ROOM TO GROW
The State of Higher Education in Tennessee
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ROOM TO GROW: THE STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN TENNESSEE

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Tennessee has made significant progress in improving public education in grades K-12 over the past decade and has recently launched a number of promising higher education initiatives. As the nation’s first free public K-14 education system through Tennessee Promise, the state is well positioned to significantly increase the number of adults with a postsecondary degree or certificate in the coming years.

POINTS OF PRIDE AND PROGRESS IN TENNESSEE EDUCATION INCLUDE:

- Largest improvement on 4th and 8th grade reading and math scores of any state in the country since 2011.\(^1\)
- Dramatically raised high school graduation rates to almost 90 percent.\(^2\)
- Nationally recognized outcomes-based funding formula for public higher education institutions.
- First fully funded program in the nation to offer two and a half years of tuition-free postsecondary education for all Tennessee high school graduates: Tennessee Promise.
- Counselors and volunteer mentors for every high school senior who participates in Tennessee Promise.
- Tennessee leads the nation in the percentage of students completing the FAFSA, comprising 40 percent of the nation’s total growth in FAFSA completions.\(^3\)
- College-going rate rose to 62.5 percent in Fall 2015. This was a 4.6 percentage point increase in one year—a larger increase than the previous six years combined.\(^4\)

At the same time, there is a fundamental problem. Tennessee community colleges and universities are not graduating students at high enough rates—and some schools have graduation rates that are woefully unacceptable. In fact, the average graduation rate at Tennessee two- and four-year public postsecondary institutions is below 45 percent, with some institutions hovering near single-digit graduation rates.
THE DATA IS STARTLING:

**3 out of 4**
Three out of four community college students in Tennessee do not complete a degree. In fact, there is not a single community college in Tennessee that graduates more than 50 percent of its first-time freshmen students within a six-year period.

**1/2**
Half of public university students and a third of University of Tennessee students do not graduate within a six-year period.

**Less than 50%**
Even “college ready” students with ACT scores between 24 and 28 have less than a 50 percent graduation rate from Tennessee community colleges and just a 60 percent graduation rate from public universities.

**1 in 20**
Only one of twenty African American students enrolled in community college in Tennessee attains a degree within three years.

Tennessee’s higher education results conclusively show that while some students arrive at college requiring remediation and some students, historically, struggled to pay for tuition without going into debt, this is not the full story. **Tennessee has a massive completion challenge that remains despite efforts to address challenges related to preparation or cost.**

Still, we have reason to be optimistic that Tennessee’s recent initiatives can help increase graduation rates for our students. The state has become best-in-class at removing the financial barriers to higher education, providing mentors to students as they navigate the admissions process and realigning incentives for higher education to support improved outcomes. In fact, Tennessee is fourth in the US for the highest amount of state-sponsored financial aid provided to students. Tennessee is experiencing a major shift in the way we think about and approach higher education. Students and families no longer have to ask if they can go to college; instead, they can ask where they will attend.

We have identified interventions that work, and we have proof points from which to build. At the same time, it will take more than just launching initiatives. **It will take a shift in the culture of higher education.** It will take collective community engagement to support higher education institutions and empower students.

**With the launch of Complete Tennessee, we issue a call to collective action.** In particular, we call on communities to partner with Complete Tennessee as we examine the challenges facing students, set ambitious long-term goals that incorporate local workforce demands and craft targeted strategies to help raise postsecondary completion rates. Community leaders can support Drive to 55 efforts through mentoring of local Tennessee Promise students, active engagement with local higher education institutions to support their graduation efforts and a commitment to measure progress and hold all institutions accountable for improvement in graduation rates. Together, we can lift up best practices, identify pathways for greater student success, and help Tennessee become a model for the nation in higher education attainment and innovation.

