“We want to make a really loud and clear statement to everyone in Tennessee: ‘No matter who you are, no matter what your education path has been in the past, no matter what your income level is, you can go to college for free in Tennessee.’”

—Bill Haslam, Governor, State of Tennessee, 2017
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LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

It is an honor to present the 2017 State of Higher Education in Tennessee report. This annual overview of postsecondary performance serves as the foundation for Complete Tennessee’s efforts to help improve student success and increase the number of Tennesseans who have earned a college degree.

Over the past year, we have learned a great deal about Tennessee’s higher education landscape by collaborating with community leaders across the state, discussing postsecondary challenges with students, and reviewing national reports on higher education access, completion, and outcomes. Through this work, we’ve identified common themes that can inform Tennessee’s ongoing efforts to improve college graduation and degree attainment rates.

This year’s report highlights three of the most pressing issues affecting postsecondary attainment in Tennessee: low graduation rates, troubling equity gaps, and a weak school-to-workforce pipeline.

To build a better future for Tennesseans, we must work together to improve postsecondary outcomes, provide all students—regardless of background or circumstance—with the resources and support necessary to excel in college, and help better align college programs and credentials with employer needs.

Tennessee has built a national reputation for education reform and student success, and that is to be commended and celebrated. However, there are disturbing trends highlighted in this report that, if left unaddressed, will negatively affect the state’s future progress and prosperity.

On behalf of our Board of Directors, the Complete Tennessee Steering Committee, and our hard-working staff, I thank you for taking the time to review this report and consider the role you and your community can play in strengthening postsecondary attainment and outcomes in our state. Our shared goal is to inspire action, and I hope you will join our work to strengthen education and better support current and future students throughout the Volunteer State.

Sincerely,

Kenyatta Lovett, Ph.D.
Executive Director
The inaugural State of Higher Education in Tennessee report, released in 2016, highlighted startling statistics that could jeopardize Tennessee’s goal to increase college graduation rates.

From low graduation rates at many of the state’s four-year institutions to dismal community college outcomes for African-American students, the inaugural report included several troubling findings that should serve as a call to action for enhanced community-led accountability and advocacy to improve post-secondary student success.

Tennessee policymakers have demonstrated a longstanding commitment to improving college graduation rates, beginning with the Complete College Tennessee Act in 2010. The state has invested heavily in programs designed to improve postsecondary access. Most recently, Tennessee approved a law allowing adult returning students to attend community colleges tuition-free.

Signs of progress in postsecondary education outcomes are evident. However, more progress is needed to attain the state’s Drive to 55 goal to equip 55 percent of Tennesseans with a college degree or credential by 2025. Beneath the surface, there are clear challenges that undermine the larger goal of transforming Tennessee’s pipeline of talent into a more skilled and educated workforce.

We have the opportunity to take action on our promise to encourage more Tennesseans to earn a college credential. To meet the current and future job demands for skilled and credentialed talent, it is critical that everyone in Tennessee participate in this effort, especially the individuals and communities that have the most to benefit from higher degree attainment rates.

The second annual State of Higher Education in Tennessee report provides an overview of our postsecondary education system, with special emphasis on the issues many students face in the pursuit of a college degree. Three main issues are highlighted throughout the report that capture the essence of our call to action for increasing the support for student success by postsecondary institutions, individuals, and communities:
1. Upward trends in postsecondary graduation rates must continue so the state can reach its degree attainment goal of 55 percent.

2. Current inequities in degree attainment and postsecondary student success require immediate attention to ensure the state’s improvements are inclusive of all Tennesseans.

3. Colleges and universities must take more deliberate action to align the pipeline of talent to employer needs.
KEY TENNESSEE POLICIES

COMPLETE COLLEGE TENNESSEE ACT OF 2010
Comprehensive postsecondary reforms focused on student success and completion. Key components included establishing an outcomes-based funding formula for public colleges and universities, mandating articulation and transfer pathways, and removing remedial coursework from universities.

DRIVE TO 55
Tennessee’s degree attainment goal to meet projected workforce needs and to equip 55 percent of Tennesseans with a degree or certificate by the year 2025.

FOCUS ACT
Focus on College and University Success (FOCUS) Act – aligns the postsecondary education system in Tennessee to sharpen the focus on community colleges and colleges of applied technology (TCATs) while granting public four-year universities autonomy via local governing boards for each institution.

