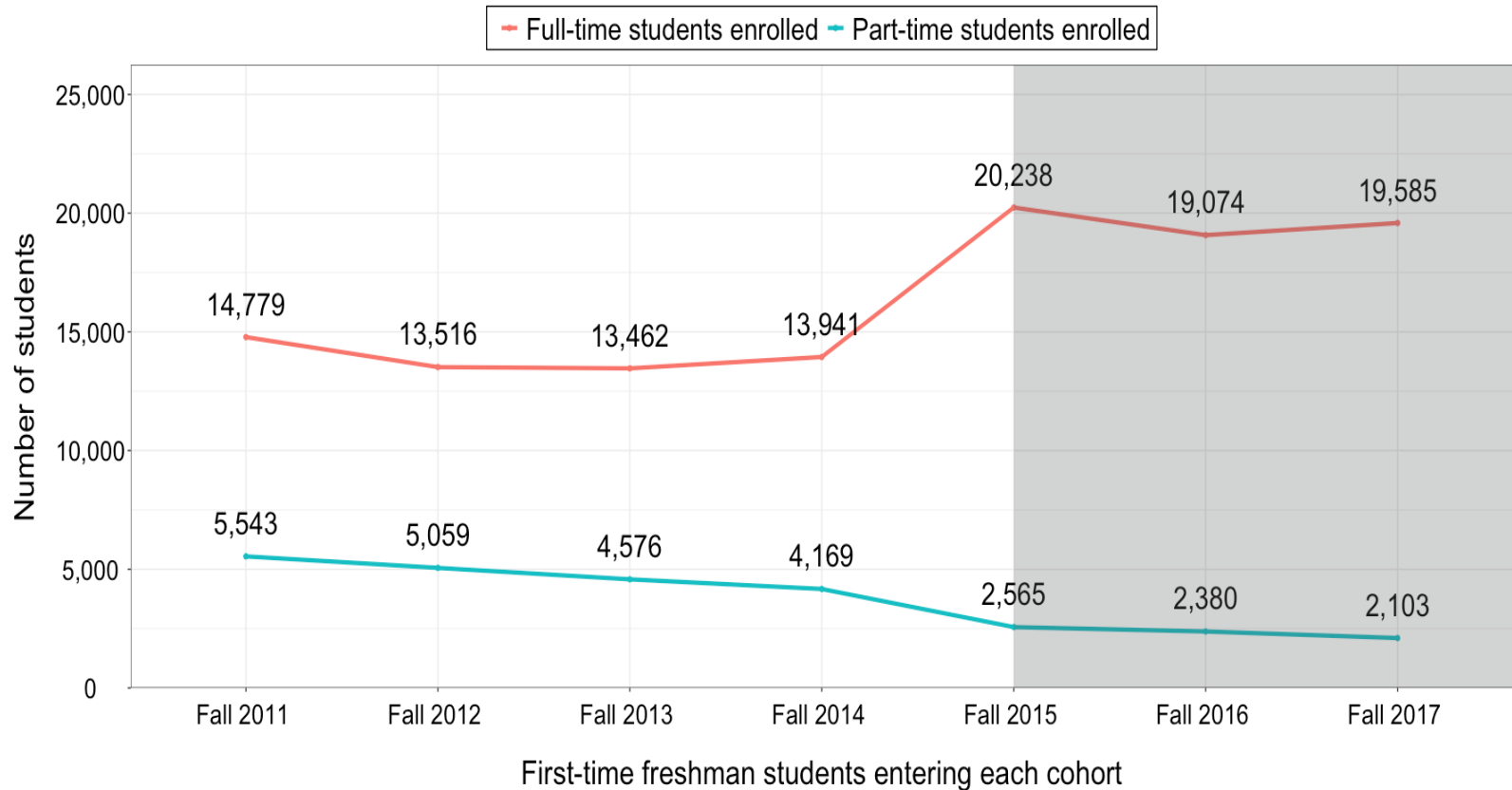
**Changes in First-Time Full-Time Enrollment and
Program Participation**

Question 1: How has the enrollment of first-time full-time students changed over time at public community colleges, compared to public universities?



