



Room To Grow: Regional Perspectives on Higher Education Improvement



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Last year, Complete Tennessee issued an inaugural “State of Higher Education in Tennessee” report that uncovered significant postsecondary completion challenges. Despite improved high school graduation rates and K-12 success, Tennessee’s higher education institutions are not adequately serving students. More must be done for the state to achieve its Drive to 55 goals.

To better understand the barriers facing current and future postsecondary students in the Volunteer State, Complete Tennessee conducted a statewide listening tour. We hosted roundtable discussions in each of the state’s nine Economic Development Regions, inviting elected officials, community and business leaders, and education stakeholders to join in a conversation about postsecondary education.

The listening tour provided a chance to interact with regional stakeholders and community leaders who must play a critical role in raising Tennessee’s higher education attainment and completion levels. Each of the nine roundtable events sparked robust conversations on barriers to completion and opportunities to improve student outcomes. The leaders who participated in the discussions play an integral role in the completion pipeline. Their continued engagement will be critical to improving attainment rates and, in turn, meeting current and future demands for local employers.

This report provides an overview of the findings of this listening tour and emphasizes the opportunities regions have to raise student success. Many of the challenges facing various communities have long been central to the discussion on college completion. But the roundtables also brought to light new and unexpected issues affecting postsecondary attainment.

As you read this report, I encourage you to consider the lens of today’s student and reflect on how your community impacts student performance in the region. I also encourage you to ask yourself how you can advocate for higher education improvement in Tennessee. Ultimately, we hope you will join us in the shared effort to build community-based strategies for completion that deal directly with factors both in and out of the classroom.

To encourage greater postsecondary success, every student needs an advocate, and advocacy can only happen with well-informed engagement. We hope this report provides the information and the inspiration for you to begin or expand your commitment to the success of our college students.



Kenyatta Lovett, Ph.D.
Executive Director

Student success is central to the missions of Tennessee's colleges and universities. However, the priorities of student success and completion have been driven mainly by the enactment of the *Complete College Tennessee Act of 2010* (CCTA) and the Drive to 55. Reforms within the CCTA established goals for improving student success at all levels of public higher education, reinforced by implementing the nation's first outcomes-based funding formula which uses public money to fund colleges based on completion metrics, rather than enrollment. The Drive to 55 set a goal for 55 percent of Tennesseans to earn a college credential by the year 2025.

Subsequent state policies clarified these goals and provided new programs and incentives to help institutions strengthen the completion pipeline. This aggressive public policy stems from an insufficient supply of Tennesseans with postsecondary credentials to meet the current and future workforce demands. In response, major reforms are underway at every college and university in the state. Many communities are developing strategies to contribute to the state's goal. However, much work lies ahead.

Regional Completion Narrative

The regional story on college completion in Tennessee highlights how differently people understand and value higher education in various parts of the state. A common appreciation of the benefit of higher education on overall quality of life in Tennessee was clearly expressed in all regions; however, the incentives and disincentives for attending and completing college directly correlated with the level of support and resources available to citizens. While this reality in Tennessee remains consistent with factors commonly known to affect postsecondary completion and attainment rates, receiving meaningful feedback from community members allowed us to assign local meaning to common terms used in the completion discussion, such as access, student support, and college preparation.

The regional roundtables were guided by county and regional data highlighting the pipeline for postsecondary student success (*See Appendix A*). Roundtable participants provided feedback on how this localized information frames the discussion around completion and attainment outcomes in their communities. The regional outlook illustrates the discrepancies in performance outcomes. The county-level data reveal an even more diverse array of outcomes, and point to the urban-rural dichotomy as one of the most critical factors tied to barriers and opportunities for improving degree attainment. Also within these factors are additional circumstances that further influence attainment outcomes, including the presence of equity gaps due to income levels, regional demographics, and academic preparation.

A closer look at the county-level outcomes highlights some of the most severe completion challenges related to equity. In equity, there are socioeconomic, geographic, and demographic factors that affect student success. The backdrop of equity creates the framework by which all regions, and the entire state, should be examined.



COMMON STATE THEMES

Access Challenges from a Local Context

Although Tennessee has invested heavily in eliminating college tuition costs, access remains a common issue across the state, but it is important to note that access is defined differently in each region. For example, transportation was cited as a major barrier for completion in the Northwest. Lack of physical locations to attend college was highlighted in the Upper Cumberland. Equity issues affecting the college-going rates of low-income, first-generation, and new Americans emerged in the Memphis Delta conversations. Financial concerns are consistent in every region, including costs beyond tuition and potential lost wages for those who are already working while also trying to attend class. Adult students are battling access barriers related to inflexible course offerings, limited options for prior learning assessment (PLA) opportunities, and inadequate childcare options.

Need for Effective College and Career Preparation

Community, education, and business leaders expressed near universal concern about students' limited understanding of local career opportunities and the postsecondary credentials necessary to qualify for these jobs. Strong academic preparation and career pathways established in the K-12 system are considered critical components to postsecondary success. Early work-based learning experiences were consistently referenced as a mechanism to aid students in career choices, along with dual enrollment opportunities in high school.