LABOR EDUCATION ALIGNMENT PROGRAM (LEAP)
The Labor Education Alignment Program (LEAP) helps ensure that Tennessee’s postsecondary institutions are producing the skills and credentials 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.

TENNESSEE PROMISE
Provides tuition-free community or technical college to high school graduates through last-dollar scholarships. Students are paired with a mentor who supports them while in high school through the college enrollment process. Students are required to complete community service hours, complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), maintain full-time enrollment, and maintain satisfactory academic progress in order to remain eligible.

TENNESSEE RECONNECT ACT
An extension of the Drive to 55 initiative that provides tuition-free community college to adults that do not already have a degree. Students are required to complete a FAFSA, enroll at least part-time (6 credit hours), participate in an approved advising program, maintain continuous enrollment, and earn at least a 2.0 GPA.

TCAT RECONNECT
Allows adult students to attend a Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) tuition-free. Students are required to complete a FAFSA, maintain satisfactory academic progress, and cannot stop out.
UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE SYSTEM
The University of Tennessee is the state’s flagship public university system with main campuses in Knoxville, Chattanooga, and Martin. 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 13 community colleges and 27 Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs). Each type of institution has its own mission. Community colleges prepare students for transfer to a university, as well as for direct entry into the workforce. TCATs 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. THEC oversees an array of finance, academic, research, and consumer protection initiatives that promote student success and support for the state’s completion agenda.

TENNESSEE INDEPENDENT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ASSOCIATION (TICUA):
The Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association (TICUA) is a membership group representing 34 private, nonprofit colleges and universities. TICUA’s mission is to engage private colleges and universities to work collaboratively in areas of public policy, cost containment, and professional development. Each institution is governed independently.

PROPRIETARY SCHOOLS
These are private institutions that provide degrees, certifications, and licensures. They are operated by private, profit-seeking businesses.

LOCALLY GOVERNED INSTITUTIONS (LGI)
Locally governed institutions consist of the state’s six public universities: Austin Peay State University, East Tennessee State University, Middle Tennessee State University, Tennessee State University, Tennessee Technological University, and the University of Memphis. Each university has a local governing board appointed by the governor and confirmed by the Tennessee General Assembly.
WHY SHOULD WE CARE...

ABOUT COLLEGE COMPLETION AND DEGREE ATTAINMENT RATES?

Improving college completion and degree attainment rates can have a positive effect on individuals, households, and communities. Earning a college credential can lead to higher earning potential and, in some cases, help break the cycle of poverty. When degree attainment rises, local communities can benefit from the resultant increases in tax revenues and decreases in demand for social services. Additionally, employers are more likely to invest in communities with larger pools of skilled and credentialed talent.

While higher college completion and degree attainment rates cannot solve all social and economic problems for a given community, there’s little doubt that improved postsecondary access and attainment can be an important part of a larger, more meaningful solution.

ABOUT EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

Recent gains in college attainment and completion rates have not equally benefited all Tennesseans. When examined through the lens of age, income, or race, data reveals a startling reality that both the opportunity to participate in higher education and the potential for success produce starkly different results. Current achievement gaps raise questions about the possibility or the moral standard of achieving the Drive to 55 goal if certain groups of Tennesseans are left behind.

Critical points of inequitable outcomes in Tennessee include:

- **Age**: Adult enrollment continues to decline
- **Race**: African-American retention and employment rates remain substantially lower than other student demographics
- **Income**: Low-income students graduate at lower rates at most colleges except the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs)

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↑ ECONOMIC GROWTH
↑ HOUSEHOLD INCOME
↑ TAX REVENUES
↓ SOCIAL COSTS
ENTERING COLLEGE REMAINS A CHALLENGE FOR MOST TENNESSEANS

The college admissions and matriculation processes are often oversimplified, and require critical decisions that are foreign to many students and their families. The journey to college is an educational experience in and of itself, especially for students who are the first in the family to pursue a postsecondary degree. Prospective students can face barriers beyond tuition that hinder their ability to enroll, such as transportation, life obligations, or access to childcare. More concerning, it appears students who could most benefit from state programs and policies designed to support postsecondary attainment are either not aware of or able to participate in these initiatives.

