

POLICY REPORT

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POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
RESEARCH CENTER

Pathways to Success:

How Cumberland University Increases College Access, Retention and Completion through Tennessee Promise, 2015-2018

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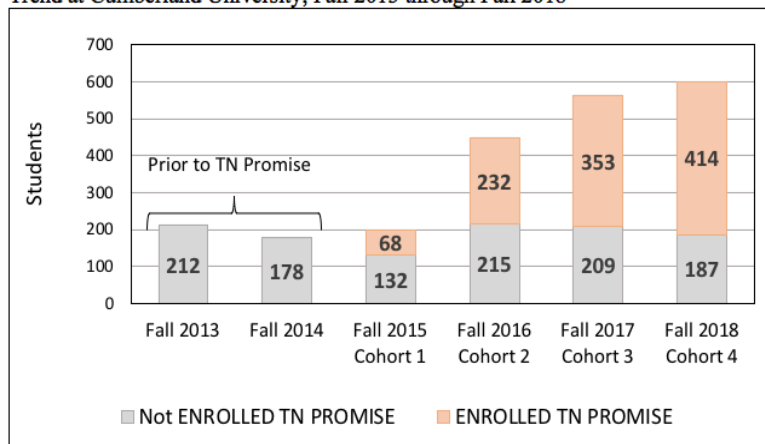
Students who complete a college degree have more career choices, greater lifetime earnings, and better health among other positive outcomes. Yet for students whose parents do not have a college degree, the financial, social and academic aspects of college may be overwhelming.

To empower these full-time, first-time (FTFT) students, the state adopted the Tennessee Promise (TN Promise) scholarship and mentoring program in 2014. This last-dollar scholarship covers the cost of tuition and mandatory fees not covered by other financial aid. Although removing

the financial burden is critical, a key component of the TN Promise is its focus on mentoring — pairing each recipient with a mentor who helps the student navigate the college experience and achieve the 2.0 grade point average (GPA) and community service required to maintain the five-semester award.

The report summarizes the findings from Cumberland University's successes in providing access, retention, and completion opportunities to students enrolled in the TN Promise program between fall 2015-fall 2018.

Figure 1: Tennessee Promise First-time, Full-time (FTFT) Student Enrollment Trend at Cumberland University, Fall 2013 through Fall 2018



Source: Cumberland University, Office of Institutional Research; IPEDS.

Access

For the first semester of the TN Promise (fall 2015), 16,291 students enrolled in one of the state's community colleges, 27 colleges of applied technology or other eligible institutions offering certificates or associate degrees. Some public two-year institutions experienced enrollment increases of more than 25%. Independent, non-public institutions offered additional capacity by accepting TN Promise students during this critical time.

Cumberland University, in Lebanon, Tennessee, is an independent postsecondary institution that offers eight (8) associate degree programs to its nearly 2,400 students. The 177-year-old university enrolled its first cohort of TN Promise students in fall 2015, and enrolled its fourth TN Promise cohort in fall 2018. Figure 1 shows the increase in enrollment in TN Promise from 68 FTFT students (fall 2015) to 414 (fall 2018). This increase in over 100% of the FTFT students enrolled in Fall 2014 indicates Cumberland University's sustained commitment to increasing access to certificates and associate degree programs.

However, the institution's commitment goes far beyond student enrollment. There exists a delicate balance among access, retention, and completion. Cumberland University is not an open-access institution. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Cumberland University admitted 54% of its FTFT applicants for 2017-2018 with a yield of 48%. According to the university, admission is based on an applicant's high school transcript, GPA, and either SAT or ACT test scores. The applicant's potential to benefit from the academic program at Cumberland is also considered. Upon acceptance, students are involved in activities that help them adjust to college life and support academic success.

Supporting the TN Promise Intent

The purpose of the TN Promise is to increase access at postsecondary institutions by removing financial barriers to earning a certificate or an associate degree. At state-funded two-year colleges, the TN Promise scholarship funds the difference (or gap) between tuition and fees not covered by federal, state, and other gift aid. Since tuition and fees are lower dollar amounts at two-year colleges, all students go "free." However, going to college for "free" may not be the case as eligible four-year public, independent or private colleges and universities participating in TN Promise may have higher tuition and fees than community colleges. This difference may result in a shortfall that translates into unfunded expenses for these students.