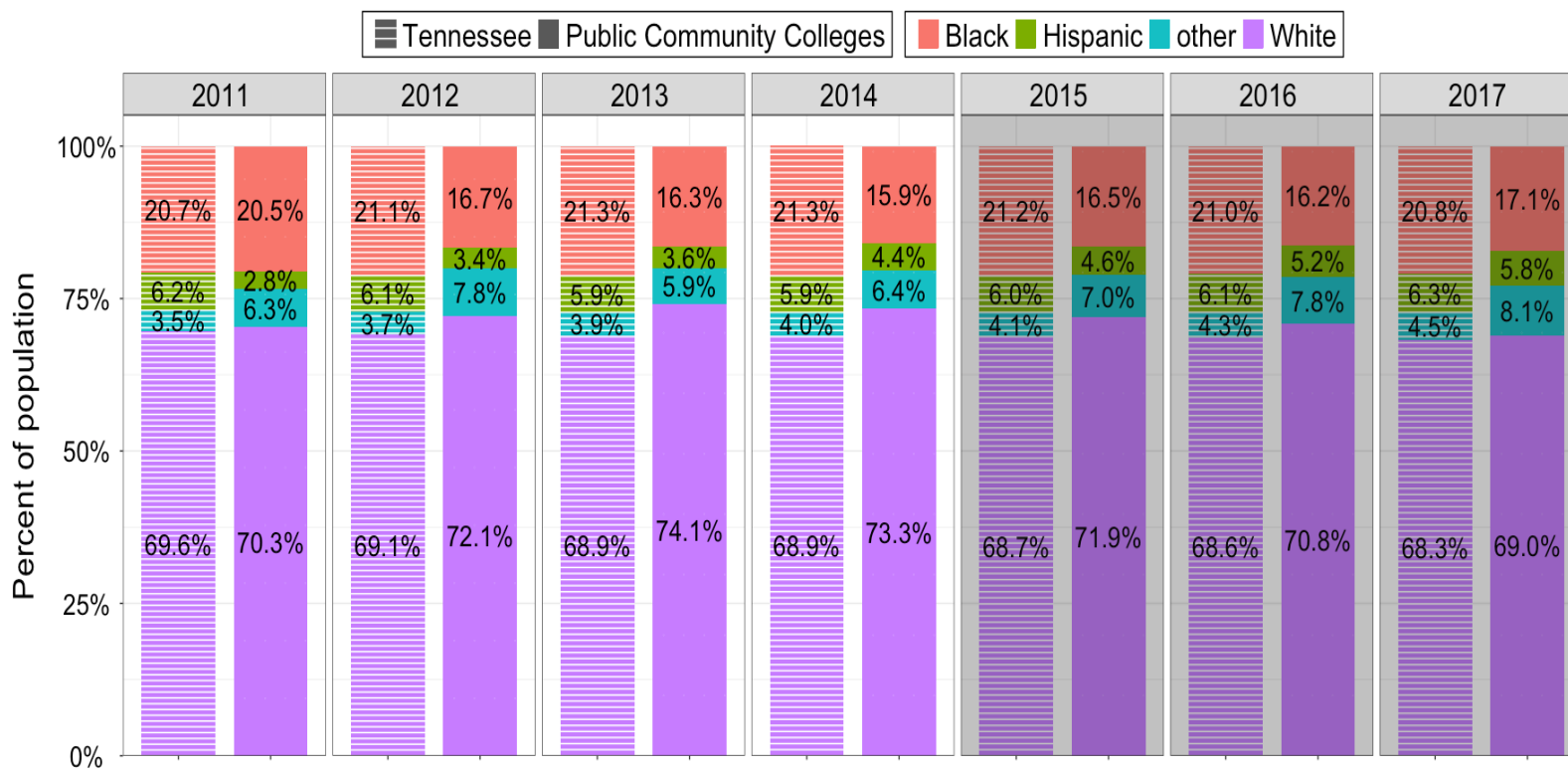
- **Community colleges experienced a substantial increase in first-time full-time enrollment in 2015**

Question 2: How has the enrollment of first-time full-time students changed over time at public community colleges, compared to part-time students?