Although preliminary numbers confirm community college enrollment has grown by two percent from 2016-2017, enrollment trends statewide have been relatively flat (see Figure 1). Community college enrollment has grown in part due to the state’s investment in the Tennessee Promise. However, enrollment growth has occurred despite significant downward trends for key populations: African-American student enrollment has decreased 12 percent and adult enrollment has dropped 25 percent (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

Without increasing enrollment for adults and students of color, the chances of producing equitable outcomes in postsecondary completion and attainment diminish greatly. The state’s rapidly-changing demographics indicate these trends could have widespread consequences. Data reveals that Tennessee’s average age is increasing, underscoring the need to help more adults earn a postsecondary credential. The state’s minority population will become a larger share of the overall population, and the gap between rich and poor continues to expand. Equal participation in higher education is necessary to elevate Tennessee’s overarching college completion and degree attainment rates.

3. Complete Tennessee. (2017). Room to grow: Regional perspectives on higher education improvement
5. IPEDS, 2015
6. IPEDS, 2015
7. U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 Population Estimates
8. Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research
FIGURE 2
Enrollment by Race
African-American enrollment rates have declined by 12 percent from 2011-2015 across public and private higher education institutions in Tennessee.
Source: IPEDS

FIGURE 3
Adult Enrollment (ages 25-64) by Institution Type
Adult enrollment in Tennessee has dropped 25 percent from 2011-2015.
Source: IPEDS
Staying in college is a challenge for many

Student retention is clearly a primary factor in college completion. The further students progress through the courses required to earn a credential, the more likely that progress will result in completion. However, the challenges that give many Tennesseans pause when considering college, such as costs beyond tuition, childcare, and transportation, remain after enrollment and can dramatically affect students’ ability to remain in school. This underscores the critical role of support programs that can assist students in overcoming these issues.

Student retention rates for Tennessee’s colleges and universities have increased over the past five years\(^\text{10}\), but still remain below the national average.\(^\text{11}\) Tennessee’s community colleges have increased full-time freshman retention rates by three percentage points from 2011 to 2015.\(^\text{12}\) Four-year public institutions have increased retention rates over the same period by two percentage points.\(^\text{13}\) Similar gains have been realized in private institutions.\(^\text{14}\) However, fall-to-fall retention rates at community colleges for African-American students remain ten percentage points below their peers (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4
Retention Rate by Institution Type and Race
Upward trends in student retention have included narrowing gaps in achievement for Hispanic students. However, disparities for African-American students continue to exist.

Source: THEC

Postsecondary institutions can do more to improve student retention, especially for low-income students and students of color. For example, summer bridge programs help students transition and adapt to college life, and are proven to substantially aid at-risk student retention. By engaging high school graduates prior to the start of their freshman year with course-prep and orientation resources, many institutions have reduced or eliminated equity gaps.

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC), for example, has established a summer bridge program for underprepared and underrepresented students. This program, along with other support efforts on campus, has allowed UTC to become the only public four-year university in Tennessee to retain black males at a higher rate than their peers.\(^{15}\)

Communities also play a vital role in student retention. Retention is often negatively impacted by misinformed decisions about future career and college options. In Memphis, leaders have developed Memphis Works, an online resource to help prospective postsecondary students explore local career pathways, identify available job opportunities, and pursue relevant credentials.\(^{16}\) Also, employers in Warren County are providing area high school students with work-based learning opportunities in an effort to strengthen the connection between college and career. Still, many regions lack the resources and local engagement necessary to help college students make smarter choices on college and career.

The national movement to improve college graduation and degree attainment rates has produced a wealth of information about effective, evidence-based strategies to raise student retention. For example, Complete College America supports practices such as incorporating remediation into college-level coursework, prescribing schedules for students that eliminate the risk of taking unnecessary courses, and encouraging full-time enrollment to improve graduation rates.\(^ {17}\) Colleges and universities in Tennessee should continue to invest in these and other high-impact practices to help ensure equitable outcomes for all students.\(^{18}\) Communities must also dedicate the critical resources required to help students make informed choices about career and college options.

\(^{15}\) Tennessee Higher Education Commission - Fall 2014-2015 retention rates by race
\(^{16}\) For more information on Memphis Works: https://app.memphisworks.com/
\(^{17}\) Complete College America website: http://completecollege.org/
FINISHING COLLEGE IS NOT GUARANTEED FOR ALL STUDENTS

Disparities in postsecondary education are best examined through graduation rates. Nationally, significant gaps in achievement have long existed for low-income and students of color, which further complicates income inequalities for many communities.