Although the published 2018-2019 tuition and fees for Cumberland University is about \$11,545 per semester, the actual dollar amount for each TN Promise student is not the actual difference between the published amount and any other gift aid.

In supporting the TN Promise intent, Cumberland University accepts the TN Promise scholarship payment as the last-dollar (or payment in full) for its higher mandatory tuition and fees. Thus, Cumberland University makes a commitment that goes above and beyond the requirements to provide access to students who otherwise would have to take out loans to cover the balance after TN Promise funds are applied.

Commitment to Serving its Local Community

Cumberland University is driven to connect students with the surrounding community. Lebanon, Tennessee (population 32,000), is in rural Wilson County and within the Nashville Metropolitan Statistical Area. The median income for a family is \$45,094 and 16% of the children under the age of 18 live below the poverty level. Potential students from this community may not have transportation to pursue higher education farther away.

Cumberland University is an attractive choice for those students who desire to stay close to home to attend college. These students may be familiar with Cumberland University based on dual-enrollment experiences at local schools. The TN Promise scholarship and mentoring program at Cumberland provides a trusted opportunity at a critical time in students' lives.

Tennessee Promise at
Cumberland University
provided access for

1,067

additional students
between 2015 and
2018.

Commitment to Increasing Diverse Access

Through its commitment to increase access among all racial/ethnicity groups, enrollment at Cumberland University through the TN Promise cohorts has become more diverse over time, as shown in Table 1 below.

As the percentage of White (Non-Hispanic) FTFT student decreased (with an increasing TN Promise enrollment), percentages of all minority students (Hispanic, African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Asian) increased with each succeeding cohort. This increase may be indicative of Cumberland University's efforts to welcome a diverse student body.

When compared with the entire fall 2017 FTFT student cohort (not shown in table), the race/ethnicity composition has a smaller percentage of students who are White (58%), and larger percentages of African Americans (12%), Asians (2%), and Unknown (21%) than for TN Promise. It is reasonable to assume Cumberland University's student racial and ethnic diversity will increase to match the entire FTFT student cohort due to the increased access the TN Promise facilitates.

In a recent survey of first-year Tennessee Promise students,

nearly 84%

stated they would not be able to attend Cumberland University, if not for TN Promise.

Table 1. Race/Ethnicity Percentages of First-time, Full-time Students Enrolled in Tennessee Promise at Cumberland University, Cohorts 1 through 4

| RACE/ETHNICITY | TN PROMISE RACE/ETHNICITY PERCENTAGES | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| | Fall 2015 Cohort 1 | Fall 2016 Cohort 2 | Fall 2017 Cohort 3 | Fall 2018 Cohort 4 |
| WHITE (NON-HISPANIC) | 75.0% | 70.3% | 64.0% | 68.1% |
| UNKNOWN | 19.1% | 17.2% | 24.4% | 18.4% |
| HISPANIC | 1.5% | 3.9% | 3.1% | 5.6% |
| AFRICAN AMERICAN | 4.4% | 5.6% | 6.8% | 5.1% |
| AM. INDIAN/AK NATIVE | < 1% | 2.2% | 1.1% | 1.7% |
| ASIAN | < 1% | < 1% | < 1% | 1.2% |
| TOTAL | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| TN PROMISE HEADCOUNT | 68 | 232 | 353 | 414 |

Source: Cumberland University, Office of Institutional Research.

Commitment to Increasing Access for Low-Income Students

Historically, students from low-income backgrounds have had limited access to higher education. Sometimes this lack of access is because those students fail to fill out the FAFSA, which may make them ineligible for federal, state, institutional, and other grants. In other cases, the federal and state grants coupled with loans are still not enough to attend some institutions.

Students whose total household income is \$50,000 or less qualify for a Pell grant, but most grants and the largest dollar amount grants go to students with household incomes under \$20,000. One way to determine whether students from low-income backgrounds are provided access is to examine the trend of Pell grant recipients. As the number of students receiving Pell grants increases, it may be generally inferred that an institution is more accessible to students with severe financial need.

The data presented in Table 2 compare the numbers and percentages of FTFT students regarding enrollment in TN Promise cohorts and whether the student received a Pell grant. Each TN Promise cohort enrolled a large percentage of Pell recipients, which indicates a commitment to increasing access for low-income students.