**With this report, Complete Tennessee lays the groundwork for community-driven collective accountability of the state’s higher education system,** and will measure and report on the progress of institutions annually, highlighting opportunities for improvement. By identifying colleges and universities that raise the bar and calling attention to institutions that lag behind their peers, we hope to build heightened awareness and implementation of best practices. Our objective is clear: to help the state reach its ambitious goal of ensuring 55 percent of Tennesseans are equipped with a college degree or certificate by the year 2025.
Higher education is a ticket to better life opportunities. Tennessee students and families want to earn postsecondary degrees.
Only 38 percent of Tennessee adults have some form of postsecondary degree or certificate. Increasing the number of Tennesseans who hold postsecondary credentials has enormous implications for the state economy and the well-being of our citizens. Productivity and wages are higher in states with a more educated workforce, and state economies grow faster when educational attainment increases.

The value of higher education is not lost on the Governor or members of the Tennessee General Assembly, who worked together to align public funding incentives with student success, creating the Tennessee Promise in 2014. With a guarantee of two and a half years of free higher education to graduates of Tennessee high schools, Tennessee Promise removes financial barriers to achieving a college degree or certificate and ensures that first-generation students—the majority of Tennesseans—have access to mentorship to navigate the complexities of enrolling in, paying for and staying in higher education.

Additionally, public funding for higher education institutions is no longer dependent on how many students the college or university enrolls each year. Instead, funding is tied to student outcomes, incentivizing institutions that retain, graduate and successfully place students in the workforce.

This outcomes-based funding model and Tennessee Promise are part of a broader movement toward progressive change in higher education. With the Drive to 55, the governor has set an ambitious goal of ensuring that 55 percent of Tennesseans hold some type of degree or certificate by 2025. This is not a goal plucked from thin air; economists estimate that more than 55 percent of jobs will require a degree by then.

For many students, higher education can be the ticket out of poverty and into a better life. For children born in the bottom 20 percent of income in this country, over 40 percent stay in the bottom 20 percent as adults. Just four percent of children born poor in America ever make it to the top 20 percent of income earners.

Achieving a degree or certificate can turn these numbers completely around. If a child born into poverty gets a college education, he or she is more likely to break the cycle of poverty. If a child born into poverty does not get a college degree, he or she is ten times more likely to be poor than rich.

Tennesseans who only have a high school diploma earn an average annual salary of $26,000. Adults with some college or an associate degree earn around $32,000 annually. A bachelor’s degree grows the average annual income to $45,000, and a graduate degree holder earns an average of $57,000 a year.

This growth in income is so substantial that if Tennessee succeeds in its Drive to 55 initiative, adults will earn around $9 billion more annually, and state and local tax revenues will increase by over $700 million annually. Tennesseans will have more money in their pockets, the economy will grow at a faster rate and state and local leaders will have additional resources to invest in schools and communities.

Beyond the obvious significance of higher education in altering life opportunities, Tennessee’s young people want to go to college. Each year on the ACT—which all Tennessee students take as juniors—students are asked about their aspirations for postsecondary and work outcomes. Over 75 percent of students say they want a college degree. While there is a difference between wanting a degree and earning one, surely our education system should work to meet the aspirations of our young people and their families.

Higher education is a ticket to better life opportunities. Tennessee students and families want to earn postsecondary degrees. And policymakers in Tennessee have deemed higher education attainment a priority for the state.

The purpose of this report is to analyze whether our postsecondary institutions currently deliver on our promise to Tennessee students. Do Tennessee colleges and universities ensure that students cross the finish line regardless of geography, race or socioeconomic background? Moreover, are Tennessee colleges and universities on track to produce the graduation outcomes necessary to reach the state’s Drive to 55 goals?

The short answer is no, but it is a qualified no. Some institutions dramatically outperform others in the rate at which students graduate. Some perform well with certain student groups but not with others. The state has launched several initiatives that have shown enormous potential but have not yet had time to impact results at scale.

While there is reason for hope, there is also a significant need to rapidly improve higher education outcomes. If we as a state are going to succeed in reaching our Drive to 55 goal, our higher education institutions must dramatically increase the number of students successfully completing a degree program. This must be the mission, and we must support our institutions and hold all parties accountable for achieving this mission.
WHERE DO OUR STUDENTS ATTEND COLLEGE?

Tennessee’s higher education system is comprised of several entities:

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE SYSTEM

The University of Tennessee is the state’s flagship public university system, with campuses in Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Martin; the Health Science Center at Memphis; the Space Institute at Tullahoma; and the statewide Institute of Agriculture and the Institute for Public Service. All are governed jointly by a University of Tennessee Board, for which board members are appointed by the governor.

