



TENNESSEE COLLEGE GOING & THE CLASS OF 2025

Tennessee Higher Education Commission

2025-26 Commission Members

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Executive Summary

College-going rate indicates the portion of public high school graduates who seamlessly enroll (i.e., immediately after high school) in postsecondary education. This year's college-going rate report focuses on the class of 2025. College going slightly increased compared to the class of 2024, for a statewide college-going rate of 56.1% (**Figure**). While the rate of college-going remained relatively steady, the number of high school graduates in the class of 2025 was the largest in over ten years, and the number of students who seamlessly enrolled in higher education was the highest total since before the COVID-19 pandemic.

College going for the class of 2025 remains uneven across Tennessee's 95 counties (**Figure 3**). Williamson County had the highest college-going rate at 83.7% and Johnson County had the lowest rate at 38.7%. The proportion of the class of 2025 enrolled at Tennessee community colleges increased slightly compared to the class of 2024 while the proportion enrolled at Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology dipped from the previous class's high (**Figure**). Fifty-eight counties had a college-going rate below the statewide average of 56.1%. The percentage of public high school graduates attending out-of-state institutions was 16.1% (**Figure 5**), with 62.1% of out-of-state students attending an institution in a bordering state (**Figure 6**).

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) continues to work with partners around the state to promote college going amongst Tennessee's high school seniors. Many of these efforts are direct counseling and coaching programs, like Advise TN¹ and GEAR UP TN², that provide students with information about postsecondary opportunities that fit their goals. A new program, Tennessee Direct Admissions, aims to simplify the administrative process of entering postsecondary institutions by eliminating the traditional application. See the callout box at the end of this report for more information about the Direct Admissions program.

College-Going Data and Methods

The college-going rate is a measure of the proportion of graduates in each high school cohort that seamlessly enroll in postsecondary education. More precisely, this metric counts public high school students in the Tennessee Department of Education's (TDOE) ninth grade cohort who earn a regular high school diploma and enroll at a postsecondary institution the following summer or fall term after graduating high school.^{3,4} The THEC cohort of graduates is slightly smaller than the graduate cohort

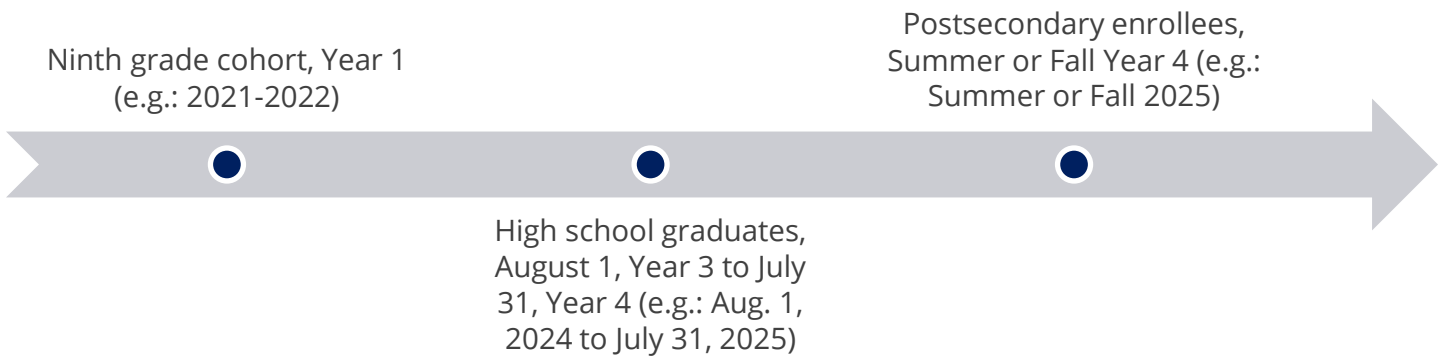
¹ To learn more about Advise TN visit <https://www.collegefortn.org/advise-tn/>.

² To learn more about GEAR UP TN visit <https://www.collegefortn.org/gearuptn-2/>.

³ For more information on TDOE's cohort methodology, see the 2024-25 Report Card Technical document at <https://www.tn.gov/education/families/report-card.html>.

⁴ Postsecondary enrollment measures reported by TDOE may include additional enrollments beyond the immediate summer or fall term of seamless enrollment and thus not match data presented here.

counts provided by TDOE, because the THEC cohort excludes students who do not earn a regular diploma, meaning that students who earn an alternate academic diploma are not included. Further, THEC’s high school graduate base does not include high school graduates who graduate more than a year before their anticipated graduation.^{5,6} Cohorts of high school graduates are referred to by their high school graduation year in this report. The process is shown below using the example of the class of 2025.