For cohorts 1 and 2, the percentages of TN Promise FTFT students receiving Pell grants is nearly the same as all FTFT students enrolled that year. Of note is the increased percentage of TN Promise students who received Pell grants in cohorts 3 and 4, indicating successful efforts to increase access.

Table 2. Pell Grant Recipients of First-time, Full-time Students Enrolled in TN Promise at Cumberland University, Cohorts 1 through 4.

| | FALL 2015 COHORT 1 | FALL 2016 COHORT 2 | FALL 2017 COHORT 3 | FALL 2018 COHORT 4 |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| TN PROMISE PELL RECIPIENTS (number of students) | 28 (41%) | 86 (37%) | 126 (56%) | 173 (42%) |
| TN PROMISE NO PELL (number of students) | 40 | 146 | 227 | 241 |
| TN PROMISE (total number of students) | 68 | 232 | 353 | 414 |
| ALL FIRST-TIME, FULL-TIME FRESHMEN AT CUMBERLAND UNIVERSITY PELL RECIPIENTS | 41% | 40% | 37% | 42% |
| AVERAGE PELL GRANT AWARD (Academic Year) | \$4,262 | \$4,243 | \$4,441 | \$4,593 |
| PELL GRANT AWARD RANGE | \$500 - \$5,775 | \$500 - \$5,815 | \$500 - \$5,920 | \$500 - \$6,095 |

Source: Cumberland University, Office of Institutional Research; IPEDS.

Commitment to Increasing Male Enrollment

A concerning trend nationally and in Tennessee is the decreasing percentage of male high school graduates enrolling in postsecondary education immediately after high school graduation.

As indicated in Table 3, as a percentage of the total FTFT students, males enrolled in TN Promise increased for each succeeding cohort. This steady increase demonstrates that the university has successfully increased access for male students.

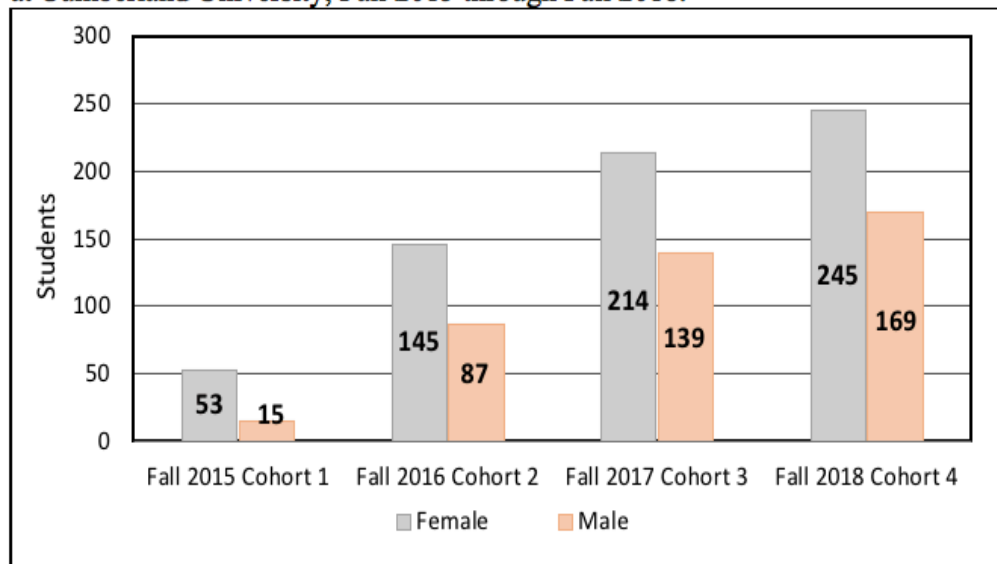
As male enrollment in postsecondary education decreases nationwide, Cumberland University **increased access** for male students through TN Promise.

Table 3. Percentages of Male First-time, Full-time Students Enrolled in TN Promise at Cumberland University, Cohorts 1 through 3.

| | FALL 2015 COHORT 1 | FALL 2016 COHORT 2 | FALL 2017 COHORT 3 |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| TN PROMISE MALES / TOTAL FTFT MALES ENROLLED | 15 / 105 | 87 / 220 | 139 / 269 |
| PERCENTAGE OF ALL FTFT MALES ENROLLED | 14.3% | 39.5% | 51.6% |

Source: Cumberland University, Office of Institutional Research; IPEDS.