TENNESSEE BOARD OF REGENTS (TBR)

The TBR system consists of 46 institutions—six universities, 13 community colleges and 27 Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCAT). Each type of institution has its own mission. Universities educate students seeking bachelor’s and advanced degrees and work to create new knowledge through research. Community colleges prepare students for transfer to a university as well as for direct entry into the workforce. The colleges of applied technology provide training and certification in fields with strong employment needs. The governor appoints the Regents, and the board appoints the chancellor of the TBR system.

TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION (THEC)

THEC is the state’s coordinating agency for higher education. Guided by the Public Agenda for Tennessee Higher Education, THEC oversees an array of finance, academic, research and consumer protection initiatives that promote student success and support the state’s completion agenda.

TENNESSEE INDEPENDENT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ASSOCIATION (TICUA)

TICUA is a membership group representing 34 private, nonprofit colleges and universities. Each institution is governed independently.
While Tennessee Promise mainly sends students to two-year colleges and TCATs, most Tennessee students attend four-year schools, split among the two public university systems (UT and TBR) and the private universities (TICUA).

Students who attend other higher education institutions go to community colleges, with a slightly smaller number attending proprietary colleges and the smallest slice attending TCATs. While TCATs are rightly praised for high completion and job placement rates in Tennessee, it is important to recognize that only one in 20 higher education students in Tennessee attends a TCAT; even doubling TCATs’ capacity would have a minimal impact on the state’s long-term higher education goals.

Even before Tennessee Promise was established, more than half (58 percent) of Tennessee students enrolled in higher education immediately after graduating high school. This shows, again, the deep desire of young people to continue their education, despite unacceptably low college graduation rates.
Room to Grow: The State of Higher Education in Tennessee

Tennessee must ensure that it is graduating a diverse group of students—geographically, racially and socioeconomically—for the growth and future of our state. Additionally, we must keep the appropriate focus on all students and make sure that no group of students is underserved a substandard educational pathway.

College-going rates vary significantly by county. While enrollment tracks closely with county wealth, it is important to note that even the highest poverty regions of the state enroll nearly half of their high school graduates in postsecondary education.

One challenge facing higher education institutions is that many Tennessee students enter into higher education lacking the basic skills that predict success. This remains true despite significant signs of progress in K-12 education.

Tennessee has engaged in an ambitious effort to overhaul K-12 education in the past decade, beginning with a 2007 commitment to improve academic standards, and continuing through significant education reforms that led former US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to call Tennessee “the fastest improving state in the country.” Additionally, Tennessee has worked to significantly increase the number of students successfully graduating from high school.

While these reforms have improved baseline competencies and hold promise for boosting college readiness down the road, today most students who graduate from Tennessee high schools are still in need of remediation and lack critical college-readiness skills. The average ACT score for public school students in the state is 19.4, lagging behind the national average ACT score of 21.

The vast majority of Tennessee students fall below the scores that ACT declares “college ready.”

WHO ARE OUR STUDENTS AND HOW WELL ARE THEY PREPARED?

fig. 3

ACT SCORE BY SYSTEM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>ACT Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Tennessee</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Universities</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Colleges</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TENNESSEE STUDENTS WHO ATTEND PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS COME FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS:

TENNESSEE ENROLLMENT DEMOGRAPHICS

**fig. 4**
ENROLLMENT BY GENDER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Tennessee</td>
<td>53.2%</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Universities</td>
<td>56.2%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Colleges</td>
<td>58.8%</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**fig. 5**
ENROLLMENT BY RACE

- University of Tennessee:
  - Non-White Students: 19.4%
  - Caucasian: 80.6%
- Public Universities:
  - Non-White Students: 34.4%
  - Caucasian: 65.6%
- Community Colleges:
  - Non-White Students: 24.4%
  - Caucasian: 75.6%