Notably, there are alternative paths through and after high school that students may take which are not captured by this college-going rate measure. Students who enter the military or who join Registered Apprenticeships are not included due to a lack of data. However, some improvements are being made, allowing additional data on students’ post-high school outcomes. Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD) apprenticeship data is currently being integrated into the TN DATA system, Tennessee’s statewide longitudinal data system. Military enlistment data remains unavailable through official reporting channels. Due to access restrictions maintained by the military, availability of these data is unlikely to change in the near future. However, some local school districts put additional effort into tracking the military recruitment, recognizing another valuable pathway for students. Finally, students who earn postsecondary credentials while in high school are not captured in the college-going metric if they do not then go on to enroll in postsecondary after high school. More information about students who complete postsecondary credentials while in high school can be found in **Table 4**.

Data Sources and Notes

Unless otherwise noted, the data in this report are sourced from TN DATA⁷, the National Student Clearinghouse Student Tracker (NSC), and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission’s Student Information System (THECSIS). High school graduate data from TDOE is pulled from TN DATA and matched to enrollment data from THECSIS and NSC to present a complete picture of public high school graduates’ enrollment behaviors, whether they enrolled in-state or out-of-state, at public or private

⁵ High school graduates included in THEC’s college-going base include winter, spring, and summer graduates in cohort’s fourth (or senior) year. For the class of 2025 this represents students from winter 2024, spring 2025, and summer 2025.

⁶ Students who graduate high school early may also be found in college enrollment in earlier terms, such as a December graduate who enrolls in postsecondary in the following spring term. THEC’s methodology will look for a December graduate in the subsequent summer or fall term to determine college-going.

⁷ Details on TN DATA can be found at <https://www.tn.gov/finance/oei/tn-data.html>.

institutions. Throughout this report, demographic groups are aligned with TDOE reporting and are not necessarily comparable to other THEC reporting. Figures are rounded to the nearest tenth of a percentage point.

For Dual Enrollment Grant analyses, grant payment records from the Financial Aid System of Tennessee (FAST) were matched to enrollment records in THECSIS to confirm which students in each THEC cohort of high school graduates participated in the dual enrollment grant at any point in their high school years. This is an undercount of dual enrollment participation and Early Postsecondary Opportunities (EPSO) participation more generally, as not all students who take dual enrollment courses receive the state Dual Enrollment Grant, and not all EPSO participants take dual enrollment courses.⁸

Privacy Notice

Throughout this report, THEC complies with the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) requirements to protect students' personally identifiable information. Therefore, when tables are presented, individual observations containing fewer than ten observations are suppressed. The suppressed counts are included in table totals. All cases in which observations are suppressed are identified with a note directly beneath the respective table.

⁸ For more information about the Dual Enrollment Grant, see <https://www.collegefortn.org/dualenrollment/>.

College Going in Tennessee

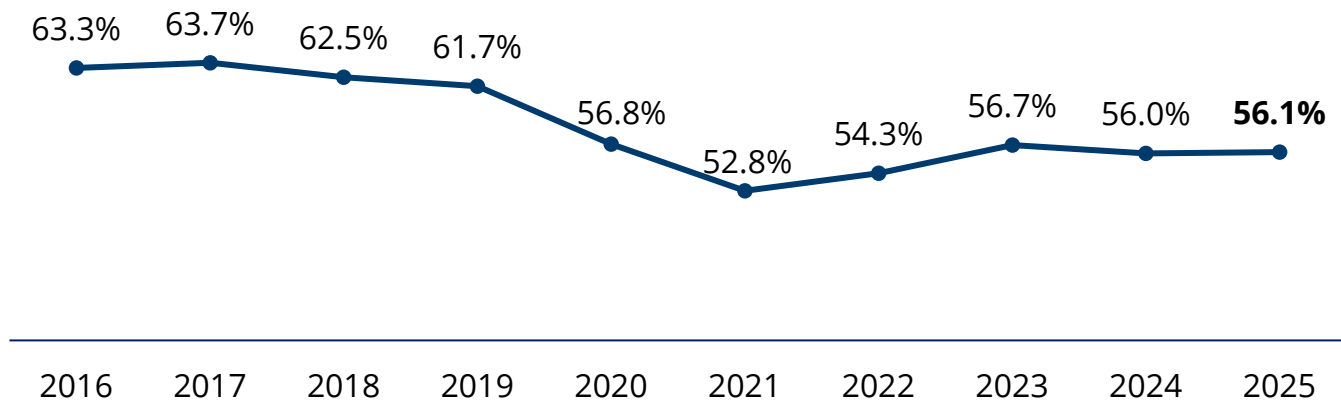
Table 1 shows counts of public high school graduates and postsecondary enrollees for the last decade. These counts of high school graduates utilize THEC’s cohort measure and thus differ from the TDOE graduation cohort counts for reasons clarified above. **Figure 1** presents the overall college-going rate of Tennessee’s public high school graduates over the last decade. For the high school class of 2025, the overall college-going rate is 56.1%. This longitudinal view shows the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. While there has been some rebound in recent years, the rates remain below pre-pandemic levels.

