

EQUITY & ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

MEETING TWO

ISSUE BRIEF



Complete Tennessee
Leadership Institute
A PROJECT OF SCORE & THE HUNT INSTITUTE

ELEVATENC
HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education offers a path toward economic prosperity for both states and individuals. As a result, most states, including North Carolina and Tennessee, established specific [higher education attainment goals to ensure residents are prepared for the workforce](#). North Carolina’s goal calls for [2 million](#) 25- to 44-year olds (66 percent) to hold a high-quality postsecondary credential or degree by 2030. Tennessee’s [Drive to 55](#) initiative centers around a goal for 55 percent of 25- to 65-year olds to hold a postsecondary credential by 2025. Equitable access to postsecondary education is one of the many critical factors states must address to reach these goals.

STATE POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT SNAPSHOTS

Racial equity gaps persist between enrollment rates of different student groups. As depicted in Figure 1, White and Asian 18- to 24-year olds enroll in higher education at higher rates than other student demographic groups. Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaskan Native students enroll at lower rates – reflecting systemic barriers to postsecondary access.

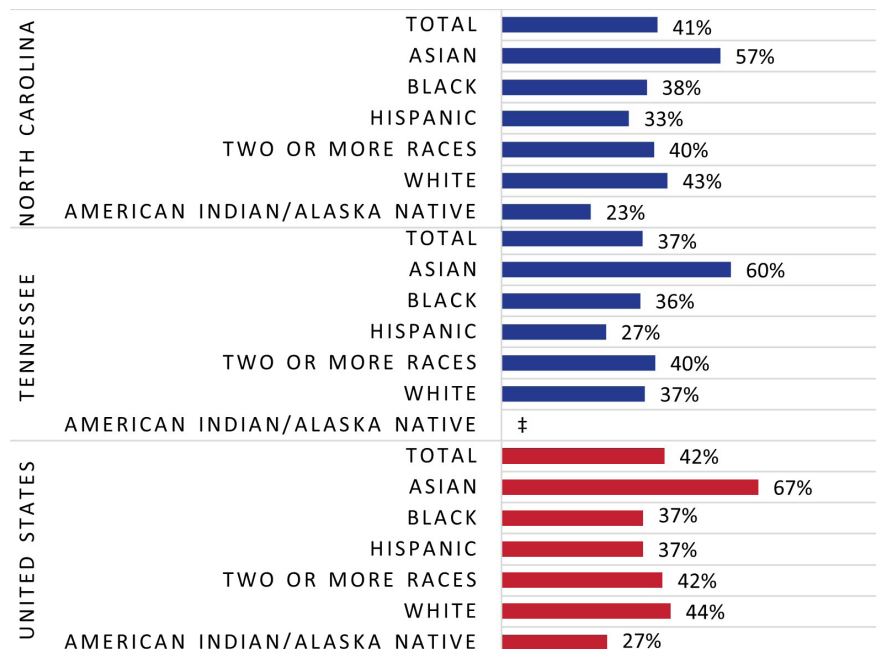
TRENDS IN COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

Undergraduate student enrollment numbers were lower in Fall 2020 compared to Fall 2014. As demonstrated in Figure 2, this overall trend holds true across the nation

– and is particularly concerning given most new job openings in this time frame [required a postsecondary credential](#). Nationally, postsecondary enrollment has declined each year since 2014, with the COVID-19 pandemic worsening an existing trend. The trend looks different across individual states. North Carolina experienced a sharp enrollment decline between Fall 2014 and Fall 2015, but then increased enrollment consistently until its peak in Fall 2019. However, almost all North Carolina progress reversed at the start of the pandemic in 2020. Tennessee’s postsecondary enrollment fluctuated between Fall 2014 and Fall 2019 (when it peaked). But at the onset of the pandemic, Tennessee’s enrollment fell well below Fall 2014 numbers. Most concerning, Black and American Indian/Alaskan Native students, whose enrollment numbers were already significantly lower than their White counterparts, experienced the largest enrollment drops of all student groups in North Carolina, Tennessee, and the United States.