Despite rising graduation rates at many colleges and universities, Tennessee ranks 44th in the nation in degree attainment. Community college 3-year graduation rates have continued to increase and in 2016 averaged 20 percent. Four-year universities have also realized gains in graduation rates but were still ranked 33rd in 2015. While this indicates progress and growth, institutions still need to improve graduation rates.

The state’s investment to incentivize college completion is making a difference. Tennessee Promise students currently have a high rate of success. Persistence to the sophomore year, successful transfer, and graduation rates are far better than non-promise students and national averages.

The rise in graduation rates for Tennessee’s postsecondary institutions has included growing completion rates for certain sub-populations. The achievement gap for Hispanic students at many institutions has substantially narrowed. Black and low-income student achievement, however, remains well below the rate of their peers (see Figure 5 and Figure 6).

20. IPEDS, 2015 and 2016
21. Based on calculations from National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)
23. IPEDS, 2016
There is evidence across the nation that closing achievement gaps for underrepresented or underserved students is possible. Deliberate student success strategies at Florida State University (FSU) and Guttman Community College offer signs of hope that implementing best practice models can substantially improve completion rates and narrow achievement gaps.

FSU has incorporated a series of high-impact practices, including summer bridge programs, structured academic pathways, proactive advising, and financial assistance programs beyond tuition. As a result, the institution has narrowed the achievement gap for African-American students to just three percentage points, ranking FSU in the top twenty nationally for African-American degree production.24

Guttman Community College in New York has implemented a portfolio of best practices, including vouchers for transportation and childcare, a full-time attendance requirement, and an 11-month academic calendar.25 Guttman’s mission focuses on increasing the number of underserved students who graduate in a timely manner. Outcomes for Guttman Community College have been impressive. In 2015, Guttman’s two-year graduation rate (31 percent) was six percentage-points higher than the national average for two-year urban public institutions.26

Evidence of successful practices can also be seen within Tennessee. The Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs) maintain graduation rates above 80 percent.27 Clear pathways to completion, high-touch student support practices, competency-based education opportunities, and strong employer relationships are integrated into all TCAT programs.

Communities also play a critical role in improving college graduation rates. Work-and-earn opportunities through employer-led internships and apprenticeships have resulted in higher rates of completion.28 Affordable resources for childcare or transportation are community supports that can help more citizens chart a successful path for college completion.

We must continue to encourage and expect better outcomes in Tennessee’s higher education system. The evidence exists to prove that greater and more equitable rates of completion are possible, but action must be intentional. Improving graduation rates at Tennessee’s colleges and universities will require thoughtful partnerships between postsecondary institutions and community leaders. These partnerships must be developed to understand student barriers to completion and identify the resources needed to remove these barriers.

While postsecondary education is often heralded as a tool for social mobility, post-success outcomes for many students do not always align with that narrative.

National statistics show gaps in income and employment for minority citizens. Income and wealth gains associated with degree attainment are lower for non-white families, underscoring the fact that the current education system is not always “the great equalizer”. Furthermore, African-Americans in Tennessee experience higher levels of unemployment at every level of educational attainment (see Figure 7). Still, earning a degree or credential remains the best option to increase and maintain incomes above the poverty rate.

Early exposure to careers and meaningful job experiences can be instrumental to closing equity gaps in post-success outcomes. Additionally, more structured paths from postsecondary completion to available jobs is required from colleges and universities. In many cases, institutions equip students with skills and credentials that fail to meet the demands of employers.
Currently, the state has a shortage of workers in sectors such as information technology and manufacturing. Yet few universities have proposed new or revised academic programs in these areas. In 2016, four new programs were approved at public four-year institutions: human services, sport science and coach education, religious studies, and engineering. On the other hand, at the community college level, programs in advanced manufacturing, mechatronics, and information technology were expanded. While some of the latest programs launched by Tennessee colleges and universities address pressing needs in the labor market, many key industries still struggle to find qualified and credentialed workers.