As shown in **Table 1**, the number of public high school graduates in class of 2025 increased by 2.3% compared to class of 2024. While the percentage of postsecondary enrollees from the class of 2025 only increased 0.1 percentage points compared to the class of 2024, the total number of postsecondary enrollees is up 2.5%.

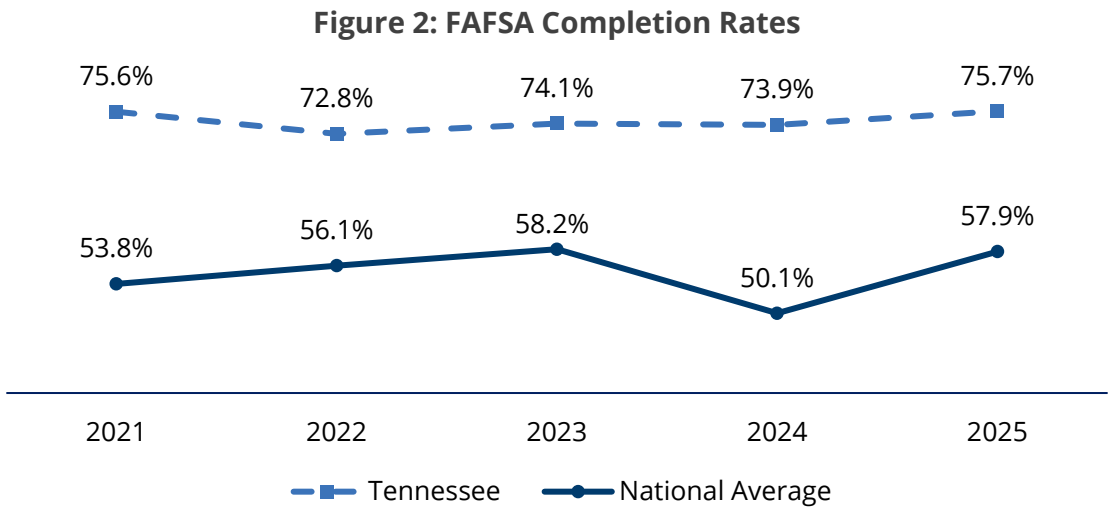
Table 1: Public High School Graduates and Postsecondary Enrollees

HS Class	Public HS Grads	Postsecondary Enrollees	College-Going Rate
2016	62,339	39,456	63.3%
2017	63,486	40,463	63.7%
2018	63,912	39,942	62.5%
2019	64,061	39,553	61.7%
2020	63,519	36,061	56.8%
2021	62,238	32,856	52.8%
2022	63,113	34,265	54.3%
2023	63,932	36,267	56.7%
2024	65,355	36,610	56.0%
2025	66,834	37,518	56.1%

Figure 1: Statewide College-Going Rate

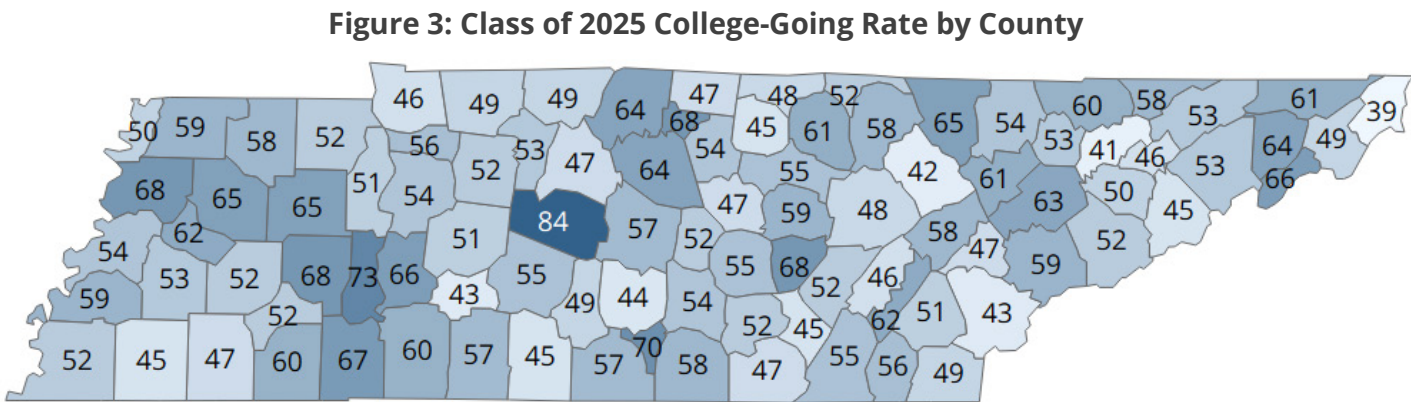


Seniors who complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) are 84% more likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education.⁹ Tennessee has consistently ranked at or near the top of the nation in FAFSA completion rates. **Figure 2** shows FAFSA completion rates in Tennessee compared to the national average.