It is important to acknowledge total undergraduate enrollment is an aggregate measure inclusive of learners coming straight from high school, adults, part-time students, and full-time students – all groups with different needs and experiences with higher education. Enrollment trends may be different when looking at these groups separately. For example, while Tennessee’s overall Hispanic student enrollment grew

FIGURE 1 | 18- TO 24-YEAR-OLDS ENROLLED IN POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS | 2019



Note: ‡Reporting standards not met. Either there are too few cases for a reliable estimate or the coefficient of variation (CV) is 50 percent or greater.

[Source](#)

Questions for Thought

- Should equity-focused postsecondary enrollment and attainment goals exist at the institution-level, state-level, or both?
- What factors should go into setting equity-focused goals?



FIGURE 2 | TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT CHANGES AT PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION BETWEEN 2014 AND 2020

	Fall 2014	Fall 2020	Difference	Percent Difference	
NORTH CAROLINA	White	239,769	224,778	-14,991	-6.3%
	Black	96,290	83,036	-13,254	-13.8%
	Hispanic	27,180	42,341	15,161	+55.8%
	Asian	11,058	14,884	3,826	+34.6%
	Two or More Races	10,366	14,544	4,178	+40.3%
	American Indian/Alaskan Native	5,265	4,668	-597	-11.3%
	Total	410,876	404,223	-6,653	-1.6%
TENNESSEE	White	148,760	140,384	-8,376	-5.6%
	Black	38,417	34,060	-4,357	-11.3%
	Hispanic	7,112	12,386	5,274	+74.2%
	Asian	3,844	4,864	1,020	+26.5%
	Two or More Races	6,027	7,370	1,343	+22.3%
	American Indian/Alaskan Native	593	449	-144	-24.3%
	Total	212,023	205,238	-6,785	-3.2%
UNITED STATES	White	9,088,451	7,751,815	-1,336,636	-14.7%
	Black	2,296,133	1,901,153	-394,980	-17.2%
	Hispanic	2,829,123	3,220,694	391,571	+13.8%
	Asian	977,879	1,061,160	83,281	+8.5%
	Two or More Races	538,136	643,025	104,889	+19.5%
	American Indian/Alaskan Native	132,800	103,003	-29,797	-22.4%
	Total	17,294,136	15,851,906	-1,442,230	-8.3%

Source

Questions for Thought

- How might postsecondary enrollment trends differ by type of student in your state (i.e., recent high school graduates versus adults, part-time versus full-time students, etc.)?
- What state-level data would you need to understand the nuance of postsecondary enrollment trends?
- How could additional, nuanced data to explore these trends impact how institutions and the state approach making effective policy to address enrollment drops?



significantly since 2014, [state data](#) illustrates a drop in the percentage of Hispanic students enrolling in postsecondary education immediately after high school graduation. That drop [outpaces](#) the drop of their White counterparts. As such, the increase for total Hispanic student enrollment could be driven by returning adult students rather than students just out of high school. There is a remaining need for increased state and local support around college-going for Tennessee’s Hispanic high school graduates – a need difficult to identify when only looking at overall enrollment numbers.

AFFORDABILITY

Cost is the largest perceived challenge to accessing additional education – [57 percent](#) of adults perceive cost as a barrier. Furthermore, only [half](#) of Americans think the economic benefits of a college education outweigh the costs. Understanding the cost of college is not as clear cut as one might assume. For instance, there is a difference between the cost to an institution and the cost to students and families. In conversations about postsecondary access, cost to students and families is the primary concern.

Even in that context, there is a difference between the “sticker price” and the actual out-of-pocket cost students and families have to pay. “Sticker price” refers to the published tuition and fees, while out-of-pocket cost is determined by several factors including student aid, living expenses, and transportation costs.

There are several important student aid programs that students, families, and advocates need to understand when discussing the out-of-pocket cost of higher education.

