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Data Snapshot:

# **FAFSA Completion Rates in 68 U.S. Cities for the High School Class of 2015**

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## Urban FAFSA Completion Rates Are All Over the Map

[Ninety percent of high school seniors who complete the FAFSA](#) proceed directly to college, versus only [55 percent who don't complete the FAFSA](#). So how good are high school FAFSA completion rates in cities and school districts in the United States? Because these data weren't easily available until recently, this is a fertile question for exploration and benchmarking.

Earlier this year, NCAN gathered FAFSA completion data for the graduating high school class of 2015 from 68 U.S. cities as part of grant applications for The Kresge Foundation's [FAFSA Completion Challenge](#). Twenty-two cities received grants of up to \$55,000 to help raise FAFSA completion rates for the high school class of 2017.

What did we learn about FAFSA completion rates by the time of high school graduation in these cities?

- Rates ranged extraordinarily, from as low as 25 percent to as high as 68 percent (see Figure 1, page 5).
- Completion rates did not correlate with city population size or poverty rate.
- The average FAFSA completion rate among the 68 cities was 48 percent.

Does 48 percent sound low to you? It sure does to us, since we know that many of these cities have high proportions of low-income students who will qualify for grant aid for college and who need financial help the most.

But when we crunched the national numbers for the class of 2014 (the most recent available), we found that the national FAFSA completion rate for high school graduates was just 44 percent. That is, of [3,480,130 U.S. high school graduates in 2013-14](#), only 1,530,949 of them completed a FAFSA before graduating ([FAFSA Data by Demographic Characteristics, 2014/15 FAFSA application cycle](#), Q1 and Q2, age 18 or less).

What are the takeaways from these data?

- Students are leaving billions of dollars of federal, state, and institutional aid on the table each year because we don't ensure that they fill out the FAFSA in a timely way. This situation leads to lower college enrollment, persistence, and completion, especially for low-income students.
- Exemplar cities of all sizes show us that it is possible to have a high percentage of high school seniors complete the FAFSA. We need to understand and replicate the strategies of these communities. Our data show rates of 60 percent or higher in Los Angeles and Chicago (large

cities); Memphis, Washington, DC, and Fresno, CA (medium cities); and Pittsburgh (small city) (see Figure 2, page 6).

- Widespread low completion rates and the significant effort involved in raising them are a strong argument for [making the FAFSA easier](#) through the legislative process and doing everything possible to make financial aid simpler and more transparent at the state and institutional level as well.

Finally, these benchmarks are valuable, but perhaps what's most important is that you understand the FAFSA completion rate for high schools in your own community, region, or state. By visiting the [FAFSA Completion by High School portal](#) from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Federal Student Aid, you can look up estimated FAFSA completion rates for your school district and check on raw numbers of FAFSAs completed to date by high school. If you like, you can also add up raw FAFSA completion numbers and combine them with your own 12<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment data to calculate a percentage. We encourage all school districts and communities to check their FAFSA completion numbers as a first step toward helping more students apply for the financial aid they need for postsecondary education. This information is also persuasive to legislative representatives and other community stakeholders in making the case for change.

## Data Notes

FAFSA completion rate calculations in this report are based on the following sources and assumptions.

For each public district high school located within the city's school district (or its largest school district when there are multiple districts):

- FAFSA completion totals for the 2015/16 Cycle through June 30, 2015, as found in the [FAFSA Completion by High School](#) tool.
- 2014-15 12<sup>th</sup> grade enrollment as the school district submitted to its state education agency for the purposes of the Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey.

All public district high schools with at least one FAFSA completion reported in the FAFSA Completion by High School tool were included. Non-district charter, private, or parochial schools and home-schooled students were not included.

