



**COMPLETE
TENNESSEE**

No Time to Wait

2018-19 State of Higher Education in Tennessee

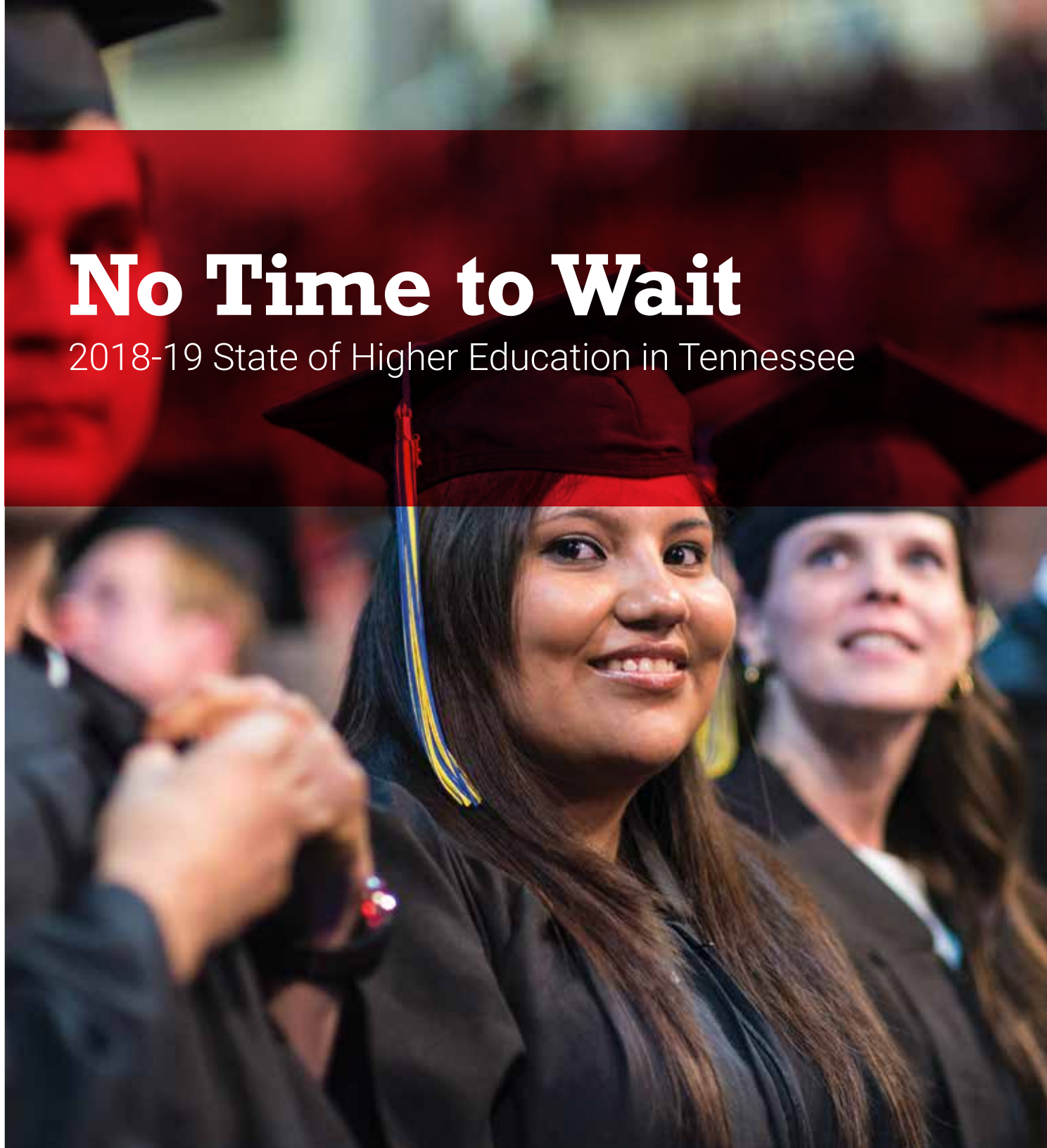




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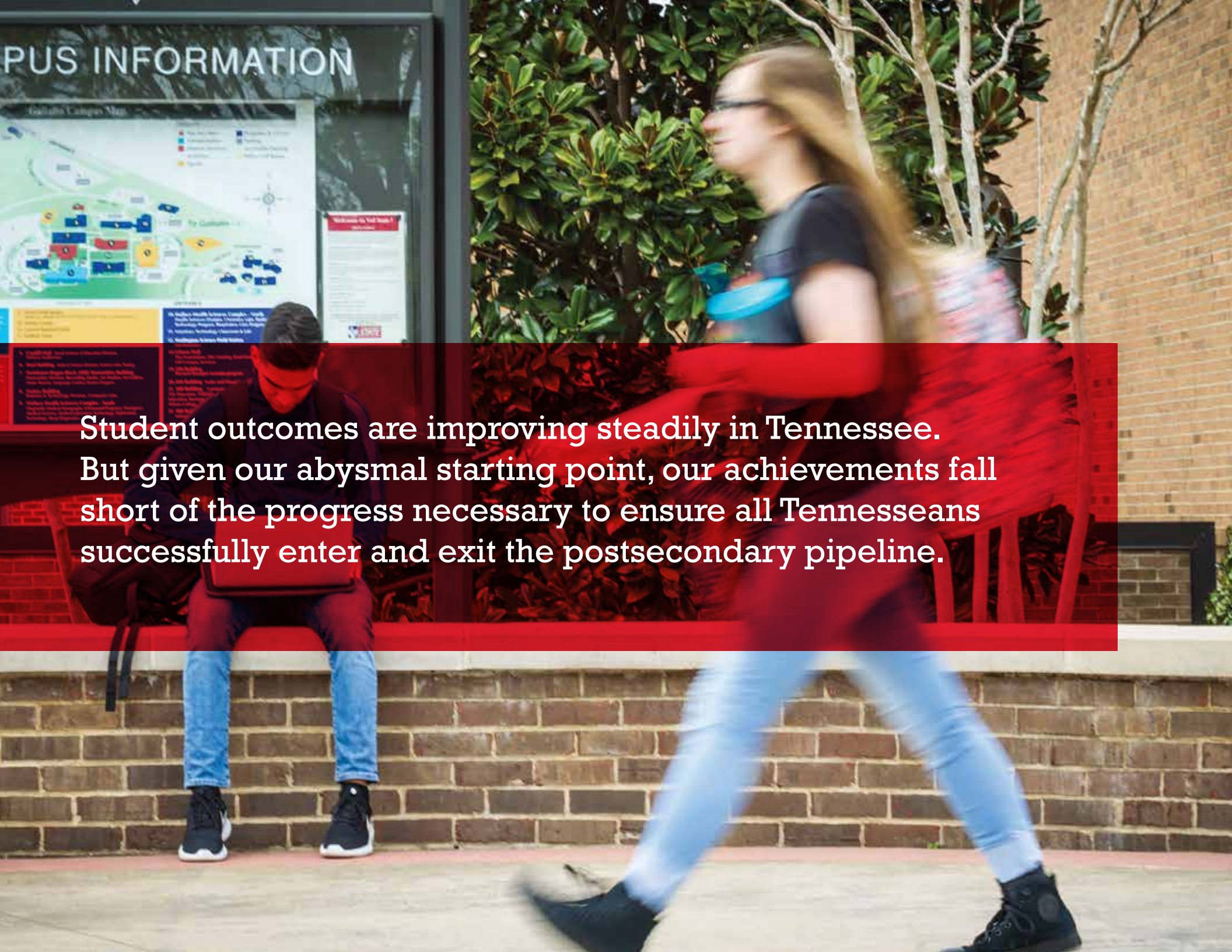
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Tennessee's Reform Timeline

Tennessee's higher education reforms have made possible a comprehensive approach to priority-setting, targeted public investment, strategic collaboration, and program innovation. Sparked by the Complete College Tennessee Act of 2010, Tennessee took a place at the forefront of the national agenda for improving student outcomes in postsecondary education. With the support of the General Assembly, the state launched bold initiatives that have inspired improvement efforts in other states. These initiatives have included Tennessee's movement from funding institutions based on enrollment to an outcomes-based funding model focused on degree completion. Initiatives to increase financial aid and cover tuition have lowered cost as a barrier for many Tennesseans—including tens of thousands of adult learners.