- **Community colleges experienced an increase in full-time enrollment and a decrease in part-time enrollment in 2015**

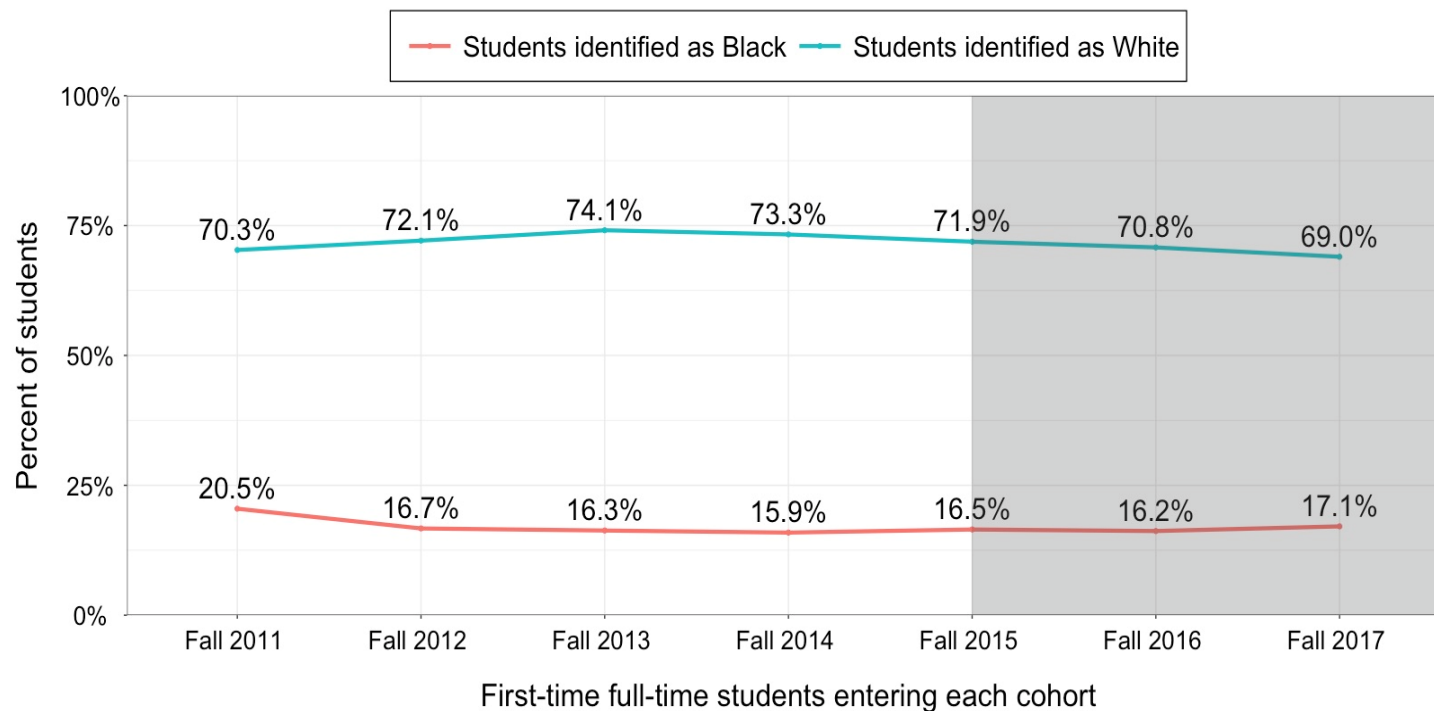
Question 3: How has the composition of racial and ethnic identities of first-time full-time students changed over time at public community colleges?



- **Community colleges experienced minimal changes in the racial and ethnic composition of first-time full-time students.**
- **Promise may have disrupted the decline over time in the enrollment of Black students in Tennessee community colleges since 2011**

Note: Students who were identified as “Other” in this analysis may be self-identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or chose not to identify themselves.

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Question 4: Who is participating in Tennessee Promise?

Year	Proportions of Tennessee residents who are 19 to 25 years old and (were) identified as				Proportions of Promise students (were) identified as			
	Black	Hispanic	other races and ethnicities	White	Black	Hispanic	other races and ethnicities	White
2015	16.5%	4.6%	7.0%	71.9%	11.5%	3.9%	6.6%	78.0%
2016	16.2%	5.2%	7.8%	70.8%	13.1%	4.6%	7.6%	74.7%
2017	17.1%	5.8%	8.1%	69.0%	14.0%	5.1%	8.1%	72.8%

- Promise cohorts include somewhat smaller proportions of Black students, slightly lower proportions of Hispanic students, and somewhat larger proportions of White students compared to Tennessee residents ages 19-25.**

Notes:

a. The shaded graph areas indicate the implementation years of Tennessee Promise.

b. Students who were identified as “Other” in this analysis may be self-identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or chose not to identify themselves.