More proactive approaches are necessary to strengthen and sustain labor supply in communities across the state. Furthermore, postsecondary institutions must work together to align credentials to ensure Tennesseans have a clearer pathway in their career field. Deliberate strategies employed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania have helped the city and region build a new economy in the heart of America’s rustbelt. Instead of creating discrete academic programs in high-demand industries, higher education institutions in the region are collaborating to foster local innovation in emerging industries. Strong linkages between education and the labor market have facilitated an effective talent pipeline for many of these high-tech jobs.

We must build stronger systems of information alignment to hold institutions accountable for equipping students with the skills and credentials that employers need in the marketplace. Institutions and employers must also work together to develop opportunities for citizens to continue earning credentials to advance their careers. There are many Tennesseans, especially veterans, with relevant work experience that could qualify for course credit. Also, many adults have the desire to earn additional postsecondary credentials to advance their careers. Through a more expanded use of prior-learning assessments, competency-based education, and stackable credentials, the opportunity exists for institutions and employers to help adults achieve postsecondary credentials. Given the majority of jobs in the future have yet to be created, our institutions will have to remain flexible and adapt to address changing skill and credential demands in the labor market.

30. U.S. Census Bureau, 2015
CASE STUDY: EQUITABLE STUDENT SUCCESS
GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY AND GRADUATION

Georgia State University graduates more black students with bachelor degrees than any other nonprofit institution in the United States, including historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). To accomplish this major milestone, the university implemented a portfolio of initiatives aimed at improving student outcomes including:  

**Summer Success Academy** is a 7-week summer bridge program which targets academically underprepared students and enrolls them in seven credits of non-remedial coursework to prepare them for the rigor of college coursework. Enrollment is combined with intensive support services and all students are put in freshmen learning communities.

**Panther Retention Grants** are micro-grants given to students who need small amounts of financial assistance to cover expenses such as minor car repair, medical bills, etc.

**POUNCE** is a virtual text-based intervention, which uses artificial intelligence to assist students with filling out forms, meeting deadlines, and learning school rules.

**GPS Advising** uses predictive analytics to identify students who are in need to targeted interventions. The use of predictive analytics and proactive advising interventions have increased retention, decreased time to a degree, saved students money, and ultimately saved tax payers over $5 million.

**Meta Majors** require students to enroll in one of seven major clusters placing them in pre-populated block schedules and an associated freshman learning community.

The success of these initiatives has led to increased graduation rates for all students, including students of color and low-income students. For example, graduation rates increased 28 percent for black students and 32 percent for Hispanic students from 2003 to 2015. Graduation rates for low-income and first-generation students also experienced similar increases. These gains were realized as Georgia State University increased enrollment of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students by ten percent.

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CASE STUDY: STRENGTHENING THE WORKFORCE PIPELINE
CALIFORNIA LAUNCHBOARD AND POST-COLLEGE SUCCESS

Stronger data collection across the education-to-career pipeline is integral to informing students, postsecondary institutions, and industry partners of program quality and industry demand. Few systems exist to connect postsecondary outcomes and job performance. If they do exist, the data is typically not easily accessible. California has responded with a collaborative data tool which allows stakeholders to easily access college-to-career data for college and technical education (CTE) students and programs.

Officially launched in 2016, the California LaunchBoard provides community college and K-12 school leaders with economic information, student performance, and employment outcomes. Highlights of the system include:

- **Enrollment patterns** are built into the system and special categories of students are monitored closely including foster youth, veterans, disabled students, and first-generation students.

- **Student success metrics** are tracked at the program level for enrollment, persistence, retention, and graduation. An equity index is embedded to evaluate if disproportionate impacts are observed by race/ethnicity.  

- **Regional employment demand** is compared to the supply of recent graduates to gauge the proportion of graduates to jobs.

- **Employment outcomes** display the number of students who found work within one year of graduation and if their earnings increased.

Stronger connections between education and workforce data benefit multiple stakeholders:

- Individuals understand how their postsecondary choices align with career options.
- Institutions can measure student success and program outcomes.
- Employers can gauge quality and recruit quality talent.
- Policymakers have the tools they need to understand the connections between education and workforce supply and demand.