Support Systems that Serve the Whole Student

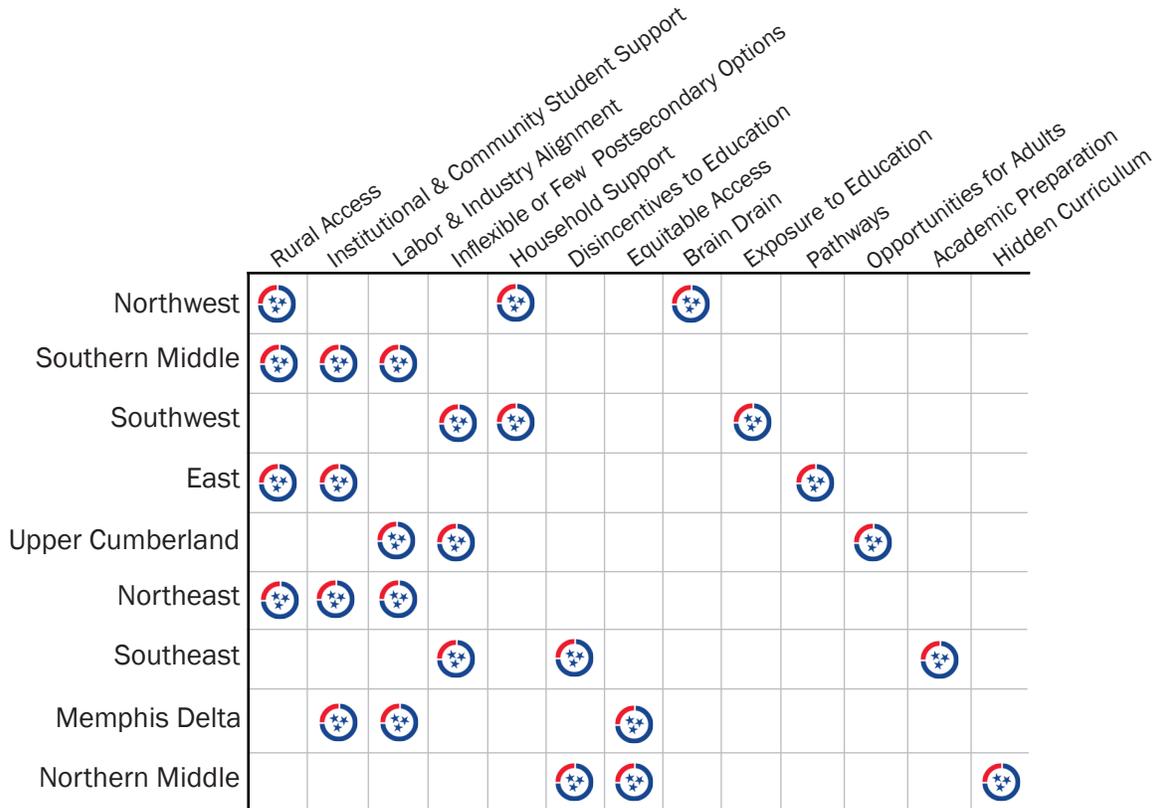
Family and work obligations can significantly affect academic performance for college students. Low-income, first-generation, and adult students are often hit hardest by these “outside-of-the classroom” challenges. The need for stronger partnerships between academic institutions and community organizations was referenced as a way to support students through completion. Participants highlighted examples of these types of wrap-around services, such as mandatory academic advising and support programs, services that increase financial stability, and peer and community mentors that extend through college graduation.

Labor Alignment and Labor Demand Priorities

Dialogue between postsecondary institutions and regional employers is central to meeting workforce demands. Successful degree programs across the state have engaged employers in curriculum development to ensure students are prepared to enter the workforce with skills that match employer needs. However, many degree programs fail to match student outcomes to employer labor requirements, which jeopardizes the entire community support framework, as well as the economic prosperity in the region.

COMMON STATE THEMES

The following chart shows the three primary postsecondary completion challenges identified by community leaders in each region. As illustrated below, regions share similar concerns while distinct regional challenges emerged.



Common Terms & Definitions

Rural Access: Individuals in rural areas face unique challenges in accessing postsecondary education. (pp. 5, 6, 8, 10)

Institutional & Community Student Support: Students receive insufficient levels of support from their postsecondary institutions and from the communities in which they live. (pp. 6, 8, 10, 12)

Labor & Industry Alignment: Postsecondary opportunities are misaligned with regional labor market demands. (pp. 6, 9, 10, 12)

Inflexible or Few Postsecondary Options: Students and potential students are often forced to choose among options that do not fit their work demands or lifestyle. (pp. 7, 9, 11)

Household Support: Family support and obligations play a large role in influencing students' enrollment and completion. (pp. 5, 7)

Disincentives to Education: When there are opportunities for income without educational attainment, students may decide not to go to college. (pp. 11, 13)

Equitable Access: Student demographics, including socioeconomic background, race and ethnicity, and parental education, affects their access to postsecondary education. (pp. 12, 13)

Brain Drain: Rural areas with few postsecondary and job opportunities often see students leave the region for education and not return, creating a cycle of under-attainment within the region. (pp. 5)

Exposure to Education: Students may not be aware of the opportunities for education available in their region - or beyond. (p. 7)

Opportunities for Adults: Even with the passing of the Tennessee Reconnect Act, which removes tuition barriers, many adults find it difficult to navigate postsecondary systems and find options that meet their lifestyles. (p. 9)

Academic Preparation: Despite improvements in K-12 education, many postsecondary students require remediation. (p. 11)

Hidden Curriculum: College students are often unaware of the unwritten processes and policies one must navigate to succeed in postsecondary education. (p. 13)



Primary Challenges: Rural Access, “Brain Drain”, and Lack of a College-Going Culture

January 1, 2017: Discovery Park of America, Union City, TN

“We live in a rural, low-income area. One factor [affecting postsecondary attainment] would be the lack of support at home.”
- Online survey respondent

The Northwest region has strong high school graduation rates (92 percent) and college-going rates (63 percent) compared to the rest of the state. Yet these outcomes have done little to improve degree attainment for the region. Twenty-six percent of the region’s population has a postsecondary degree or certificate - nearly 13 percent lower than the state average. Additionally, the percentage of citizens participating in the workforce (53 percent) falls substantially below the state average (61 percent), with Lake County producing the lowest rate in the state (32 percent). Although high school and college-going rates in the region exceed or match state averages, the Northwest roundtable discussion reflected a collective urgency to engage community members to improve attainment and labor force participation rates.

Discussion highlights:

Affordability and transportation barriers

Participants expressed concern that, although programs like the Tennessee Promise have provided free tuition for students, the high cost of textbooks, inadequate childcare resources, and limited options for public transportation present substantial barriers to completion - even more than challenges related to academics. The lack of public transportation, coupled with long commutes to campuses, was arguably the most notable barrier for both access and completion. Roundtable participants explored potential public transportation models that made use of local school buses during non-peak times.

Lack of awareness of regional job opportunities

Strong high school graduation and college-going rates coupled with low degree attainment support the assertion from local leaders that many students from the region attend college elsewhere and do not return. This “brain drain” affects the cultural attitudes toward postsecondary education, and was attributed to the perceived lack of jobs and few postsecondary options in the region.