**fig. 6**
ENROLLMENT BY INCOME (PELL ELIGIBLE)

- University of Tennessee:
  - Percent Pell Eligible: 33.3%
- Public Universities:
  - Percent Pell Eligible: 43.1%
- Community Colleges:
  - Percent Pell Eligible: 43.6%
Across public higher education systems in Tennessee, our community colleges and universities do not graduate a sufficient number of students. Tennessee’s postsecondary completion rates are unacceptably low, ranking 38th in the nation in public university graduation rates and 40th in community college graduation rates. Additionally, the overall graduation rates mask even more concerning data for certain populations, especially for low-income and first-generation students, as well as students of color. For three-quarters of community college students, half of public university students and a third of students who attend the University of Tennessee, the higher education experience is a net loss. These students invest time and money, and they sometimes take out loans. They suffer the opportunity cost of attending classes, sacrificing potential income due to time spent pursuing a degree or certificate. And they leave without a degree. This is unacceptable.

Additionally, the graduation rates at some institutions fall considerably below their peers. When a school fails to graduate the majority of its students, it fails in its mission of serving the community and compromises the state’s ability to hit its goals.

In the world of K-12 education, high schools that graduate fewer than half of their students are identified as institutions in need of immediate intervention. In Tennessee higher education, the following institutions would qualify for such a concern:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Graduation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Memphis</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson-Newman University</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee Wesleyan University</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin Peay State University</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumberland University</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King University</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welch College</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Methodist College</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tusculum College</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee State University</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethel University</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquinas College</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia State Community College</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lane College</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watkins College of Art, Design, and Film</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motlow State Community College</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast State Community College</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walters State Community College</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pellissippi State Community College</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roane State Community College</td>
<td>18.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer State Community College</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland State Community College</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LeMoyne-Owen College</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyersburg State Community College</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson State Community College</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chattanooga State Community College</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nashville State Community College</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest TN Community College</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 3-year graduation rates for Community Colleges (Source: IPEDS), 6-year graduation rates for Public Universities (Source: THEC), 6-year graduation rates for Private Universities (Source: IPEDS)
We must also help Tennesseans of all backgrounds have the chance to earn a good living and contribute to a robust economy. When we look at the data for African American students in higher education, the findings are shocking.

**Just one in 20 African American full-time students at Tennessee community colleges graduates within three years.**

These are students who graduate from high school, demonstrate an interest in higher education, enroll in classes and end up—in the vast majority of cases—with nothing to show for it. This failure holds back entire segments of the Tennessee population and must be addressed.

Graduation rates at higher education institutions are closely linked to high school ACT scores, reinforcing the importance of our K-12 education initiatives. For community colleges and four-year schools, at each rung of ACT improvement, higher education graduation rates improve.

However, national research has revealed connections between income levels and the probability of low ACT scores. Even worse, studies are now proving that highly prepared low-income students have less of a likelihood of graduating from college than academically underprepared affluent students from high-income families.

Still, we cannot let higher education institutions off the hook. When we look at graduation rates by ACT composite scores, even students who score a 24 or higher—significantly above the national average of 21 and Tennessee’s Hope scholarship threshold—have surprisingly low graduation rates from Tennessee colleges and universities.

In fact, students who score between 24 and 28 on the ACT—objectively high scores demonstrating strong preparation for higher education—still graduate at less than a 50 percent rate from community colleges, and just over a 60 percent rate from public four-year institutions. As a state, we are taking students who want a higher education degree and have the prerequisite skills for achieving that degree, and we are failing to help them live up to their potential.
This again confirms that while we have a preparation challenge in Tennessee’s public K-12 schools, we also have a massive completion challenge in higher education.

As Tennessee strives to reach a point where 55 percent of adults have a postsecondary degree or certificate, the state must also help K-12 public school students seamlessly transition into and through higher education. Currently, the pipeline leaks at multiple points.

Current graduation rates are unacceptable at Tennessee colleges and universities. The Drive to 55 is focused on helping students of all ages earn a degree or certificate. Even if the state succeeds in ensuring that every student enters college right after high school and receives a degree or certificate, we still cannot reach our Drive to 55 goal without also helping adults go back to school.

Currently, nearly one million Tennessee adults have some postsecondary credit but no degree. These Tennesseans have demonstrated an interest in higher education but, for one reason or another, were unable to complete their degree program. One major priority for the state is getting these students—some of whom have less than a year of coursework remaining—back on track to finish a degree.