Figure 2. TN Promise First-time, Full-time Freshmen Enrollment, Female to Male Trend at Cumberland University, Fall 2015 through Fall 2018.



Source: Cumberland University, Office of Institutional Research.

According to Figure 2 (right), both female and male enrollment in TN Promise at Cumberland University increased for each succeeding cohort. Male enrollment numbers increased from 15 FTFT students (2015) to 169 FTFT students (2018).

These trends indicate that Cumberland University is increasing access for both females and males to enroll in postsecondary education to earn a certificate or an associate degree.

Retention

The retention rate is the percentage of an institution's FTFT undergraduate students who continue at the institution the next year. High rates or percentages of students who return for the next year indicate those students are satisfied academically and socially.

A large body of research suggests that high retention rates are the result of an institution's ability to meet students' needs and expectations. Higher retention rates are also tied to an institution's selectivity regarding student admissions. Attracting, selecting, and supporting students who are a good fit benefits the institution and likely increases retention.

How long does it take to earn a degree?

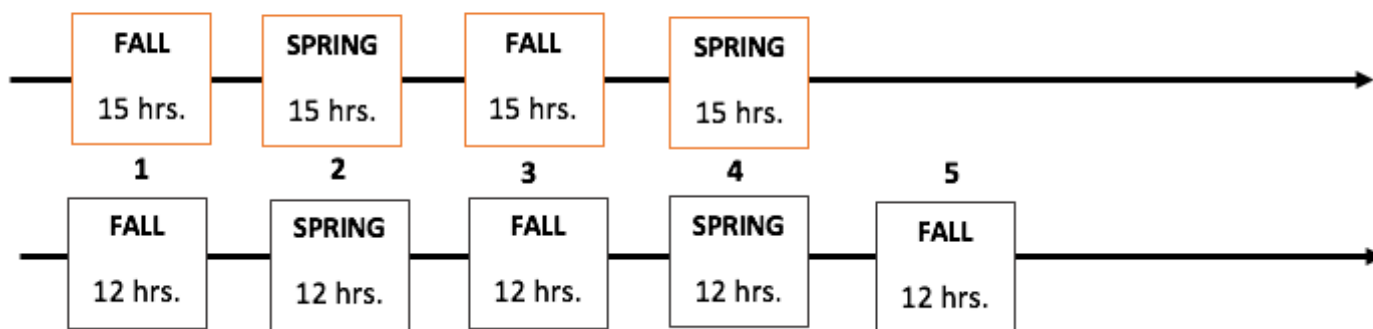
Associate degrees typically require a minimum of 60 semester hours of coursework. Most courses at Cumberland University are three (3) credit hours; except, for example, science courses that carry three (3) credit hours for the lecture plus one (1) additional hour for the laboratory, for a total of four (4) credit hours. Students with minimum of 12 credit hours each semester are considered full time.

Completing 12 credit hours of required courses per semester for five (5) semesters equals the 60 semester hours required for an associate degree. If a student registers for 15 credit hours per semester (five, three-credit courses) and passes all the required courses, then the degree requirements can be completed in four (4) semesters (or two years). Students in each of the four TN Promise cohorts registered for an average of 15 credit hours per semester.

The differences in the two patterns of course taking to complete an associate degree are shown in Figure 3 (below). TN Promise eligibility for the scholarship ends after the fifth semester, although students may attend Cumberland University to complete their degree after TN Promise eligibility has been exhausted, if needed.

In an effort to further increase access to higher education, Cumberland University offers the "Cumberland Promise." This program provides a scholarship for TN Promise students that graduate with a university-parallel associate degree (an associate degree program designed to transfer to a four-year university) either from Cumberland University or from a Tennessee community college.

Figure 3. Four-Semester and Five-Semester Associate Degree Course Loads per Semester for TN Promise.



Investments in Retention

Cumberland University invests heavily in implementing academic and personal strategies to increase and sustain academic achievement. These strategies begin even before students take their first course on campus and extend through students' entire academic career at the university.

Table 4. Selected Student Retention Strategies Used by Cumberland University.

1. Selective and Individualized Admissions Process
2. Three-week Summer Bridge Program
3. Developmental Courses During the Academic Year
4. Free Tutoring
5. Course-Based Attendance System
6. Freshman Experience Course
7. Highly Involved Professors, and Administrators
8. TN Promise Dinners
9. "Cumberland Promise" Scholarship Opportunity

Source: Interviews with Cumberland University Administrators.