Lack of a college-going culture

Participants noted regional poverty greatly affects an individual’s ability to complete college, and often contributes to a lack of household support for pursuing higher education. This trend was also raised when discussing the cultural value of education in the region, as encouraging a child to pursue college meant encouraging them to leave family and the region.

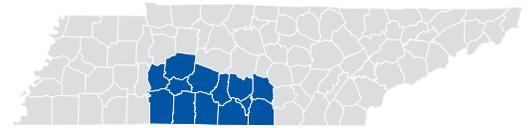
Roundtable participants raised concern that students move away to attend college and are unlikely to return because they are unaware of the opportunities for postsecondary education and gainful employment in the region. Emphasizing the value of higher education and the opportunities for advancement within Northwest Tennessee must be an integral component to the postsecondary completion strategies for the region.

Regional Counties

Benton
Carroll
Crockett
Dyer
Gibson
Henry
Lake
Obion
Weakley

Regional Institutions

Bethel University
Dyersburg State CC
TCAT - McKenzie
TCAT - Newbern
TCAT - Paris
UT - Martin



Primary Challenges: Rural Access, Employer and College Partnerships, and Community Student Support

February 1, 2017: Workforce Development and Conference Center at Northfield, Spring Hill, TN

“We need to get kids believing again. To get them to be great, the adults have to remove their self-serving competition.”
- County mayor

The Southern Middle region provides several examples of strong partnerships and collaborations between postsecondary institutions and industry. The Northfield Workforce Development and Conference Center (NWDC) exemplifies this collaboration and houses several educational institutions to offer the community a wide range of postsecondary options in one location. In Maury County, where the NWDC is located, the percent of the population with a degree or certificate is 35 percent - the highest in the region. However, other counties are not performing at this level. Overall, nine of the thirteen counties in the region are at or below 30 percent on this measure, which is less than or behind the state average of 39 percent.

Discussion highlights:

Lack of public transportation, affordability, and broadband access

Access issues were tied to transportation barriers, specifically a lack of public transportation and significantly longer commute times for rural communities without college campuses close by. “Access” was also defined as the costs to attend college that extend beyond tuition, including textbooks, car maintenance, and childcare. Participants referenced inadequate broadband in rural and remote areas of the region, which creates a major challenge when trying to complete assignments or participate in online courses and programs, as an additional access challenge.

Postsecondary alignment and collaboration

Although institutional collaboration at the NWDC has been successful, community leaders agreed similar efforts are needed in other counties. Participants stated that one benefit of collaborative postsecondary partnerships is reduced “turf wars” among area institutions. Reducing this competitive environment between colleges allows more resources to be spent supporting the retention of enrolled students rather than competing for potential students.

Need for completion mentors

Many community leaders pointed to the mentoring component of the Tennessee Promise as an exemplary model for providing student support during the transition from high school to college. Participants recommended extending similar support services through postsecondary education, and agreed this increased support is even more critical for the success of first-generation and low-income students.

Roundtable participants praised successful collaborations between institutions such as Columbia State Community College, TCAT-Hohenwald, TCAT-Pulaski, and Martin Methodist College (all housed at NWDC), but noted the absence of local industry at the roundtable discussion. Community leaders discussed the importance of cross-sector communication to help ensure postsecondary credentials are aligned with workforce demands.

Regional Counties

Bedford
 Coffee
 Franklin
 Giles
 Hickman
 Lawrence
 Lewis
 Lincoln
 Marshall
 Maury
 Moore
 Perry
 Wayne

Regional Institutions

Columbia State CC
 Martin Methodist College
 Motlow State CC
 Sewanee: The University of the South
 TCAT - Hohenwald
 TCAT - Pulaski
 TCAT - Shelbyville



Primary Challenges: Limited Household Support, Inflexible Postsecondary Options, and Exposure to College and Career

February 7, 2017: Jackson Chamber of Commerce, Jackson, TN

***“Going back to school will change the way [adults without degrees] have done things for however long they have done them.”
- Online survey respondent***

The average high school graduation rate (93 percent) and college-going rate (63 percent) in the Southwest region are both higher than state averages. However, students are not completing postsecondary credentials or entering the job market with the same frequency. The average regional postsecondary attainment rate (26 percent) and labor-force participation rate (54 percent) are both below state averages. Attainment rates vary widely across the region from a low of 16 percent in Hardeman County to 39 percent in Madison County.

Discussion highlights:

Family obligations and perceptions

The Southwest roundtable highlighted the need to engage families in better understanding the value of postsecondary experiences in order to encourage a college-going culture. Additionally, one participant referenced to the need for individuals to obtain “survival jobs” to meet pressing financial obligations, often creating a disincentive to pursue higher education. Students that need to work to support themselves and their families have to balance multiple priorities including potential lost wages. Additional barriers mentioned were limited awareness of postsecondary education opportunities, unreliable transportation, and lack of flexible course offerings.

Inflexible postsecondary options

Participants said working students tend to have schedules that conflict with traditional times and locations of course offerings. Increased access to technology was viewed as a favorable option to improving the ability of adults to complete postsecondary credentials; however participants did not believe online programs should be the primary or only solution.

Lack of early work-based learning opportunities

Increased soft skills was mentioned as a priority for regional employers. Local industry leaders agreed higher education should encourage students to value the importance of showing up to work on time, dressing appropriately for interviews, and other critical skills necessary for successful employment. To better prepare students, roundtable participants suggested cooperative education and internship requirements to incorporate professional development into existing curriculum as early as 7th grade.

Roundtable participants emphasized the importance of exposing students to career pathways and postsecondary options as early as possible. However, participants referenced the prohibitive nature of current labor laws that prevent many companies from hosting experiential learning opportunities for students under the age of 18. The discussion included an inquiry about legal options to reduce potential liability risks for interested employers.