Note: National Average Completed FAFSA filing rate sourced from [National College Attainment Network](#). Tennessee statistics provided by THEC’s Bureau of College Access and Outreach.

Figure 3 shows a heat map of college-going rate by county for the class of 2025. Darker blue counties have a higher college-going rate, and lighter colored counties have a lower college-going rate. College-going rate ranges from 38.7% in Johnson County to 83.7% in Williamson County. College-going rate by county over the last five years is available in **Appendix A**. In counties with fewer high school graduates, a handful of students enrolling in postsecondary education can change the college-going rate by several points.



College Going by Student Demographics

Just as college-going rate varies by county, postsecondary enrollment behavior varies by demographic and socioeconomic categories. **Table 2** shows college-going rates by gender, by race/ethnicity, and by economically disadvantaged status for the class of 2025.

Continuing a long-standing trend, females enroll in college at higher rates than males. White students have the highest college-going rate, followed closely by students in the “Other” race/ethnicity category. Students who identify as Asian or as Two or More races make up most of this category. Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in postsecondary at lower rates than the rest of their class. Students who are not classified as economically disadvantaged have higher college-going rates than economically disadvantaged students.

Table 2: College-Going Rates of Class of 2025 by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Race/Ethnicity-Gender Pairs, and Economic Status

	Public HS Grads	College-Going Rate
Gender		
<i>Female</i>	33,132	63.6%
<i>Male</i>	33,702	48.8%
Race/Ethnicity		
<i>Black or African American</i>	13,178	49.7%
<i>Hispanic/Latino</i>	9,343	36.4%
<i>Other</i>	5,069	60.7%
<i>White</i>	39,244	62.4%
Race/Ethnicity-Gender		
<i>Black or African American Female</i>	6,632	57.6%
<i>Black or African American Male</i>	6,546	41.7%
<i>Hispanic/Latino Female</i>	4,521	42.8%
<i>Hispanic/Latino Male</i>	4,822	30.4%
<i>Other Female</i>	2,601	65.7%
<i>Other Male</i>	2,468	55.5%
<i>White Female</i>	19,378	70.2%
<i>White Male</i>	19,866	54.8%
Economic Status		
<i>Economically Disadvantaged</i>	22,712	40.1%
<i>Not Economically Disadvantaged</i>	44,122	64.4%

Note: The “Other” race/ethnicity category includes American Indian or Native Alaskan, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races. Economically disadvantaged includes students who are in foster care, homeless, migrant students, runaway students, and students who are directly certified by the Tennessee Department of Human Services as participants in federal/state income/nutrition programs, namely Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). This is defined in TDOE’s Federal

Programs and Oversight Data Manual (August 2023). Here and throughout the college-going data, demographic groups are aligned with TDOE reporting and are not necessarily comparable to other THEC reporting.

THEC administers Tennessee’s financial aid programs, including the Dual Enrollment Grant (DEG). **Table 3** shows the count of students and proportion of each high school graduating class that received the Dual Enrollment Grant at any time in their high school career, as well as their college-going rate. Participation in the Dual Enrollment Grant has continued to grow in popularity, with 38.7% of the class of 2025 receiving a grant at some point. More than 75 percent of DEG students went on to seamlessly enroll in postsecondary education, which is much higher than the college-going rate of the full cohort.

Table 3: College-Going Rate for Dual Enrollment Grantees

HS Graduating Class	Dual Enrollment Grantees (as % of cohort)	DEG College-Going Rate	Full Cohort College-Going Rate
2021	17,879 (28.7%)	76.4%	52.8%
2022	17,859 (28.3%)	77.3%	54.3%
2023	19,866 (31.1%)	78.0%	56.7%
2024	22,547 (34.5%)	76.4%	56.0%
2025	25,836 (38.7%)	75.9%	56.1%

Table 4 presents an analysis of college-going rates for high school graduates who earned postsecondary credentials while in high school as compared to the full cohort of graduates over the past five years. The table shows that this group of students consistently enrolls in college at high rates. For the class of 2025, 83.6% of credential earners continued to college, compared to 56.1% of the full cohort. If students from the class of 2025 who earned a credential but did not attend college were added to the college-going rate, the rate would increase by 0.2 percentage points.