Affordability: FAFSA Completion and Financial Awards

Question 5: How have statewide FAFSA completion rates changed around the onset of Tennessee Promise?

Tennessee Promise has contributed to the increase in Tennessee's FAFSA filing rates

- Nationally, only 61% of high school seniors filed FAFSA.
- Tennessee's FAFSA filing rates increased from 60% in 2014 to 70% in 2015.
- As of 2017, 77% of Tennessee high school seniors filed FAFSA.

Promise Subsamples

For the following research questions, we define our Promise sample as:

- **Promise students** – Students who met all the eligibility requirements and participated in the Promise program
- **Promise scholarship recipients** – Students who received the Promise scholarship
- **Non-recipient Promise participants** – Students who did not receive the Promise scholarship but participated in the Promise program (i.e., received non-financial supports and met program requirements)

Note: we use the receipt of a Promise scholarship as a proxy to indicate a higher household income since receiving a Promise scholarship suggests that a student's expected family contribution is too high to qualify for full tuition coverage through state and federal need-based financial aid sources.



Question 6: Who is receiving a last-dollar scholarship from Tennessee Promise?

First-time full-time students entering ...	Number of Promise students enrolled	Number of Promise scholarship recipients	Proportion of Promise scholarship recipients
Fall 2015	13,045	7,347	56.5%
Fall 2016	13,506	7,253	53.7%
Fall 2017	14,215	7,134	50.1%

- **More than half of Promise students received the last-dollar scholarship in their first semester.**

Note: In this analysis, we define “Promise Scholarship Recipients” as first-time full-time students enrolled in Tennessee community colleges, who participated in the Promise program and received any amount of Promise scholarship (i.e., \$1 or more) in the first Fall semester enrolled.



Question 6: Who is receiving a last-dollar scholarship from Tennessee Promise?

Sample in 2017	% of Sample who identified as Black	% of Sample who identified as Hispanic	% of Sample who were identified as other race/ethnicity	% of Sample who identified as White
Tennessee Residents 19 to 25 years old	20.8%	6.3%	4.5%	68.3%
Non-recipient Promise participants	20.8%	6.4%	8.9%	63.9%
Promise scholarship recipients	7.2%	3.8%	7.4%	81.6%

- **Demographically, non-recipient Promise participants look more like Tennessee residents than Promise recipients.**

Note: In this analysis, we define “Promise Scholarship Recipients” as first-time full-time students enrolled in Tennessee community colleges, who participated in the Promise program and received any amount of Promise scholarship (i.e., \$1 or more) in the first Fall semester enrolled.



Success: Persistence and Completion

Question 7: How many Promise students persisted into the second semester and the second academic year?

First-time full-time students entering	Proportion of Promise students persisted into the second semester	Proportion of Promise students persisted into the second year
Fall 2015	81.3% (N = 12,983)	59.0% (N = 12,719)
Fall 2016	81.8% (N = 13,431)	60.4% (N = 13,301)
Fall 2017	81.0% (N = 14,150)	56.1% (N = 14,015)

- Barriers to persistence remain for Promise students - majority of Promise students persisted into Spring but only 57% persisted into the second year.**

Notes: Persistence rate is defined as whether a first-time full-time student who participated in Promise was still enrolled in the subsequent Spring semester and Fall semester in the same Tennessee community college; On average, in each cohort, there are about 0.5% of Promise students for whom we were not able to validate their data on attempted credits in the first Spring semester and 1.8% of Promise students in the second Fall semester. Therefore, we excluded them from this analysis.



Question 8: How many Promise students from historically underserved student groups persist into their second semester and second academic year of college?