- Loans, which need to be repaid with interest. There are both public and private loan programs.
- Federal [Pell Grants](#), which do not need to be repaid and are awarded to students with financial need.
- State grant and loan programs, which vary across states. Both [North Carolina](#) and [Tennessee](#) offer several state financial aid options. States vary on the percentage of aid allocated based on financial need. For example, Tennessee provides a larger amount of grant aid per student, but allocates a smaller proportion of that aid based on financial need (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3 | STATE GRANT AID SNAPSHOT

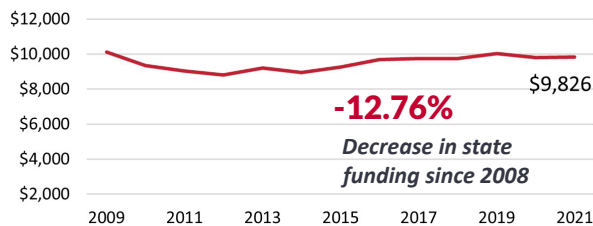
	AVG. STATE AID PER FTE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT	PERCENT OF UNDERGRADUATE STATE AID AWARDED BY NEED
North Carolina	\$859.09	97%
Tennessee	\$1,887.74	28%
United States	\$979.94	74%

[Source](#)

Questions for Thought

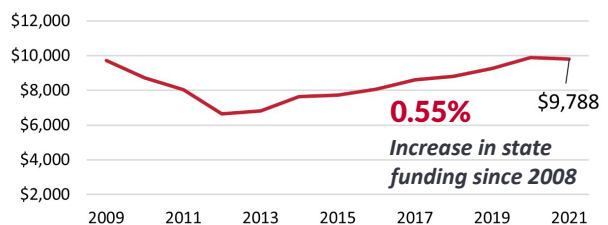
- Would you rather have a state financial aid system with more dollars, but a smaller proportion allocated based on need? Or fewer dollars, with almost all allocated based on need?
- If you had decision making power for institutional aid, what proportion would you allocate to need based aid versus merit aid? How might this answer differ if you were an institution president versus a state governor?

FIGURE 4 | STATE HIGHER EDUCATION PER STUDENT FUNDING IN NORTH CAROLINA



[Source](#)

FIGURE 5 | STATE HIGHER EDUCATION PER STUDENT FUNDING IN TENNESSEE



Related to college affordability, it is important to know public higher education institutions receive state funding. States report their overall funding, related to the total investment amount, as well as their per student funding, related to the total investment as well as the number of students enrolled at that time. If overall state investments do not keep pace with student enrollment, students may not receive the resources needed to succeed. State per student funding decreased around the Great Recession, even with federal investments through the [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act \(ARRA\)](#) between 2009 and 2012 (Figures 4 and 5). Most states' per student funding levels are still [below pre-Great Recession levels](#).

COLLEGE ACCESS METRICS

Policymakers, stakeholders, and advocates can monitor several [indicators](#) of postsecondary preparation, enrollment, and success. Data around these indicators should be collected and publicly reported by student demographic groups whenever possible to ensure all students are prepared to access higher education and to identify critical points for targeting efforts to close equity gaps in college access.

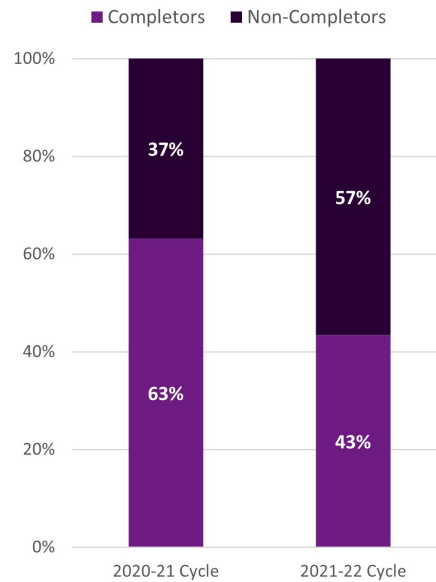
FAFSA

One important indicator related to postsecondary access is completion of the [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#). The FAFSA is used to determine how much and what kind of financial aid students and their families are eligible to receive from the federal government, and is a requirement for receiving federal and most state aid. As such, [completing the FAFSA](#) significantly increases the probability of a student enrolling in higher education directly after graduating high school. Some states introduce innovative initiatives to increase FAFSA completion rates. For example, in June 2020, North Carolina administered a [FAFSA Frenzy NC](#) campaign that included a website launch, official proclamation from the governor, online working groups, and an extensive marketing campaign.