Regional Counties

- Chester
- Decatur
- Hardeman
- Hardin
- Haywood
- Henderson
- Madison
- McNairy

Regional Institutions

- Freed-Hardeman University
- Jackson State CC
- Lane College
- TCAT - Crump
- TCAT - Jackson
- TCAT - Whiteville
- Union University



Primary Challenges: Rural Access, Lack of Institutional Student Support, and Unclear Pathways to Postsecondary Education

February 15, 2017: Pellissippi State Community College, Knoxville, TN

***“Students need a chance to get on campus, see what life is like, and see that they can do it.”
- Education advocate***

There are many postsecondary options in the East region, including the state’s flagship public institution, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Collectively, the institutions in the region enroll more than 56,000 students. However, despite ample opportunities, access to college was frequently mentioned as a barrier at this roundtable. The variations in college-going rates and the percentage of the population with a degree or certificate illustrate these access disparities, especially for rural counties. For example, the average college-going rate in the region is 59 percent, but stretches from a low of 43 percent in Monroe County to a high of nearly 70 percent in Knox County. The percentage of the population with a postsecondary credential also varies greatly from 19 percent in Morgan County to 50 percent in Knox County.

Discussion highlights:

Lack of awareness of access to postsecondary education

Although there is a substantial amount of postsecondary institutions located in this region, concern was expressed about the level of awareness of these options in rural areas. Additionally, the lack of a college-going culture further complicates the issue. Roundtable participants discussed ways to counter these obstacles, including marketing campaigns that highlight the various postsecondary options in Tennessee, and increased partnerships with K-12 systems that expose students at an earlier age to the value of higher education.

Limited flexibility to help adult students balance school and life

Engaging adult students was referenced as a critical factor for the East region to reach the Drive to 55 goal. Although postsecondary institutions offer academic programs catered to adult students, roundtable participants suggested the creation of more flexible programs that address work-life balance challenges for working adults. Participants suggested that adult-centered student support services including childcare and eldercare options, would be valuable additions to existing programs.

Limited career exposure

The discussion highlighted the importance of creating clearly-defined career pathways that include work-based learning experiences. Roundtable participants expressed the need for area high schools, postsecondary institutions, and local employers to work collaboratively to develop meaningful work experiences that expose students to various career options in the region.

An examination of attainment rates by county illustrates a startling gap between rural counties, which have limited access to postsecondary and employment opportunities, and the Knoxville economic core, which has many institutions and more job prospects. However, barriers remain for all college students in the East region that are affected by unclear postsecondary completion and career pathways, limited capacity for summer bridge programs, and an emerging need for mentors that extend throughout a student’s college experience.

Regional Counties

- Anderson
- Blount
- Campbell
- Claiborne
- Cocke
- Grainger
- Hamblen
- Jefferson
- Knox
- Loudon
- Monroe
- Morgan
- Roane
- Scott
- Sevier
- Union

Regional Institutions

- Carson-Newman University
- Johnson University
- Lincoln Memorial University
- Maryville College
- Pellissippi State CC
- Roane State CC
- TCAT - Harriman
- TCAT - Jacksboro
- TCAT - Knoxville
- TCAT - Morristown
- TCAT - Oneida-Huntsville
- UT - Knoxville
- Walters State CC

**Primary Challenges: Education Deserts, Limited Opportunities for Adults, and Poor Labor Alignment**

March 1, 2017: Cookeville Chamber of Commerce, Cookeville, TN

“[College administrators] don’t understand what you’re going through as an adult to try and go back to school.”
- County mayor and returning adult student

The Upper Cumberland region’s high school graduation rate (92 percent) is higher than the state average (89 percent), indicating a sizeable pool of potential students to pursue postsecondary opportunities. However, when compared to the lower than average college-going rate (59 percent) and labor force participation rate (53 percent), it is evident students are not progressing through the regional postsecondary pipeline.

Discussion highlights:

Lack of postsecondary institutions in the region

A review of postsecondary opportunities in the Upper Cumberland reveals a significant gap in the number of institutions in the area, with many locations serving as satellite campuses for colleges in distant regions. Although the region houses three Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (Livingston, McMinnville, and Crossville) and Tennessee Technological University, the Upper Cumberland is the only region in the state lacking a main campus from the community college system.

Adult attainment opportunities

The Upper Cumberland has made a substantial effort to support adult attainment in the region, but barriers still exist. Factors that hinder completion for these students are common to many rural regions in Tennessee and include costs beyond tuition, inadequate options for childcare, and lack of transportation. Compounded by the limited enrollment capacity in the region, roundtable participants mentioned completion challenges caused by a lack of flexible course offerings and degree programs.

Industry and postsecondary institutions do not communicate

Representatives from industry and workforce development expressed a need for postsecondary institutions to be more proactive in addressing labor demands. One participant mentioned the need for business leaders to focus on the pressing demands of basic operations which leaves little time to initiate collaborations with postsecondary institutions. Given institutions’ expertise in training and curriculum design, participants believed enhanced alignment between degree programs and workforce demands, depends on institutions developing more forward-thinking approaches to industry partnerships.

The Upper Cumberland region has been referred to as an “education desert”^{*} due to insufficient postsecondary options. However, this has not discouraged the community from working together to tackle the attainment problem. A prominent example is the Highlands Economic Partnership, which promotes cross-sector collaboration and helps align postsecondary opportunities with regional workforce demands.

^{*}Hillman, N., & Weichman, T. (2016). Education deserts: The continued significance of “place” in the twenty-first century. Viewpoints: Voices from the Field. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

Regional Counties

- Cannon
- Clay
- Cumberland
- DeKalb
- Fentress
- Jackson
- Macon
- Overton
- Pickett
- Putnam
- Smith
- Van Buren
- Warren
- White

Regional Institutions

- TCAT - Crossville
- TCAT - Livingston
- TCAT - McMinnville
- Tennessee Technological University



March 8, 2017: General Morgan Inn, Greeneville, TN

“We have to make sure students in rural Hancock County have the same access [to postsecondary education] as students on Church Street in Greeneville.”
- College administrator

High school graduation rates in the Northeast region are mostly above the state average. However, wide gaps in the college-going rate - from 44 percent in Hancock County to 72 percent in Washington County - present a concern for college access. Postsecondary attainment rates also vary greatly with a low of 21 percent in Johnson County to a high of 44 percent in Washington County. Concerns surrounding the regional variations led to a robust discussion about strategies to encourage completion. Participants questioned if the focus should be on increasing postsecondary attainment rates to attract business, or if an emphasis should be placed on attracting employers with jobs that incentivize college completion.