As the state moves forward with initiatives designed to help adult learners, including Tennessee Reconnect, prior-learning assessment opportunities, reverse transfer agreements and online programming through the Western Governors University Tennessee, it will be vital that communities and employers are engaged and informed on institutional performance. The proven success of competency-based education models at institutions such as Lipscomb University will also need to be significantly expanded to ensure more adult students and military veterans can receive credit for prior work and training experience to earn a degree in a more timely manner.

In addition, we must track the challenges and progress of these adult students separately from the overall population. This is a distinct group of students with different needs, and analyzing their progress will help the state tailor its programming to help more students cross the finish line.
A number of initiatives launched in recent years give us reason to believe that graduation rates will improve when combined with community engagement, advocacy and innovation.

**STATE-SUPPORTED STUDENT SUCCESS PROGRAMS**

**SEAMLESS ALIGNMENT AND INTEGRATED LEARNING SUPPORT (SAILS)**

SAILS is an innovative program designed to reduce the need for remedial coursework for new freshmen. In the SAILS program, high school students with low ACT scores (scores that ordinarily would track them for remedial courses at community college or university) are enrolled in a special technology-driven class during their senior year of high school. This allows them to complete the remediation before ever enrolling in postsecondary, and even allows fast-moving students to earn postsecondary credit.

Early results of SAILS are extremely promising, and the program has expanded. In 2015-16, more than half of all Tennessee high school seniors with low ACT scores in math were able to enroll in SAILS at their high schools. In the previous school year, more than 90 percent of SAILS students successfully completed the coursework and avoided remedial math in college.

Furthermore, through stronger K-12 preparation and the scaling of the SAILS program, the number of students requiring remediation in postsecondary has declined significantly over a four-year period. In 2011, 77 percent of first-time college students required some remedial coursework but, by 2015, the number had dropped to 63 percent. In math—the largest driver of remediation and the target of the SAILS program—remediation for first-time students dropped from 71 percent to 55 percent of first-time students, a significant decrease in a short time period. Through SAILS, literally thousands more students each year arrive at postsecondary institutions ready to take credit-bearing courses.

**TENNESSEE PROMISE**

The Tennessee Promise is a scholarship and mentoring program focused on increasing the number of students who attend and complete college in Tennessee. It provides students a last-dollar scholarship, meaning the scholarship will cover tuition and fees not covered by the Pell Grant, the HOPE Scholarship or state student assistance funds. Students may use the scholarship at any of the state’s 13 community colleges, 27 colleges of applied technology or other eligible public and independent institutions offering an approved associate’s degree program.

While removing the financial burden is key, a critical component of Tennessee Promise is the individual guidance each participant receives from a mentor who assists the student as he or she navigates college application and enrollment processes. This is accomplished primarily via certain mandatory meetings and the consistent communication students must maintain with their mentors to remain eligible for the program. In addition, Tennessee Promise participants must complete eight hours of community service per term enrolled and maintain satisfactory academic progress at their institution.

**TENNESSEE RECONNECT**

Tennessee Reconnect is the Drive to 55 initiative to help more adults complete a postsecondary degree or credential. About 900,000 adults with some college but no degree reside in the state, and it will be impossible to achieve the mission of the Drive to 55 without reengaging these students and helping them finish their degree or certificate. As part of Tennessee Reconnect, all Tennessee adults can now attend and earn a diploma or certificate at any of our 27 Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs) completely free of tuition and fees.

**LABOR EDUCATION ALIGNMENT PROGRAM (LEAP)**

The Labor Education Alignment Program (LEAP) helps ensure that Tennessee’s postsecondary institutions are producing the skills and credentials that employers in the state actually need. The objective of Tennessee LEAP is to eliminate skills gaps across the state in a proactive, data-driven and coordinated manner by encouraging collaboration across education and industry, and by utilizing regional workforce data.