Unfortunately, the FAFSA is lengthy, confusing, and includes certain questions that students and families may be uncomfortable answering. The [FAFSA Simplification Act](#), which passed in December 2020, introduced several changes to the form to better serve students and streamline processes – but changes are being phased in and have not yet all gone into effect.

FIGURE 6 | PERCENTAGE OF NORTH CAROLINA HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO COMPLETED THE FAFSA

12TH GRADE ENROLLMENT: 106,705

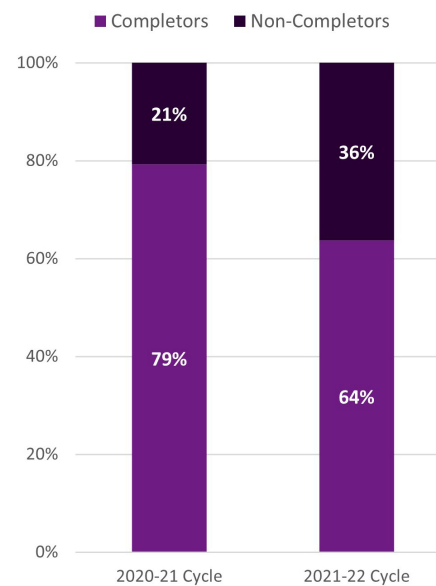


State Rank: 19 State Rank: 25

[Source](#)

FIGURE 7 | PERCENTAGE OF TENNESSEE HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS WHO COMPLETED THE FAFSA

12TH GRADE ENROLLMENT: 77,008



State Rank: 2 State Rank: 1

[Source](#)

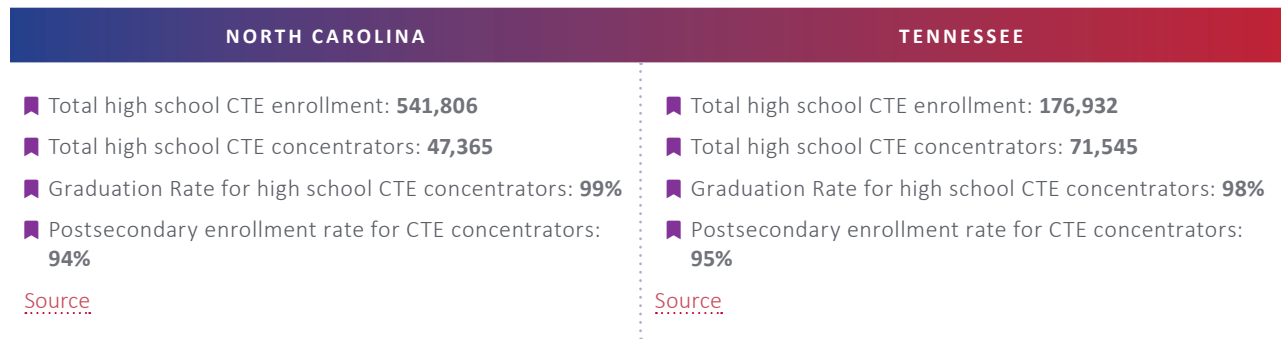


Coursework Participation

Another indicator related to postsecondary access is participation in advanced coursework and career and technical education (CTE). Research shows that participation in [advanced coursework](#) and [CTE](#) increases a student's likelihood of graduating high school and attending postsecondary education. Yet, there are significant [equity gaps](#) for low-income students and students of color to access advanced coursework. Participants in CTE courses tend to be more [representative](#) of the broader student population than participants in advanced courses, though data should be analyzed on a state-by-state basis (Figures 9 and 10).