Discussion highlights:

Physical access, limited transportation options, and other access barriers

Roundtable participants believed access challenges due to geographical location and mountainous terrain are the primary causes of the attainment disparities between counties, despite eight regional postsecondary institutions serving more than 30,000 students in the area. Additional postsecondary barriers to enrollment are caused by lack of transportation, preexisting financial obligations, limited broadband access, and unavailable or unaffordable childcare options.

Consistent student support services

Participants stressed the importance of support services that can accommodate diverse student needs. An emphasis was placed on high-touch programs that provide frequent and intentional support such as intrusive advising, tracking systems that intervene before students drop out, and scholarships that assist with unexpected financial needs outside of tuition. One participant shared her own positive experience with a regional university and the personalized follow-up she received while she was enrolled as an adult student.

Postsecondary and industry alignment

Community leaders confirmed alignment between area businesses and local colleges is a clear strength for the region. Postsecondary institutions have been working closely with area employers to align educational goals with industry needs. For example, some colleges coordinate with businesses to ensure students will complete a degree program before being offered a job. This intentional policy – job placement after college – proves critical during times of economic growth.

In the Northeast region, community leaders have worked to address access issues by creating strong partnerships. Due to the physical barriers, collaborations between postsecondary institutions, community organizations, and city governments have resulted in locations housing multiple postsecondary options in a single setting. The Kingsport Center for Higher Education is a strong example of successful collaboration, housing multiple institutions and a range of postsecondary options from associates to graduate degree programs all under one roof.

Regional Counties

Carter
 Greene
 Hancock
 Hawkins
 Johnson
 Sullivan
 Unicoi
 Washington

Regional Institutions

East TN State University
 King University
 Milligan College
 Northeast State CC
 TCAT - Elizabethton
 Tusculum College



Primary challenges: Disincentives for Postsecondary Education, Lack of Alternative Postsecondary Options, and Insufficient Academic Preparation

March 29, 2017: Chattanooga State Community College, Chattanooga, TN

“What is the incentive for industry to let students in training programs finish their education before hiring them?”
- Non-profit executive

The Southeast region, like most regions in the state, has a disparity in college completion outcomes. The region is home to the county with the highest high school graduation rate (99 percent in Meigs County) as well as the county with the third lowest high school graduation rate (79 percent in Rhea County). Similar variations can be seen in the number of high school graduates that go on to college and those that participate in the region’s labor force.

Discussion highlights:

Disincentives for postsecondary enrollment

According to community leaders, job growth has accelerated in this region faster than others. As a result, employers are hiring workers as quickly as they can, with or without a college degree or certificate. One participant even said some students in the community have been hired before earning a high school diploma. Roundtable participants agreed that although growth in job opportunities benefits many people, the current employment development in the region can create a disincentive for postsecondary enrollment. This also runs counter to community goals for higher levels of attainment.

Expansion of micro-credentials

Fast-track, short-term training and educational options for students were referenced as necessary additions to the region’s postsecondary options. Participants discussed current initiatives in the region that provide training and education for citizens to earn “micro-credentials” in high-demand workforce programs. Not only do these postsecondary opportunities lead to guaranteed jobs upon completion, they can also be used toward additional certificate and degree programs in the future.

Academic preparation for postsecondary success

Participants referenced successful programs in the region including the Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support (SAILS), which allows students to complete remedial requirements prior to college enrollment. Expanding dual enrollment programs in high schools, creating programs to engage family members in completion conversations, and designing postsecondary programs that connect students to career options during the college experience were referenced as additional strategies.

Although county-specific challenges exist, the Southeast is characterized by strong regional and city planning leadership that has advanced clearly-articulated strategies, such as Chattanooga 2.0 and Thrive 2055. Both initiatives have broad support and advance comprehensive strategies to promote college completion, which can be used across the state as examples of a collective impact framework for achieving long-term social change.

Regional Counties

- Bledsoe
- Bradley
- Grundy
- Hamilton
- Marion
- McMinn
- Meigs
- Polk
- Rhea
- Sequatchie

Regional Institutions

- Bryan College
- Chattanooga State CC
- Cleveland State CC
- Lee University
- Southern Adventist University
- TCAT - Athens
- TCAT - Chattanooga
- Tennessee Wesleyan College
- UT - Chattanooga



***“We are finding that a lot of our students have gone through a lot of trauma. They need a whole lot more than money.”
- College president***

Regional Counties

Fayette
Lauderdale
Shelby
Tipton

Regional Institutions

Baptist Memorial College of Health Sciences
Christian Brothers University
LeMoyné-Owen College
Memphis College of Art
Rhodes College
Southwest Tennessee CC
TCAT - Covington
TCAT - Memphis
TCAT - Ripley
University of Memphis
UT - Health Science Center

The Memphis Delta economy is growing,* but significant labor supply challenges remain due to an insufficient pool of qualified workers to fill existing jobs. Participants acknowledged substantial gaps in the regional completion pipeline that complicate the situation. For example, Tipton and Lauderdale counties have some of the state’s stronger high school graduation rates, yet attainment levels are some of the lowest. High school graduation rates in Fayette and Shelby counties (76 percent and 79 percent, respectively) fall in the bottom five percent for the state. Additionally, the college-going rates for all counties in this region fall below the state average, varying from 50 percent in Lauderdale County to 60 percent in Shelby County.

Discussion highlights:

Equity and diversity in postsecondary education

A robust discussion concerning challenges affecting low-income, first-generation, and New American students highlighted clear disincentives to enroll or complete college that go beyond traditional financial considerations. Participants highlighted institutional initiatives targeting specific sub-populations, such as a mentoring program for African-American males and scholarship programs for undocumented students. Although successful, due to limited resources, these programs have impacted small numbers of students.

Need for increased mentorship and advising opportunities

Due to the low college-going rates in the region, participants recognized the importance of assisting currently enrolled students through graduation. Creating holistic mentoring and advising programs was stressed as a critical strategy to support completion for postsecondary students. Several organizations highlighted existing programs and/or policies that aid students in overcoming some of these barriers, but a conversation ensued concerning the scalability and cohesion of these programs.

Improved labor alignment

Institutions voiced concerns about understanding the region’s labor market priorities. Inversely, local industry expressed frustrations with the timeliness of student completion, often desiring micro-credential programs as a way to meet pressing needs for both employers and low-income citizens. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of clear career pathways for students that align with regional workforce demands.