Tennessee currently has the lowest unemployment rate in the state’s history.\(^{36}\) In many regions, the strong economic growth has tightened the labor market, making it difficult for employers to find qualified talent. To continue retaining and attracting employers, the pipeline of talent will have to increase beyond the current output. All Tennesseans hope our economy will continue to grow in the foreseeable future. However, employer demand in many regions is requiring a substantial amount of credentialed workers and the supply of talent is often a challenge. There is also a real concern about equal participation in this strong economy. The list of economically-distressed counties continues to grow, and labor force participation is the 8th lowest in the nation during this period of historically low unemployment rates.\(^{37}\)

Low attainment rates for Tennesseans have a direct bearing on the quality of life in the state. Data shows annual social costs and tax burdens driven by low attainment for just one graduating high school class in Chattanooga, Knoxville, Memphis, and Nashville to be $67 million, $72 million, $185 million, and $137 million respectively.\(^{38}\) The cost correlation is just as significant for non-urban counties such as Obion and Blount. Cost burdens for these counties range from $4 million to $16 million for the same student population.\(^{39}\)

On the other hand, social benefits of improved degree attainment are substantial for communities. For a city like Nashville to reach its attainment goal, the increase in annual local tax revenue would be $30 million. Even smaller counties such as Lake County and Hamblen County that reach their Drive to 55 goals would see local tax revenue increase by a cumulative $4 million.

Our institutions also have much to gain by supporting the state’s attainment goal. Tennessee remains the only state to appropriate funds to public institutions based solely on outcomes.\(^{40}\) The policy rewards institutions for ensuring students persist through college and earn a credential.\(^{41}\) Based on the outcomes-based funding formula created by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, community colleges could have earned an estimated $300,000 in additional funds last year if student progression had improved by five percent and an estimated $500,000 in additional funds for increasing completion by five percent.\(^{42}\)

Even without state incentives to improve student success, better outcomes bring other financial benefits for colleges and universities. Georgia State University discovered that increasing the retention rate by just one percent raised the institution’s continuing revenue by $3 million.\(^{43}\) The university also found that providing small emergency grants averaging $900 helped more students to persist in college, which, in turn, helped to stabilize annual income.\(^{44}\)

Tennessee has provided financial incentives for public colleges and universities to improve student success, but the outcomes we see at the state’s public postsecondary institutions are not always aligned with these incentives. Furthermore, communities must engage in the work to improve degree attainment rates, to increase tax revenues and reduce social cost burdens.

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\(^{37}\) U.S. Census Bureau, 2016 ACS 1-year estimates.


\(^{42}\) THEC outcomes-based funding formula dynamic simulation. Note: Progression measures include a five percent increase in students accumulating 12, 24, and 36 credits without increasing any other measures.

\(^{43}\) Georgia state backed up analytics with support system, Diverse Education, 2017: http://diverseeducation.com/article/102425/

CONCLUSION

Progress in postsecondary student outcomes over the past few years offers hope for a brighter future in Tennessee. With retention and completion on the rise, we should appropriately commend the colleges and universities in the state for their efforts. Beneath the surface, however, there are significant achievement gaps for low-income students and students of color. Barriers beyond tuition remain a factor for adults to engage in higher education. The changing demographics in our state, combined with the need for more Tennesseans to participate in the current economic boom, require a much larger supply of credentialed talent to attract and retain employers.

No longer will pilot programs or limited-cohort initiatives suffice for the needs of the state. Tennessee’s completion agenda is now more than seven years old, and problems must be tackled with innovative solutions that can benefit all students. Postsecondary institutions need to strengthen existing programs and implement new initiatives based on best practices that have proven successful across the nation. Furthermore, postsecondary institutions and employers must work together to ensure the skills and credentials of graduates align with workforce demands.

Complete Tennessee will continue to press for greater outcomes in college completion and degree attainment rates. We will cultivate partners across the state and equip these advocates with the tools and information necessary to hold institutions accountable. Our work within communities will remain focused on building strategies to support the state’s Drive to 55 goal.

Through this report we emphasize the importance of being mindful of the challenges that students face in college every step of the way. By highlighting exemplars in postsecondary student success, a primary goal for this report is to encourage all regions in Tennessee to evaluate the strategies employed to help college students. This report serves as a call to action for institutions, communities, and employers to increase their investment and ownership of the state’s completion agenda. By looking beyond the current trends of improvement in postsecondary outcomes, data highlight an urgency to build solutions that offer an equal chance of success for the underserved and underrepresented. Our work across the state offers hope that we will make good on our promise to ensure more students are successful and our attainment rate is sufficient for the future needs of our economy.
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