In addition, according to recent studies, Tennessee provides the fourth-highest amount of state-funded scholarships and grant aid to students. The magnitude of the state’s contribution to tuition coverage—when compared to the rate of students walking across the stage to receive a degree or certificate—proves, once again, that Tennessee has a massive completion challenge that cannot be attributed to financial barriers.
SUPPORT FOR STUDENT-ATHLETES

Each year the National College Athletes Association (NCAA) announces the graduation and success rates of student-athletes across the country. According to the most recent reports, 84.9 percent of freshmen athletes who began at a university in Tennessee in 2008 earned a degree within a six-year period. These student-athletes come from a wide range of backgrounds and academic preparation levels. This is particularly true in collegiate football—the highest revenue-generating athletic program. Many student-athletes are first-generation college students, and have academic backgrounds that mirror first-generation students at our community colleges.

Through concerted focus and investment of resources, 87 percent of athletes at Middle Tennessee State University, 85 percent of athletes at the University of Memphis and 80 percent of athletes at the University of Tennessee (UT) graduated from the 2008 cohort within six years. Additionally, UT football players graduate at a 64 percent rate—which is less than ideal but nonetheless a higher rate than almost all postsecondary institutions in the state.

Public universities in Tennessee invest considerable resources in academic counseling and tutoring for athletes, and closely monitor the student-athletes’ progress in class to ensure they are successfully working toward graduation. Graduation rates for all student-athletes are on the rise, with some programs graduating 100 percent of their students. Indeed, the UT football team last year had its highest-ever grade point average, and is likely to significantly grow graduation rates as new cohort results are released.

Similar success rates for student-athletes can be found at the community college level. Recent conversations about the value college athletes bring to our public two-year institutions have revealed a benefit beyond school pride and an enhancement to the overall college experience. The success rates for community college student-athletes at many institutions are significantly higher than the overall average.

When we look at the success of student-athletes, we can see many obvious factors that contribute to student success. Counseling, support, tutoring, monitoring and reporting by outside watchdogs help promote academic success. The high rate of graduating scholarship athletes shows that we know how to graduate more students at our community colleges and universities—the question is whether we can build strong systems at scale and grow the public will to encourage higher graduation rates for all students, not just athletes.

INCREASED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT THROUGH MENTORING

Most of the attention associated with Tennessee Promise has focused on the financial benefits of the scholarship. While “free college” is surely a strong message, this is only one piece of the puzzle. A less-publicized but equally important key to the success of the program is the support provided through engagement of community members at a local level.

Tennessee Promise involves a public-private partnership, leveraging the strength of community-based non-profit organizations. These partnering organizations—The Ayers Foundation, REDI and tnAchieves—have the responsibility of ensuring all Tennessee Promise students are assigned a volunteer mentor to help guide them through the college access process.

tnAchieves, the partnering organization for 85 of 95 counties, has recruited and trained more than 7,500 volunteers from the community each year. A study by the University of Tennessee’s Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research found that students who participated in the tnAchieves program were 24 percent more likely to go to college than their statistical peers. The Ayers Foundation and the Regional Economic Development Initiative (REDI) operate Tennessee Promise in 11 counties; both organizations place staff members in each high school to provide intensive college access counseling and coaching for all seniors.

In short time, the state, in conjunction with these organizations, has brought thousands of citizens to the table to join the conversation on increasing higher education standards. A large percentage of these mentors are from the business community, retirees or other non-education related fields. These are citizens in Tennessee who are now supporting the state’s Drive to 55 goals in very tangible ways.

Tennessee’s approach goes beyond lowering the cost of public higher education and highlights the opportunity to include citizens in meaningful change. The benefits go beyond assisting a student through the enrollment process. It can open the door for practices that will drive the future of public policy and finance in higher education. It can turn everyday citizens into champions who drive real change. And it can set the stage for a new conversation on completion and degree attainment.
Raising graduation rates for students from diverse backgrounds is possible. It takes the efforts of institutions, but also the support of entire communities. It is work that, collectively, we must take on.
**WHAT ARE THE APPROPRIATE GOALS FOR OUR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS?**

At the dawn of the new millennium, the graduation rate at Tennessee public high schools was 61 percent. This was below the national average, and it was clearly unacceptable as the state moved into an economic era in which a high school diploma was a bare minimum for even being considered for most jobs.