The Memphis Delta region has demonstrated a commitment to postsecondary attainment through the work of numerous organizations across multiple sectors, including higher education institutions, non-profit organizations, and industry partners. However, one community leader noted that the illicit economy further complicates the regional completion landscape and forces businesses and postsecondary institutions to “compete with the streets”.

*Memphis accounted for 11 percent of the state’s job growth from December 2014-2015 according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



Primary Challenges: Equitable Outcomes, Low Priority for Credentials, and Communication Barriers

April 19, 2017: Casa Azafrán, Conexión Américas, Nashville, TN

“We [higher education] speak in a language that students don’t understand.”
- College president

Regional Counties

Cheatham
 Davidson
 Dickson
 Houston
 Humphreys
 Montgomery
 Robertson
 Rutherford
 Stewart
 Sumner
 Trousdale
 Williamson
 Wilson

Regional Institutions

American Baptist College
 Aquinas College
 Austin Peay State University
 Belmont University
 Cumberland University
 Fisk University
 Lipscomb University
 Middle TN State University
 Nashville State CC
 TCAT - Nashville
 TCAT - Dickson
 TCAT - Hartsville
 TCAT - Murfreesboro
 Tennessee State University
 Trevecca Nazarene University
 Vanderbilt University
 Volunteer State CC
 Watkins College of Art
 Welch College

The Northern Middle region is responsible for 70 percent* of the economic growth in the state and boasts the highest average high school graduation rate (94 percent), college-going rate (64 percent), attainment rate (36 percent), and labor force participation rate (63 percent). Although these measures suggest a healthy postsecondary pipeline, a deeper dive into the county-level data reveals attainment gaps related to access. For example, Davidson County has the fifth-lowest high school graduation rate in the state (81 percent), and six counties have lower-than-average college-going rates.

Discussion highlights:

Equitable access to postsecondary education

Community leaders expressed concern about access for undocumented immigrants who do not qualify for state tuition-assistance programs and cannot afford to pay out-of-state tuition rates. Additionally, participants identified engaging adult learners as a key strategy, but noted significant barriers exist for this group including unaffordable childcare, work obligations, and the opportunity cost of leaving a current job. Strategies to engage adult learners emphasized the importance of flexible course scheduling and competency-based learning opportunities, such as prior learning assessment which provides an avenue for students to earn college credit for knowledge and skills gained from experience in the workforce.

Growth in job opportunities for non-degree holders

Participants highlighted the disincentives that emerge for individuals to enroll in postsecondary education related to a thriving economy. Due to considerable job opportunities that do not require a postsecondary credential, many individuals transition immediately to the workforce or drop out of college.

Hidden curriculum

Complicated processes and miscommunication within institutions often create what one student referred to as a “hidden curriculum”. This term references the knowledge expected of students in order for them to be successful, but is not explicitly explained. Participants in the Northern Middle region stressed the importance of demystifying this hidden curriculum and clearly providing the resources needed for success to all students regardless of background, preparation, demographic, or prior knowledge.

The Northern Middle region has benefitted from a thriving economy, but participants emphasized the need to align state attainment goals with work-based incentives for students to complete postsecondary programs. Furthermore, the importance of wrap-around student support services for currently enrolled students was highlighted as essential in increasing regional attainment rates.

*Source: U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics from December 2014 to December 2015.

Moving Forward

The most promising common theme from the roundtables was the near-universal enthusiasm of community leaders excited to elevate the conversation around postsecondary completion. However, more must be done to ensure every county successfully delivers on the state's completion goal - the Drive to 55.

At each point in the completion pipeline, community engagement will be critical to the realization of the state's completion goals, student success in postsecondary institutions, and the ongoing prosperity of the state's economy. While many of the topics identified through the roundtable discussions directly relate to processes and outcomes of our postsecondary institutions, they also present opportunities for communities to examine how they contribute to the success of students in their region.

Complete Tennessee started the statewide listening tour with 2 goals: formally introducing the organization to community leaders across the state, and engaging those leaders in meaningful conversations surrounding completion challenges in their communities. Having achieved those goals, the next step is to work with community-based stakeholders to develop completion plans that can help address the concerns highlighted in this report. Regions must be the architects of these diverse plans and will ultimately be responsible for the implementation of the strategies necessary to improve degree attainment in their region.

Just as Tennessee students are diverse, so too are the challenges they face. Addressing the barriers to postsecondary progress in the state will require the voices of many and the participation of all. Only then will the state's ambitious Drive to 55 goal be reached, ensuring more Tennesseans have the chance to earn a degree that will open the doors to increased economic mobility, enhanced community engagement, and a better quality of life.