The retention strategy begins with the admissions process. Students' academic and personal strengths are evaluated in relation to Cumberland University's resources to address each student's needs and guide that student toward successfully completing an associate degree.

Next, for selected students prior to their first semester, Cumberland University offers a three-week Summer Bridge Program to develop their capacity of base academic knowledge and study skills.

Students with ACT sub-scores less than 18 are required to enroll in developmental courses. All Cumberland University students have access to free tutoring.

Cumberland University also employs a course-based attendance system that monitors a student's attendance patterns, based on research concluding that non-attendance in a course is an early behavior of a student who is disengaged and may be at risk of dropping out or of impending course failure. In Cumberland University's supportive culture, faculty and others contact the student to ask, "How can we help?" The mantra for student retention is: "You're not in this alone. You've got some help that's available to you!"

In addition, four TN Promise dinners scheduled throughout the academic year foster personal relationships among students, faculty and college administrators. These and other social support may encourage student retention.

Finally, an incentive for students to complete a university-parallel associate degree is the opportunity to receive a Cumberland Promise scholarship that may be applied toward a bachelor's degree at Cumberland.

Retention as a Prerequisite to Progression

The TN Promise was founded on the supposition that having a prepared workforce in the state will raise the future economic, social, and health outcomes in the state. Retaining students working toward degree is an important step in the overall initiative.

Cumberland University aspires to a 70% retention rate for FTFT students. The retention rates for Tennessee Promise cohorts from fall to the succeeding fall are as follows:

63% (cohort 1), 69% (cohort 2), and 64% (cohort 3) — all slightly below the 70% retention goal. As shown in Table 5 (page 9), these rates are higher than the statewide rate.

"You're not in this alone. You've got some help that's available to you."

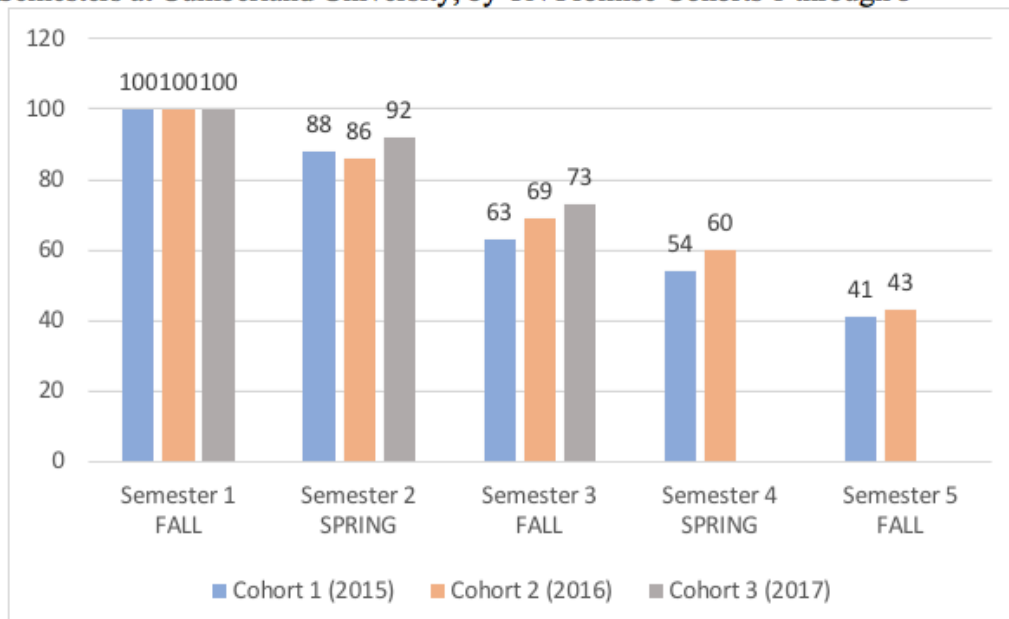
Since the cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of those students still enrolled increases with each succeeding semester, it is likely that some attrition from the cohort is due to poor academic performance, and the students' relatively lower grades are not used in the CGPA recalculation. However, further study is needed to confirm why students are not in TN Promise and assess those students' characteristics.