Table 4: College-Going Rate for High School Students with Postsecondary Credentials

HS Graduating Class	HS Grads with Postsecondary Credentials (as % of cohort)	College-Going Rate of HS Grads with Postsecondary Credentials	Full Cohort College-Going Rate
2021	414 (0.7%)	74.6%	52.8%
2022	427 (0.7%)	78.5%	54.3%
2023	582 (0.9%)	79.7%	56.7%
2024	624 (1.0%)	81.7%	56.0%
2025	724 (1.1%)	83.6%	56.1%

College Going by Sector

Figure Figure 4 shows the distribution of college-going public high school graduates who enroll in Tennessee’s public institutions by system. This is a subset of all postsecondary enrollees. The proportion of the class of 2025 enrolled at Tennessee Board of Regents community colleges and at locally governed institutions saw small increases compared to the previous class.

Figure 4: Public In-State High School Graduate Enrollment by System

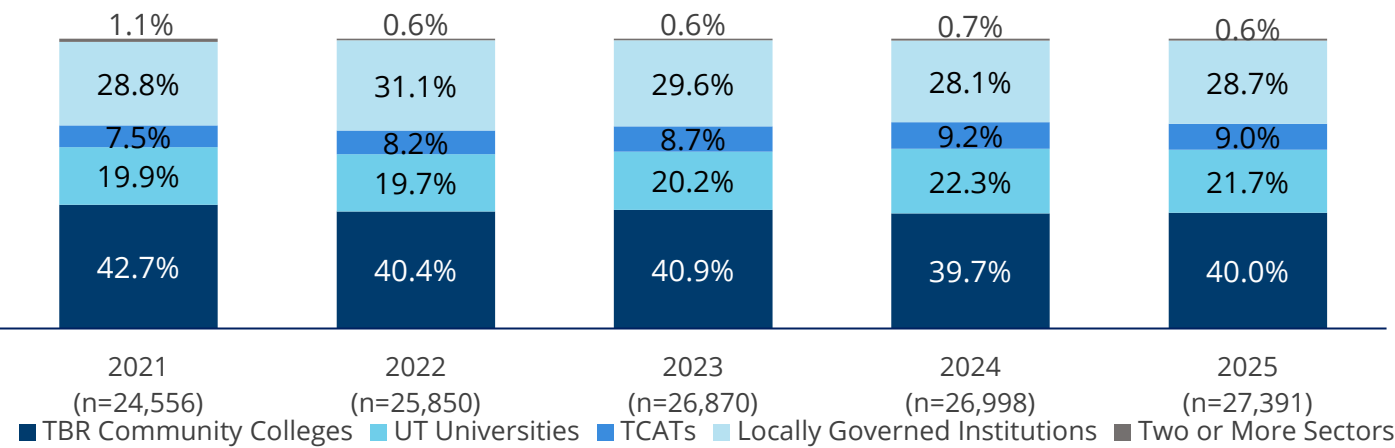


Figure 5 shows the distribution of college-going public high school graduates who enroll in any college according to their sector of enrollment. While the majority of students enroll at in-state public institutions, the class of 2025 saw a small increase in the proportion of college goers enrolling in in-state private institutions.