APPENDIX A: COMPLETION PIPELINE DATA

Geography	Secondary Education*		Postsecondary Attainment**			Economic & Public Benefits**			
	High School Graduation Rate	College-Going Rate	% of population with a degree or certificate in 2015	% of population needed to earn a credential by 2025	Additional degrees needed to meet Drive to 55 Goals	Labor Force Participation Rate	Household Economic Benefits (millions)	Estimated State Tax Revenue (millions)	Estimated Local Tax Revenue (millions)
Northwest	91.6%	62.5%	26.1%	43.7%	19,232	53.3%	\$211.4	\$9.8	\$7.1
Benton	94.4%	60.5%	21.5%	39.4%	1,157	52.4%	\$11.8	\$0.5	\$0.4
Carroll	96.5%	71.1%	27.5%	44.5%	1,852	53.7%	\$17.3	\$0.8	\$0.6
Crockett	99.1%	66.2%	25.1%	42.0%	1,041	56.7%	\$12.1	\$0.6	\$0.4
Dyer	91.1%	61.9%	36.4%	49.9%	2,191	58.6%	\$29.3	\$1.4	\$1.0
Gibson	95.7%	63.5%	28.4%	47.6%	4,338	57.8%	\$57.5	\$2.7	\$1.9
Henry	91.9%	54.0%	26.7%	43.8%	2,190	54.8%	\$20.5	\$1.0	\$0.7
Lake	73.1%	53.8%	14.0%	32.3%	1,002	32.1%	\$11.9	\$0.6	\$0.4
Obion	89.6%	65.9%	26.1%	43.0%	2,045	55.9%	\$26.1	\$1.2	\$0.9
Weakley	93.0%	65.7%	29.0%	51.0%	3,415	57.6%	\$24.9	\$1.2	\$0.8
Southern Middle	92.5%	63.1%	27.2%	44.9%	37,824	56.7%	\$468.9	\$21.8	\$15.7
Bedford	92.1%	51.9%	22.8%	42.2%	5,072	59.7%	\$66.5	\$3.1	\$2.2
Coffee	92.1%	63.1%	31.2%	49.1%	4,907	57.1%	\$71.3	\$3.3	\$2.4
Franklin	90.9%	56.5%	32.2%	49.5%	2,998	56.2%	\$41.0	\$1.9	\$1.4
Giles	87.6%	57.0%	26.6%	45.1%	2,218	56.3%	\$22.0	\$1.0	\$0.7
Hickman	93.3%	58.8%	21.5%	40.3%	2,709	53.4%	\$38.4	\$1.8	\$1.3
Lawrence	93.9%	61.3%	26.2%	42.9%	3,058	57.8%	\$32.6	\$1.5	\$1.1
Lewis	95.5%	67.9%	28.7%	44.0%	796	52.7%	\$7.6	\$0.4	\$0.3
Lincoln	94.1%	58.0%	30.0%	47.8%	2,621	58.2%	\$25.0	\$1.2	\$0.8
Marshall	95.1%	65.3%	26.8%	44.6%	2,991	61.6%	\$39.0	\$1.8	\$1.3
Maury	92.1%	61.1%	35.2%	51.1%	7,338	63.9%	\$87.4	\$4.1	\$2.9
Moore	92.3%	74.2%	28.5%	45.1%	554	63.7%	\$7.3	\$0.3	\$0.2
Perry	92.3%	75.8%	25.5%	42.7%	585	49.8%	\$8.4	\$0.4	\$0.3
Wayne	91.6%	69.4%	18.1%	39.1%	1,976	47.0%	\$22.4	\$1.0	\$0.8



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Southwest	93.1%	63.1%	26.4%	44.1%	20,854	54.4%	\$247.2	\$11.5	\$8.3
Chester	97.1%	65.1%	31.8%	48.5%	1,638	58.4%	\$19.8	\$0.9	\$0.7
Decatur	93.5%	75.3%	26.3%	45.4%	891	53.8%	\$8.2	\$0.4	\$0.3
Hardeman	88.5%	59.6%	16.3%	37.7%	2,848	47.0%	\$30.5	\$1.4	\$1.0
Hardin	90.1%	53.3%	23.5%	40.6%	1,809	52.1%	\$17.9	\$0.8	\$0.6
Haywood	92.4%	58.2%	21.1%	38.9%	1,093	56.9%	\$9.6	\$0.4	\$0.3
Henderson	96.2%	76.4%	28.0%	44.4%	2,374	56.7%	\$38.4	\$1.8	\$1.3
Madison	92.4%	56.9%	38.7%	56.0%	8,256	60.6%	\$95.8	\$4.5	\$3.2
McNairy	94.7%	60.3%	25.3%	41.3%	1,945	50.0%	\$27.0	\$1.3	\$0.9
East	91.5%	58.6%	28.4%	46.2%	113,935	54.3%	\$1,584.6	\$73.7	\$53.1
Anderson	92.7%	65.6%	35.8%	53.8%	6,023	56.6%	\$80.0	\$3.7	\$2.7
Blount	93.8%	64.6%	37.8%	53.8%	11,580	59.8%	\$146.9	\$6.8	\$4.9
Campbell	88.7%	51.3%	21.1%	38.2%	3,207	47.7%	\$38.3	\$1.8	\$1.3
Claiborne	92.0%	61.2%	24.4%	44.9%	3,267	49.1%	\$40.5	\$1.9	\$1.4
Cocke	89.6%	46.0%	20.7%	40.2%	3,253	55.3%	\$36.1	\$1.7	\$1.2
Grainger	91.1%	64.0%	26.0%	40.1%	1,583	52.6%	\$18.2	\$0.8	\$0.6
Hamblen	94.3%	62.6%	27.2%	47.4%	6,270	57.1%	\$70.1	\$3.3	\$2.3
Jefferson	91.8%	57.3%	29.8%	45.4%	4,387	59.1%	\$56.2	\$2.6	\$1.9
Knox	90.3%	69.9%	49.9%	65.2%	43,877	63.8%	\$704.5	\$32.7	\$23.6
Loudon	89.7%	58.8%	37.0%	53.9%	4,423	54.2%	\$68.0	\$3.2	\$2.3
Monroe	91.6%	43.1%	22.9%	41.3%	4,232	52.3%	\$51.3	\$2.4	\$1.7
Morgan	95.3%	51.8%	19.0%	36.6%	2,410	42.2%	\$26.5	\$1.2	\$0.9
Roane	94.6%	65.5%	32.3%	51.0%	4,170	53.3%	\$65.2	\$3.0	\$2.2
Scott	92.4%	64.7%	22.8%	42.3%	2,046	52.1%	\$17.5	\$0.8	\$0.6
Sevier	87.4%	57.4%	28.2%	46.6%	11,511	64.3%	\$144.2	\$6.7	\$4.8
Union	88.9%	53.6%	19.1%	37.8%	1,696	49.1%	\$21.1	\$1.0	\$0.7