At the time, there were many rationales provided for low graduation rates. Schools are not able to pick and choose who walked through the doors. Many students come from poverty. Students need to take more personal responsibility for showing up at class and doing the work. These are also common excuses in higher education.\(^\text{30}\)

Despite the myriad reasons that nearly 40 percent of students failed to graduate, Tennessee high schools established the goal of graduating the vast majority of their students. They plowed resources into tracking systems. They added remediation programs to catch students up when they fell off track. Most importantly, they took responsibility for the results, with federal, state and district accountability systems counting graduation rates as a primary factor.

Today, Tennessee’s high school graduation rate is 88.5 percent. It is the highest graduation rate in the Southeast and sits considerably above the national average.\(^\text{31}\) It has improved more than the high school graduation rate in any other state in America.

The work of Tennessee high schools over the past 15 years provides an interesting roadmap, albeit in a different context.

**Raising graduation rates for college students from diverse backgrounds is possible. It requires the intentional efforts of institutions, and also the direct support of entire communities. It is work that, collectively, we must take on.**

To remain on track for the state’s Drive to 55 goals, we must significantly increase enrollment and graduation rates across all postsecondary institutions. We believe the best way to set goals is to root them in local communities rather than through a top-down mandate. Local communities should come together and set ambitious goals commensurate with the future job market and with community needs. Complete Tennessee calls on communities across the state to come together to engage in supporting and challenging local postsecondary institutions to meet these ambitious goals.

Complete Tennessee will work with local communities to host meetings, provide data and engage with institutions. Additionally, Complete Tennessee will report on results.

This will take time. It will not happen overnight. **The first step is clear: All citizens and higher education institutions must feel responsible for student completion rates that align with the needs of this state.** This does not mean that students have no responsibility. It does not mean the bar should be lowered; this would defeat the very purpose of the work. We all support and expect that our institutions will provide credentials that lead to meaningful employment opportunities.

Each year, we intend to publish data prominently for all institutions that includes but is not limited to:

- The rate of enrollment;
- The rate at which freshmen go on to become sophomores;
- The 150 percent completion rate (six-year graduation rates for universities and three-year graduation rates for community colleges); and
- The disparities in completion rates by geography, race and socioeconomic background.

Furthermore, each year, we will highlight the institutions, regions and communities that show the most improvement as it pertains to the completion pipeline. Understanding that colleges and universities cannot reach a significantly higher graduation rate immediately, we believe it is important to focus on improvement and growth, and we intend to celebrate schools that significantly improve graduation rates, even if they still fall short of the finish line.

Finally, we will help lift up student voices so our students can advocate for the support they need to successfully complete college. **Student voices are critical to ensuring that institutions are focused on the people they serve.**
Tennessee, more than any other state in the nation, is uniquely positioned to transform the education levels and economic prospects of its citizens. Tennessee public high schools are improving at a faster rate than schools in other states. The state has guaranteed two years of free postsecondary education to its high school graduates, building the nation’s first K-14 public education system complete with mentorship and community support. And state leaders have united around a goal of massively growing the number of degree holders.

Still, one critical piece of the puzzle remains: completion rates at postsecondary institutions have room to grow.

Many brilliant Tennesseans work in higher education. The purpose of Complete Tennessee is not to tell higher education institutions how to do their jobs. There are best practices from institutions all over the state and the country from which we can draw, and administrators and faculty are best positioned to figure out the strategies that work.

However, we intend — through annual reporting and through galvanizing and supporting local community goal-setting — to draw public attention to the results and to insist that higher education institutions take responsibility for the success rates of their students in a manner much more ambitious than what currently has been deemed appropriate and acceptable. We will praise institutions that make progress. And we will highlight institutions that fail their students.

We do our work in service of Tennessee students and the local economies that rely on a skilled and capable workforce. The institutions and their faculty must necessarily drive the solutions, and our focus must be on the needs of students seeking to improve their opportunities in life.

While this first report includes a number of unfortunate truths, we look at the history of education in Tennessee and are filled with optimism. The unprecedented reforms Tennessee has implemented to improve education confirm the possibilities that lie ahead. Through community engagement and a statewide dialogue on completion, we believe future reports will tell the story of higher education institutions rising to the challenge and improving the lives of many hundreds of thousands of Tennesseans.
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Complete Tennessee advocates for students and communities by supporting increased postsecondary access and completion.

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