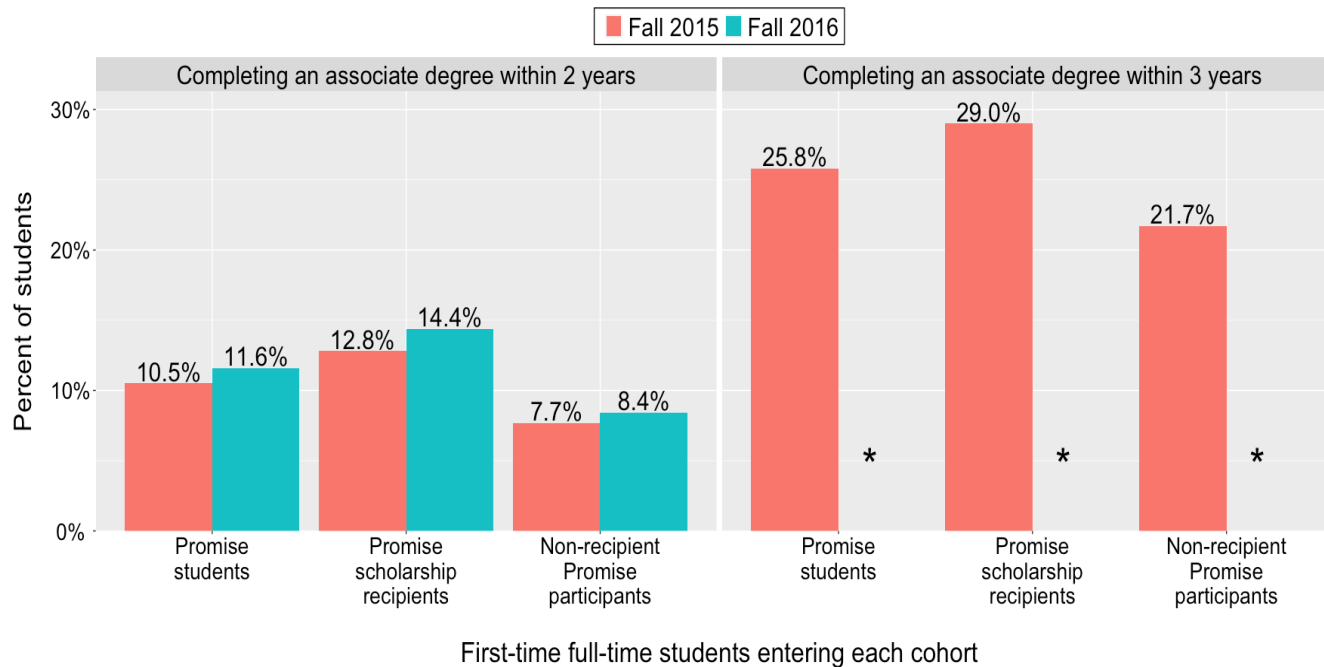
First-time full-time students entering ...	Proportion of students persisted into the second semester				
	Promise scholarship recipients	Non-recipient Promise participants	Students who identified as Black	Students who identified as Hispanic	Students who identified as White
Fall 2015	81.9%	80.5%	79.7%	82.7%	81.4%
Fall 2016	82.9%	80.6%	78.6%	83.7%	82.1%
Fall 2017	82.0%	80.1%	81.6%	80.2%	80.7%

First-time full-time students entering ...	Proportion of students persisted into the second year				
	Promise scholarship recipients	Non-recipient Promise participants	Students who identified as Black	Students who identified as Hispanic	Students who identified as White
Fall 2015	62.1%	55.1%	52.5%	61.0%	59.8%
Fall 2016	63.1%	57.4%	53.1%	65.7%	61.2%
Fall 2017	60.5%	51.8%	48.7%	57.0%	57.3%

Question 8: How many Promise students from historically underserved student groups persist into their second semester and second academic year of college?

- All Promise students had similar fall-to-spring persistence rate, but **more higher-income students persisted into the second academic year than their low-income peers.**
- Students who identified as Black, Hispanic, and White experienced similar fall-to-spring persistence rates but for fall-to-fall persistence, **opportunity gaps grew between Black students and both their Hispanic and White peers.**

Question 9: How many Promise students earned an associate degree in two and three years?



- **One in four Promise students in the first cohort earned an associate degree in three years**
- **Promise scholarship recipients had higher associate degree completion rates within two and three years compared to non-recipient Promise participants.**

Note: Data on completing an associate degree within three years is not available for the entering cohort of Fall 2016 given our data request timeframe. In this analysis, due to data limitation, we were not able to control for the degree program students were initially enrolled in.

Question 9: How many Promise students earned an associate degree in two and three years?