Figure 5: Public In-State High School Graduate Enrollment by Sector

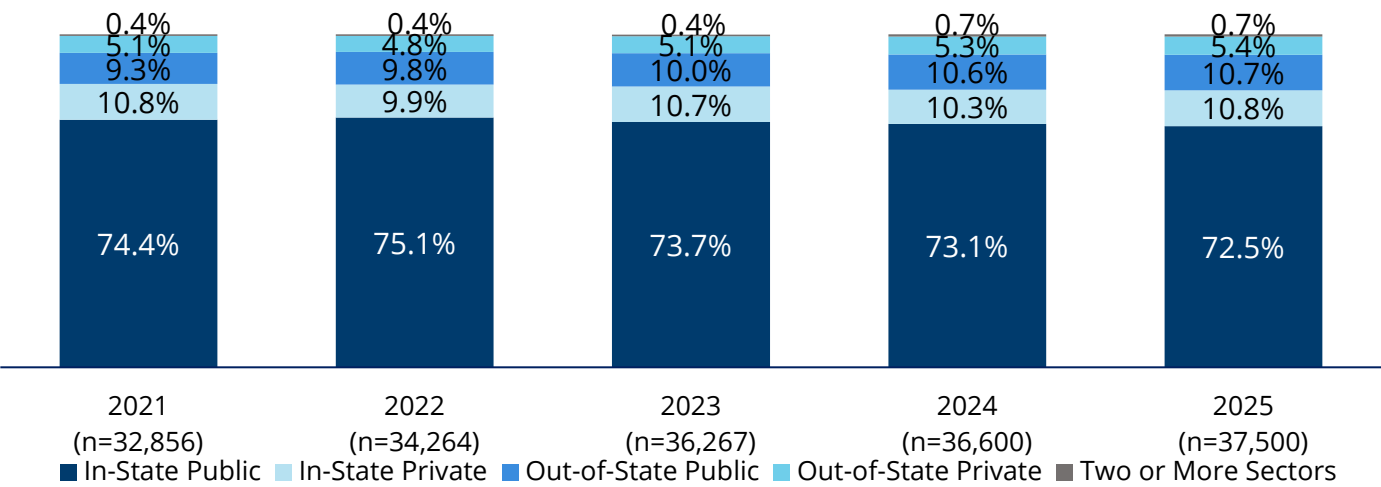
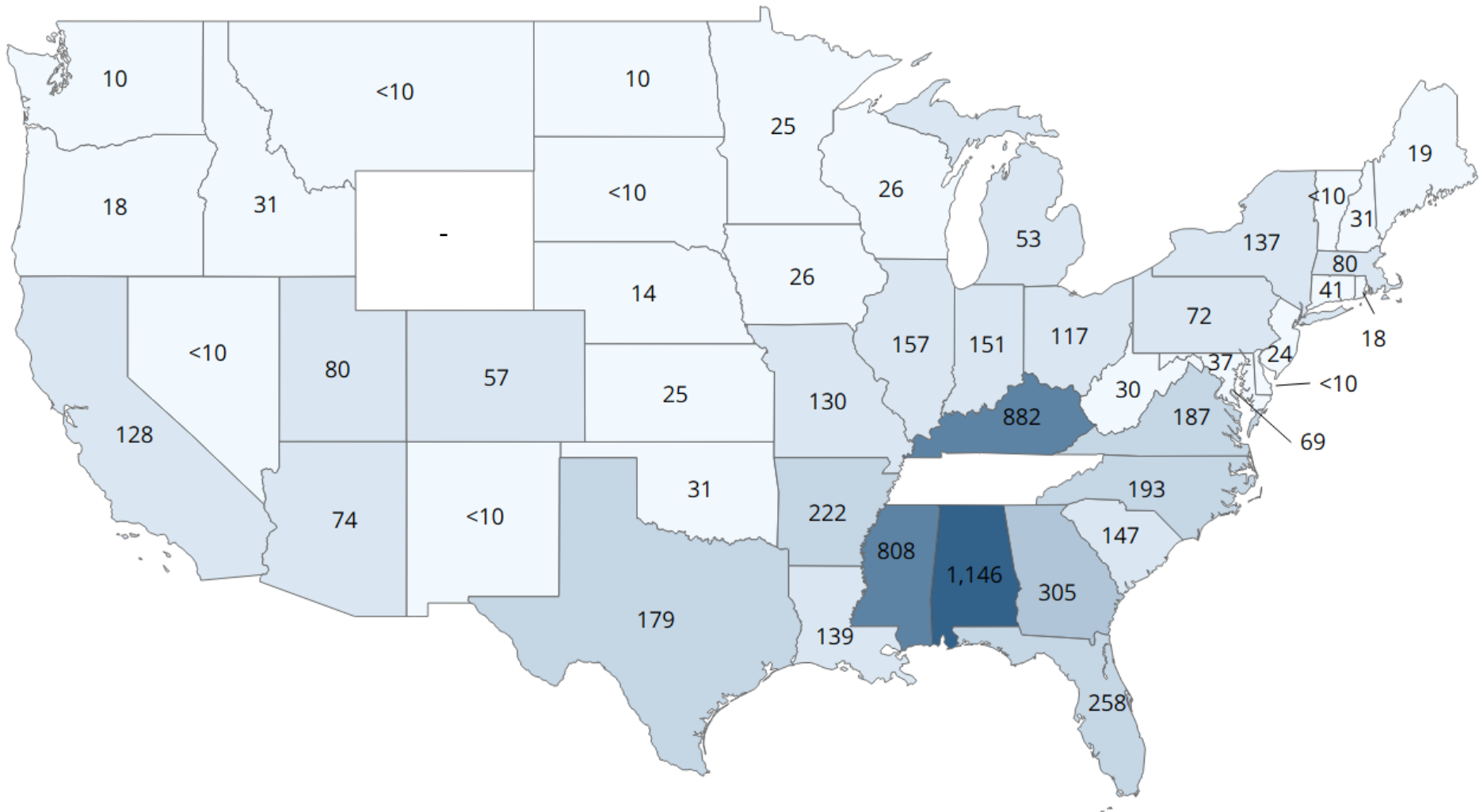


Figure 6 shows a heat map of out-of-state college goers for the class of 2025. Darker blue states receive higher number of Tennessee public high school graduates, and lighter colored states receive fewer. Students who enroll out-of-state are likely to enroll in states bordering Tennessee. It is also important to note that with the rise of online education, students may not be relocating out-of-state to enroll at these institutions; colleges and universities with robust online course offerings may attract students to enroll without having to relocate.