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Upper Cumberland	91.7%	59.0%	23.9%	42.7%	32,382	53.1%	\$365.8	\$17.0	\$12.3
Cannon	85.3%	52.3%	22.6%	41.7%	1,474	57.8%	\$17.6	\$0.8	\$0.6
Clay	96.3%	67.2%	20.7%	41.7%	607	46.9%	\$6.9	\$0.3	\$0.2
Cumberland	87.4%	57.8%	28.9%	46.9%	4,771	46.8%	\$37.5	\$1.7	\$1.3
DeKalb	97.6%	50.0%	23.9%	41.6%	1,584	55.9%	\$18.7	\$0.9	\$0.6
Fentress	95.2%	55.6%	20.9%	40.1%	1,591	47.6%	\$22.4	\$1.0	\$0.8
Jackson	87.2%	64.2%	20.8%	40.5%	1,018	48.7%	\$9.2	\$0.4	\$0.3
Macon	82.5%	64.1%	22.0%	40.7%	2,192	58.1%	\$21.2	\$1.0	\$0.7
Overton	87.1%	62.9%	23.1%	41.6%	2,032	52.6%	\$20.4	\$0.9	\$0.7
Pickett	96.5%	76.2%	25.6%	46.8%	421	52.9%	\$11.2	\$0.5	\$0.4
Putnam	93.0%	60.2%	32.3%	52.5%	8,905	56.7%	\$120.8	\$5.6	\$4.0
Smith	93.8%	57.3%	21.1%	41.5%	2,046	56.6%	\$14.0	\$0.7	\$0.5
Van Buren	94.9%	54.0%	22.9%	38.1%	328	53.8%	\$4.5	\$0.2	\$0.2
Warren	93.8%	49.8%	24.9%	43.0%	3,146	55.3%	\$36.8	\$1.7	\$1.2
White	93.4%	54.3%	24.6%	41.7%	2,265	53.6%	\$24.6	\$1.1	\$0.8
Northeast	91.2%	60.3%	29.7%	47.0%	43,302	53.1%	\$541.2	\$25.2	\$18.1
Carter	88.8%	66.3%	30.3%	47.8%	4,393	54.5%	\$32.5	\$1.5	\$1.1
Greene	95.8%	58.4%	28.0%	46.9%	6,398	54.8%	\$64.5	\$3.0	\$2.2
Hancock	83.3%	44.3%	21.6%	36.6%	399	49.3%	\$2.4	\$0.1	\$0.1
Hawkins	95.1%	56.3%	26.7%	45.1%	5,000	53.7%	\$72.5	\$3.4	\$2.4
Johnson	92.3%	52.7%	20.6%	39.7%	1,882	45.7%	\$16.7	\$0.8	\$0.6
Sullivan	93.1%	67.8%	37.3%	53.4%	9,833	56.6%	\$139.6	\$6.5	\$4.7
Unicoi	90.6%	64.7%	29.7%	45.2%	1,072	50.8%	\$16.8	\$0.8	\$0.6
Washington	90.5%	71.8%	43.5%	61.6%	14,324	59.4%	\$196.2	\$9.1	\$6.6



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Southeast	88.9%	58.7%	27.8%	44.6%	55,129	53.8%	\$780.2	\$36.3	\$26.2
Bledsoe	87.9%	48.8%	26.6%	38.6%	774	46.4%	\$7.3	\$0.3	\$0.2
Bradley	91.4%	63.4%	35.7%	52.7%	9,739	60.4%	\$129.4	\$6.0	\$4.3
Grundy	96.0%	54.2%	21.4%	37.2%	775	45.2%	\$8.0	\$0.4	\$0.3
Hamilton	83.8%	68.1%	43.9%	60.8%	30,780	63.4%	\$494.3	\$23.0	\$16.6
Marion	83.1%	64.3%	24.6%	43.3%	2,354	55.1%	\$26.1	\$1.2	\$0.9
McMinn	95.3%	59.8%	31.6%	48.1%	3,795	55.2%	\$45.0	\$2.1	\$1.5
Meigs	99.1%	49.2%	18.5%	37.5%	1,109	48.7%	\$13.9	\$0.6	\$0.5
Polk	91.7%	61.9%	23.3%	42.2%	1,480	53.1%	\$10.8	\$0.5	\$0.4
Rhea	79.0%	55.5%	22.1%	40.6%	2,985	55.2%	\$26.0	\$1.2	\$0.9
Sequatchie	82.1%	61.9%	30.5%	45.2%	1,337	55.6%	\$19.4	\$0.9	\$0.7
Memphis Delta	87.2%	55.3%	31.9%	50.4%	92,697	60.0%	\$1,615.2	\$75.1	\$54.1
Fayette	75.5%	51.8%	34.1%	53.3%	4,766	60.7%	\$78.2	\$3.6	\$2.6
Lauderdale	97.5%	50.0%	20.8%	39.2%	2,762	49.1%	\$29.1	\$1.4	\$1.0
Shelby	79.4%	59.9%	43.7%	60.3%	77,091	65.6%	\$1,386.5	\$64.4	\$46.5
Tipton	96.5%	59.4%	28.7%	48.8%	8,078	64.5%	\$121.4	\$5.6	\$4.1



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Northern Middle	93.7%	64.3%	36.2%	53.2%	231,332	62.8%	\$3,515.4	\$163.4	\$117.8
Cheatham	93.3%	56.6%	32.0%	51.5%	4,232	64.8%	\$51.0	\$2.4	\$1.7
Davidson	81.0%	57.8%	50.9%	62.5%	53,815	69.0%	\$863.8	\$40.1	\$29.0
Dickson	93.5%	58.8%	24.1%	44.7%	5,950	60.2%	\$81.1	\$3.8	\$2.7
Houston	97.2%	69.9%	23.3%	38.2%	607	50.5%	\$7.0	\$0.3	\$0.2
Humphreys	95.6%	73.8%	26.9%	42.5%	1,199	55.4%	\$15.7	\$0.7	\$0.5
Montgomery	94.8%	52.0%	39.0%	57.1%	27,700	66.2%	\$377.9	\$17.6	\$12.7
Robertson	94.4%	54.7%	31.0%	49.1%	7,923	66.0%	\$104.4	\$4.9	\$3.5
Rutherford	95.2%	63.9%	40.9%	60.7%	56,150	69.7%	\$628.7	\$29.2	\$21.1
Stewart	94.9%	58.2%	27.3%	44.4%	1,100	53.5%	\$13.8	\$0.6	\$0.5
Sumner	92.2%	71.0%	39.1%	57.3%	20,868	65.8%	\$263.4	\$12.2	\$8.8
Trousdale	95.3%	66.7%	23.3%	42.2%	861	60.9%	\$2.5	\$0.1	\$0.1
Williamson	95.5%	82.7%	70.0%	80.6%	33,905	68.6%	\$805.7	\$37.4	\$27.0
Wilson	95.1%	69.5%	43.2%	60.4%	17,024	65.8%	\$300.4	\$14.0	\$10.1
Tennessee	88.5%	62.50%	38.7%	55.0%	646,687	61.4%	\$9,330.0		
United States	82%	69.20%				63.9%			

*Tennessee Higher Education Commission

**Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development



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