First-time full-time students entering	Proportion of Promise students who identified as... earned an associate degree in two years			Proportion of Promise students who identified as... earned an associate degree in three years		
	Black	Hispanic	White	Black	Hispanic	White
Fall 2015	3.3% (N = 1,499)	8.2% (N = 511)	11.7% (N = 10,178)	12.7% (N = 1,499)	25.6% (N = 511)	27.7% (N = 10,178)
Fall 2016	3.5% (N = 1,767)	9.0% (N = 619)	13.1% (N = 10,091)	N/A	N/A	N/A

- **Black and Hispanic students experienced opportunity gaps in completion**

Note: Data on completing an associate degree within three years is not available for the entering cohort of Fall 2016 given our data request timeframe. In this analysis, due to data limitation, we were not able to control for the degree program students were initially enrolled in.



Policy Implications, Limitations, & Future Research

Access: Changes in First-Time Full-Time Enrollment and Program Participation

Emerging Evidence

- First-time full-time enrollments in community colleges increased while full-time enrollments in universities and part-time enrollments in community colleges decreased.
- Opportunity gaps in access remain for Black and Hispanic students but maybe starting to narrow.

Policy Implication:

- Targeted outreach for students with different needs and education attainment goals can help expand access for historically underserved students.
- Effective communications of the benefits of Promise to all students.

Affordability: FAFSA Completion and Financial Awards

Emerging Evidence

- Recipients of Promise funds are disproportionately students from higher income households based on the level of federal and state grant aid available to them.

Policy Implication:

- Policymakers should consider the equity implications of a last-dollar statewide scholarship program in improving college affordability.
- For students with the most significant financial needs, the form of a last-dollar-plus Promise model may help cover the additional costs of attendance.

Success: Persistence and Completion

Emerging Evidence

- Black students and students from low-income families have lower rates of persistence and degree completion than White and higher-income student peers.

Policy Implication:

- Students of color and lower-income students are disproportionately affected by structural barriers in education. Policy designs should focus on providing equitable opportunities and supports for historically underserved students beyond college enrollment.

Limitations

- **Data availability**
 - Need complete financial aid information for the pre-Promise cohorts
 - Need cross-sector data to track the full postsecondary trajectory of students
- **Analytic method**
 - Need a student-level comparison to examine the impacts of Tennessee Promise

Future Research

- To what extent, if any, can Promise programs help **narrowing access gaps for students of color and students living in low-income households and communities?**
- What **sector-level change in college completion and workforce** would including part-time students in Promise bring?
- How might **last-dollar-plus programs support student success** for students with the highest financial needs?



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Appendix A. Data and Method

Data

- Partnered with Tennessee Board of Regents, we obtained **student-level administrative data collected from all 13 public community colleges from Tennessee Board of Regent's Student Information System between 2010 and 2018.**
- Reflecting the Promise program eligibility requirements, we restricted the study sample to **first-time full-time freshman students enrolled at a Tennessee community college.**
- Our study sample includes **four pre-Promise cohorts** (Fall 2011 to Fall 2014) and **three post-Promise cohorts** (Fall 2015 to Fall 2017)

Analysis method

- For this report, we conduct **descriptive analyses** to identify and examine trends and variations in student characteristics, enrollment, persistence, and completion for each entering cohort of Tennessee Promise students and different student subgroups.

Appendix B. Comparison of student demographics by Promise scholarship recipient status (2015 – 2017)

Students by Promise program status and race and ethnicity in each cohort		Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Fall 2017
Enrollment of Promise scholarship recipients	% recipients are Black	6.8%	7.1%	7.2%
	% recipients are Hispanic	2.8%	2.8%	3.8%
	% recipients are identified as other races/ethnicities	6.0%	6.9%	7.4%
	% recipients are White	84.4%	83.2%	81.6%
Enrollment of Non-recipient Promise participants	% participants are Black	17.5%	20.0%	20.8%
	% participants are Hispanic	4.2%	5.7%	6.4%
	% participants are identified as other races/ethnicities	8.6%	9.4%	8.9%
	% participants are White	69.7%	64.9%	63.9%

Note: In this analysis, we define “Promise Scholarship Recipients” as first-time full-time students enrolled in Tennessee community colleges, who participated in the Promise program and received any amount of Promise scholarship (i.e., \$1 or more) in the first Fall semester enrolled.