Figure 6: States Receiving Tennessee Public High School Graduates, Class of 2025



Note: Students may enroll at multiple institutions, so out-of-state counts here may duplicate students compared to previous figures. Alaska, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico are not shown and each received less than ten Tennessee high school graduates.

Conclusion

The college-going rate for the class of 2025 increased slightly to 56.1% compared to the class of 2024 despite the public high school graduating class being the largest in over a decade. The total number of high school graduates enrolling in postsecondary education increased to its highest level since the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on enrollment trends and population forecasts, the number of Tennessee high school graduates is expected to continue to grow in the coming years.

THEC and Tennessee partners continue efforts to increase college going amongst Tennesseans. Programs such as AdviseTN and GEAR UP TN provide one-on-one advising opportunities for many high school seniors as they think through their best path after high school. Postsecondary institutions also aim to remove barriers that make entering postsecondary education harder for students. THEC has partnered with institutions across the state to make applying for postsecondary education easier through the Direct Admissions program. THEC, in partnership with the college access community, will continue reporting on and evaluating these core initiatives as the State works to ensure that every Tennessean can earn a credential leading to lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee.

TN Direct Admissions

Beginning with next year's report, this publication will track the effect of Tennessee's Direct Admissions program¹⁰. In the 2025-2026 academic year, select high schools were chosen randomly to participate in a pilot to proactively offer eligible high school seniors from the class of 2026 guaranteed acceptance to 56 participating postsecondary institutions based on academic readiness without requiring a traditional application. Select students also received a list of estimated grants and scholarships they were on track to qualify for from each applicable institution. By simplifying the pathway, the Direct Admission's program reduces procedural barriers, promotes transparency, and provides students and families with earlier awareness of their college options.

For Year 2, the TN Direct Admissions program expanded -- all eligible Tennessee Promise applicants from the class of 2027 will receive a letter with guaranteed acceptance to a list of universities, community colleges, and technical schools, and estimated financial aid they are on track to receive from each institution. Seven more of Tennessee's public and private universities and colleges are participating in year two, bringing the total to 63 postsecondary institutions. An estimated 70,000 letters will be sent in fall 2026 to make the path to college easier than ever for Tennesseans.

¹⁰ Updates on the Direct Admissions program can be found on this webpage: <https://www.collegefortn.org/direct-admissions/>

Appendix A: College-Going Rate by County, 2021 to 2025

County	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Anderson	57.0%	58.7%	64.1%	61.2%	60.6%
Bedford	44.7%	43.6%	44.4%	44.5%	44.3%
Benton	46.1%	59.6%	58.1%	48.8%	50.7%
Bledsoe	35.2%	38.4%	43.6%	40.0%	51.9%
Blount	54.1%	56.8%	57.7%	58.6%	58.5%
Bradley	59.1%	55.9%	55.1%	55.7%	55.7%
Campbell	46.9%	51.8%	51.3%	54.0%	54.3%
Cannon	42.0%	42.0%	43.9%	43.0%	51.8%
Carroll	50.5%	55.7%	60.8%	56.8%	64.7%
Carter	52.8%	49.5%	52.8%	52.9%	48.9%
Cheatham	46.0%	48.9%	51.4%	50.4%	52.6%
Chester	51.7%	54.3%	54.4%	60.0%	51.9%
Claiborne	50.7%	56.2%	62.5%	60.7%	60.0%
Clay	47.9%	48.6%	51.8%	53.8%	47.7%
Cocke	38.8%	39.0%	43.6%	38.6%	45.4%
Coffee	49.0%	49.0%	55.1%	53.1%	53.6%
Crockett	44.0%	53.1%	64.0%	56.9%	61.8%
Cumberland	42.1%	45.9%	56.7%	47.0%	48.3%
Davidson	46.7%	49.5%	50.8%	49.4%	47.3%
Decatur	76.1%	58.2%	68.1%	68.5%	72.9%
Dekalb	52.2%	54.0%	51.5%	51.7%	47.3%
Dickson	51.9%	48.5%	49.4%	46.1%	52.2%
Dyer	56.3%	64.6%	66.2%	62.2%	67.9%
Fayette	32.6%	43.7%	47.2%	43.5%	44.5%
Fentress	50.3%	47.0%	56.5%	64.2%	58.1%
Franklin	45.1%	50.5%	56.3%	57.5%	57.9%
Gibson	53.0%	53.4%	56.1%	56.5%	65.4%
Giles	44.3%	39.8%	47.1%	53.8%	44.8%
Grainger	35.9%	44.9%	47.7%	48.1%	41.0%
Greene	49.5%	52.2%	55.0%	55.7%	53.3%
Grundy	45.0%	52.5%	55.2%	48.7%	52.5%
Hamblen	51.2%	49.0%	51.8%	49.7%	46.4%
Hamilton	54.7%	54.8%	55.9%	55.1%	55.4%
Hancock	43.8%	52.3%	46.3%	45.1%	58.1%
Hardeman	43.9%	45.8%	46.4%	45.4%	47.5%
Hardin	51.3%	61.5%	62.8%	61.4%	67.0%
Hawkins	47.4%	47.3%	56.4%	53.5%	52.6%
Haywood	41.6%	45.9%	49.7%	45.5%	53.2%
Henderson	62.6%	66.0%	65.8%	66.3%	68.3%