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Figure 1

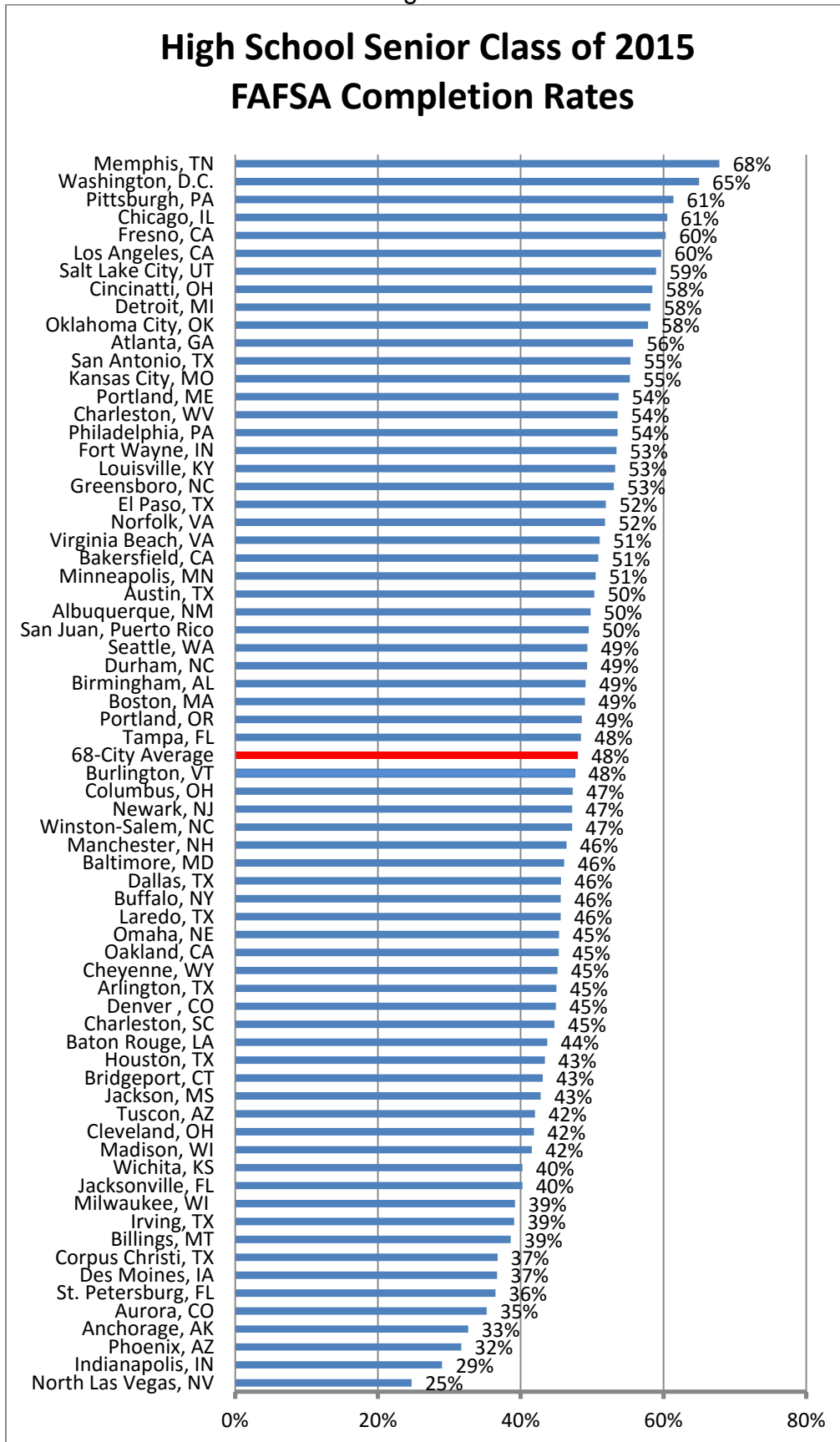
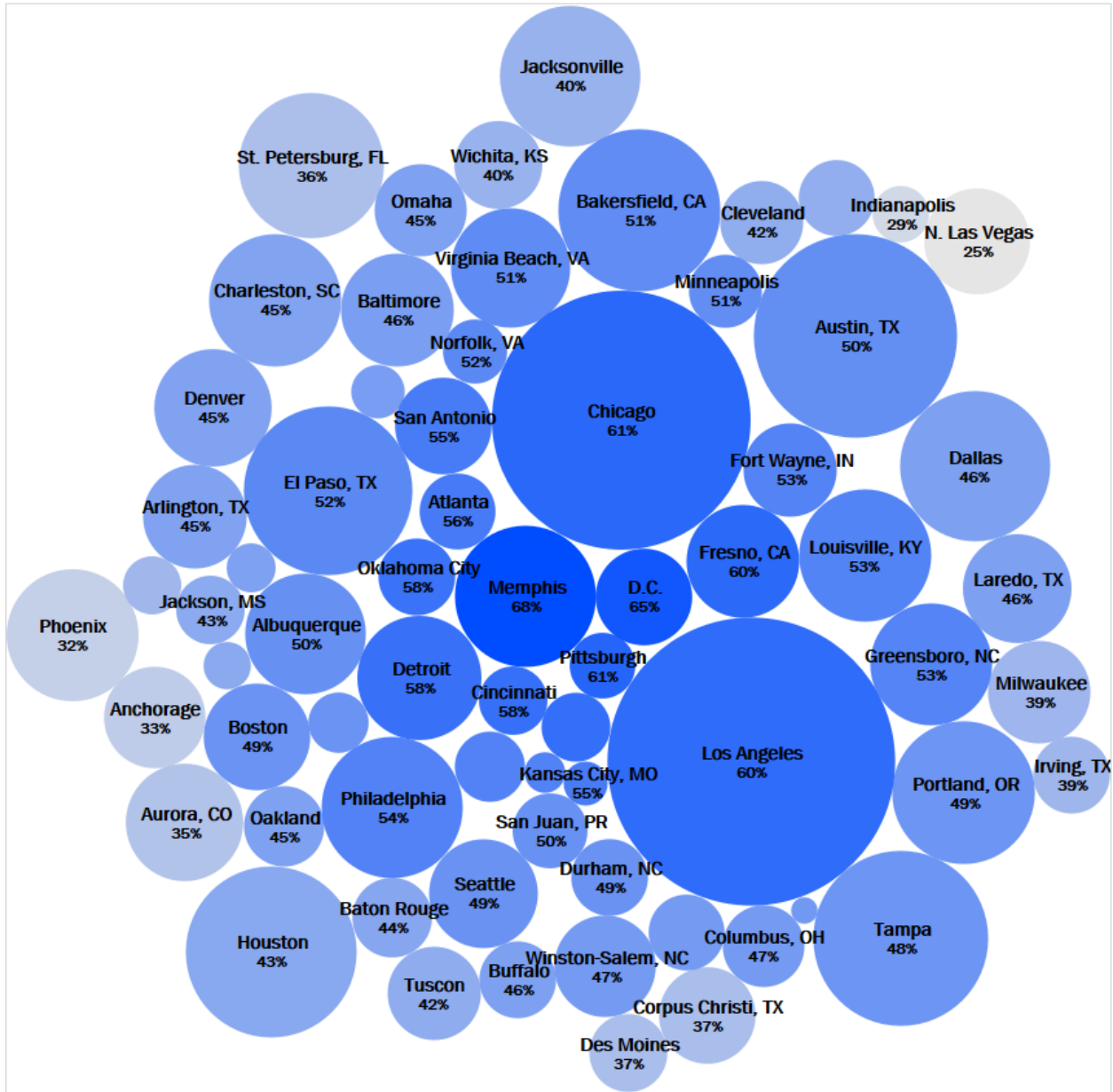


Figure 2

FAFSA Completion Rates in 2014-15 (Color) by City's 12th Grade Enrollment (Size of Circle), through June 2015



FAFSA Completion Rate  
25% 68%