Figure 4 (below) illustrates the percentage of students in retention by the number of semesters since beginning TN Promise at Cumberland University. The retention rates for the first three TN Promise cohorts from fall to spring semester in the first year were 88% (Cohort 1, 2015), 86% (Cohort 2, 2016), and 92% (Cohort 3, 2017).

Overall, the upward retention trends of the three successive cohorts indicate that the strategies Cumberland University employs may contribute to student retention and success.

The TN Promise retention rate for Cumberland University is **higher** than the statewide rate.

Figure 4. Semester by Semester Comparison of Retention Percentages for the First Five Semesters at Cumberland University, by TN Promise Cohorts 1 through 3



Source: Cumberland University, Office of Institutional Research.

Note: Cohort 3 started in Fall 2017. Data are shown for Cohort 3 retention in Fall 2017 (Semester 1), Spring 2018 (Semester 2), and Fall 2018 (Semester 3). At the time of this report enrollment data for Semester 4 and Semester 5 of TN Promise were not available.

Completion of Award

The main goal of the TN Promise scholarship and mentoring program is to promote the completion of associate degrees and certificates through enhanced access, retention, and completion at eligible postsecondary institutions in Tennessee.

Tables 5 and 6 (below) show the number and percent of Cumberland University TN Promise students who began in cohort 1 (2015) and cohort 2 (2016). The tables also compare retention rates and the completion of an associate degree between Cumberland University and the statewide average.

As shown in Table 5 (below), cohort 1 at Cumberland University had 44.9% of students complete an associate degree in five semesters compared with the statewide rate of 23.6%. The Cumberland University associate degree completion rate is almost twice as much as the state average.

Cohort 1 (2015) at Cumberland University retained a larger percentage of TN Promise students each of the five semesters when compared with the average statewide percentage.

Table 5. Success Indicators for Cumberland University (CU) TN Promise Students, Cohort 1 (2015)

| | CU FTFT STUDENTS ENROLLED | CU FTFT % ENROLLED | STATEWIDE % ENROLLED ¹ | CU STUDENTS RECEIVED AWARD (CUMULATIVE) | CU % WITH AWARD (CUMULATIVE) | STATEWIDE % WITH AWARD ¹ |
|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|---|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| FALL 2015* | 68 | 100% | 100% | - | - | - |
| SPRING 2016 | 60 | 88% | 81.5% | - | - | 0.8% |
| FALL 2016 | 43 | 63% | 60.7% | 1 | 15% | 5.1% |
| SPRING 2017 | 37 | 54% | 50.3% | 17 | 25% | 8.8% |
| FALL 2017 | 28 | 41% | 34.0% | 30 | 44.9% | 23.6% |

Source: Cumberland University, Office of Institutional Research.

*First semester of Cohort 1.

¹THEC – TSAC TN Promise Annual Report, 2018. Retrieved from

<https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/promise/TN%20Promise%20Report%20-%202018%20-%20Final.pdf>

As shown in Table 6 (below), Cohort 2 at Cumberland University had 50.9% of students complete an associate degree in five semesters. Cohort 1 (2015) at Cumberland University retained a larger percentage of TN Promise students each of the five semesters when compared with the average statewide percentage.

Table 6. Success Indicators for Cumberland University (CU) TN Promise Students, Cohort 2 (2016)

| | CU FTFT STUDENTS ENROLLED | CU FTFT % ENROLLED | STATEWIDE % ENROLLED ¹ | CU STUDENTS RECEIVED AWARD (CUMULATIVE) | CU % WITH AWARD (CUMULATIVE) | STATEWIDE % WITH AWARD ¹ |
|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|---|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| FALL 2016* | 232 | 100% | 100% | - | - | - |
| SPRING 2017 | 199 | 86% | 82% | - | - | 0.7% |
| FALL 2017 | 159 | 69% | 72.1% | 16 | 6.9% | 4.8% |
| SPRING 2018 | 139 | 60% | na | 76 | 32.8% | na |
| FALL 2018 | 100 | 43% | na | 118 | 50.9% | na |

Source: Cumberland University, Office of Institutional Research.

*First semester of Cohort 2.

¹THEC – TSAC TN Promise Annual Report, 2018. Retrieved from

<https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/promise/TN%20Promise%20Report%20-%202018%20-%20Final.pdf>

na = not yet available

CONCLUSION: Cumberland University has had a successful track record in increasing college access, retention and completion through its participation in TN Promise.



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