College-Going Rate by County, 2021-2025 (continued)

County	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Henry	47.1%	50.2%	51.8%	54.5%	52.0%
Hickman	48.9%	49.2%	49.0%	51.3%	51.4%
Houston	51.7%	50.0%	41.9%	46.3%	56.1%
Humphreys	51.1%	52.6%	49.5%	50.6%	54.5%
Jackson	44.3%	39.8%	46.6%	42.7%	45.0%
Jefferson	46.6%	49.5%	53.2%	48.5%	50.4%
Johnson	53.4%	40.5%	41.1%	34.1%	38.7%
Knox	59.5%	64.3%	64.2%	64.5%	63.3%
Lake	72.5%	62.8%	39.5%	59.6%	50.0%
Lauderdale	47.9%	47.0%	49.7%	53.9%	53.9%
Lawrence	53.9%	56.5%	52.7%	61.5%	56.6%
Lewis	45.5%	61.8%	70.8%	43.8%	43.4%
Lincoln	54.1%	56.0%	57.7%	57.4%	56.6%
Loudon	43.8%	43.2%	50.1%	47.3%	47.5%
Macon	50.0%	43.8%	45.1%	45.3%	47.4%
Madison	43.8%	42.3%	47.1%	44.8%	52.3%
Marion	45.9%	49.5%	55.1%	49.6%	46.6%
Marshall	49.5%	45.8%	51.1%	51.0%	49.0%
Maury	48.0%	50.3%	53.8%	51.0%	54.6%
McMinn	49.9%	51.1%	47.8%	54.7%	51.5%
McNairy	51.0%	50.3%	55.8%	61.4%	59.8%
Meigs	55.9%	48.3%	39.4%	59.6%	62.4%
Monroe	40.9%	44.0%	43.3%	39.4%	43.0%
Montgomery	45.4%	49.2%	53.6%	51.3%	49.1%
Moore	64.9%	53.2%	70.0%	68.4%	70.0%
Morgan	47.6%	48.8%	38.3%	44.6%	42.0%
Obion	57.9%	53.1%	52.0%	63.2%	59.2%
Overton	51.7%	56.4%	58.8%	51.9%	60.6%
Perry	75.5%	64.5%	64.9%	59.4%	65.7%
Pickett	73.8%	64.6%	56.1%	55.0%	52.0%
Polk	49.3%	48.7%	51.0%	51.8%	48.6%
Putnam	50.8%	47.6%	53.4%	51.7%	55.0%
Rhea	47.2%	44.1%	45.8%	47.6%	46.4%
Roane	52.5%	52.0%	64.1%	57.2%	57.6%
Robertson	41.4%	37.2%	46.3%	46.4%	48.5%
Rutherford	55.0%	56.1%	56.5%	57.0%	56.8%
Scott	57.4%	46.0%	59.8%	52.1%	64.7%
Sequatchie	54.8%	46.9%	48.5%	51.1%	44.7%

College-Going Rate by County, 2021-2025 (continued)

County	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Sevier	48.7%	49.8%	55.1%	47.8%	51.7%
Shelby	49.2%	52.3%	52.8%	51.6%	51.8%
Smith	43.9%	53.0%	59.2%	53.0%	54.3%
Stewart	39.3%	42.9%	49.3%	46.4%	46.0%
Sullivan	61.5%	58.7%	60.9%	61.8%	61.3%
Sumner	53.9%	54.7%	67.2%	64.4%	63.7%
Tipton	57.4%	57.0%	57.1%	59.6%	59.3%
Trousdale	53.7%	58.0%	66.2%	59.5%	68.1%
Unicoi	62.5%	56.6%	63.7%	67.1%	66.0%
Union	34.6%	50.3%	49.7%	43.4%	52.8%
Van Buren	53.6%	63.5%	52.8%	50.0%	68.0%
Warren	52.6%	51.8%	60.1%	60.8%	55.2%
Washington	53.9%	57.2%	61.7%	62.8%	64.0%
Wayne	49.7%	51.2%	54.9%	46.8%	59.6%
Weakley	57.3%	57.9%	57.4%	62.0%	57.6%
White	40.5%	41.5%	51.7%	61.3%	58.6%
Williamson	81.3%	81.6%	82.0%	84.0%	83.7%
Wilson	62.5%	62.4%	64.8%	64.6%	64.2%