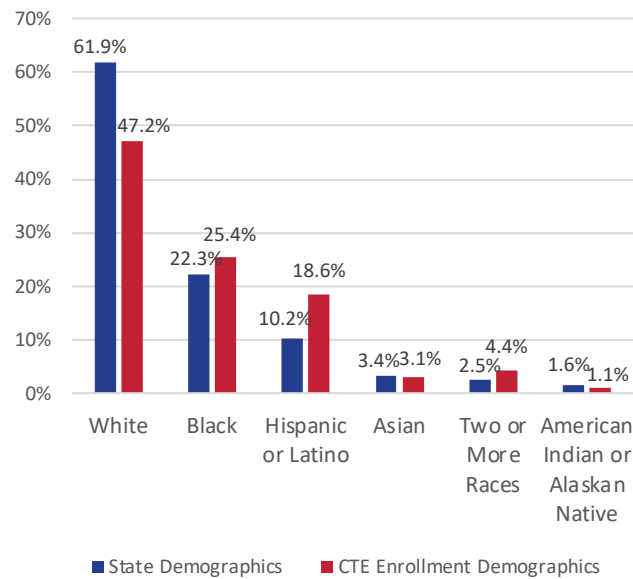


FIGURE 8 | CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (CTE) SNAPSHOT



*Note: CTE concentrators are defined as a student who earned two or more credits within a single program of study

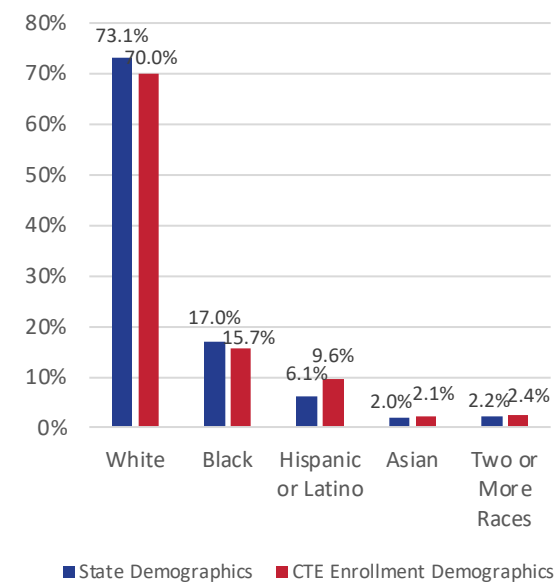
FIGURE 9 | NORTH CAROLINA SECONDARY CTE ENROLLMENT BY RACE COMPARED TO OVERALL STATE DEMOGRAPHICS



[State Source](#)

[CTE Source](#)

FIGURE 10 | TENNESSEE SECONDARY CTE ENROLLMENT BY RACE COMPARED TO OVERALL STATE DEMOGRAPHICS



[State Source](#)

[CTE Source](#)



Other Indicators

There are a number of other useful indicators to understand postsecondary access, including but not limited to [9th grade GPA](#), timing of [completion of Algebra 1](#), and [number of completed college applications](#).

Ongoing mentoring, counseling, and other support can help students navigate through these milestones to postsecondary enrollment and close opportunity gaps that create inequities in postsecondary access.

Questions for Thought

- What indicators do you think are most relevant to ensure equity in postsecondary access?
- What systems are, or should be, in place in your state to support students through these milestones?

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is the role of **state policymakers** in advancing equitable access to postsecondary education?
- What is the role of **local policymakers** in advancing equitable access to postsecondary education?
- What is the role of **institution policymakers** in advancing equitable access to postsecondary education?
- What are some examples of policy or practice initiatives focused on increasing postsecondary access in your state, community, or institution?
- What do you believe is the largest barrier to postsecondary access?
- What do you believe should be the main priorities for addressing equity in postsecondary access within the next year?
- Who might you consider engaging with as you build a coalition to garner support for advancing equitable access to postsecondary education?





4000 Centregreen Way Suite 301
Cary, NC 27513
p: 984.377.5200



1207 18th Ave S
Nashville, TN 37212
p: 615.727.1545