Beyond these initiatives, efforts at the state level have increased communication and program alignment across agencies focused on better preparing Tennesseans through education for success and subsequent careers. The growth in public investment, grant-aid funding, and collaboration has led to improved student outcomes that illustrate the benefits and results that come with embracing innovation and reform. The timeline to the left highlights the key events that have shaped Tennessee's education reform landscape. It also illustrates how these events affected postsecondary enrollment across the state.



PUS INFORMATION



Student outcomes are improving steadily in Tennessee. But given our abysmal starting point, our achievements fall short of the progress necessary to ensure all Tennesseans successfully enter and exit the postsecondary pipeline.

Letter from THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

For more than two years, Complete Tennessee has examined the many factors that affect student success in Tennessee. We have sparked new conversations statewide that center on two important questions about Tennessee's recent postsecondary attainment strategies: What will it take to significantly improve the overall success of college students? And, how can this achievement change the trajectory of our current growth trend in degree attainment?

Student outcomes are improving steadily in Tennessee. But given our abysmal starting point, our achievements fall short of the progress necessary to ensure all Tennesseans successfully enter and exit the postsecondary pipeline. During this time of political transition, we must assess the direction of our higher education system and explore new opportunities that could further advance the state's educational outcomes and goals.

As you read this report, I encourage you to think not only about the more than 300,000 students currently enrolled in Tennessee's colleges and universities, but also those who have not taken or cannot take advantage of the wealth of available postsecondary opportunities. As we move toward the state's Drive to 55, we need all hands on-deck to achieve this goal. This collective commitment means we must remove barriers that stand in the way of Tennesseans who have not found a promising path of access and success in higher education.

I cannot stress this strongly enough: Your engagement in this effort is critical. Already, more than 2,000 Tennesseans have partnered with Complete Tennessee to take part in a movement to secure a brighter future for our college students. I hope this report ignites a new sense of ownership and commitment to address the questions posed above. By doing so, we can continue serving as a beacon of innovation and improved outcomes for our nation.

Sincerely,



Kenyatta Lovett
Executive Director



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



After a decade of K-12 and higher education policy reforms, nearly every Tennessee high school graduate now has the opportunity to pursue a technical training program or associate's degree free of tuition. Adults can take advantage of Tennessee Reconnect to cover their tuition. Today, more than 40 percent of Tennesseans hold a postsecondary credential. This rate represents more than a 9 percentage point increase compared to 2008.¹

Perhaps the greatest effect of these policy efforts, however, has been to change conversations and cultural attitudes about who and what college is for. Creating a college-going culture—particularly in urban centers and rural areas with persistent poverty—takes time and strong relationships. Between 2005 and 2015, Tennessee outpaced all but one state in increasing postsecondary attainment as bold new policies have gone into place in pursuit of the Drive to 55.² But Tennessee can't afford to grow complacent. Despite recent progress, our state still ranks 44th in the nation for postsecondary attainment.

Perhaps the greatest effect of these policy efforts, however, has been to change conversations and cultural attitudes about who and what college is for.

Complete Tennessee's third State of Higher Education report assesses the state's current postsecondary landscape and highlights needed areas of attention to advance educational equity. Progress on these fronts will lead to a healthier, more prosperous population and economy. Failure would put Tennessee at a continued disadvantage for decades.

Increasing Enrollment, Retention, and Graduation

Over the past five years, higher education enrollment rates declined nationwide as job opportunities increased following the Great Recession. Enrollment in Tennessee, however, has remained steadier than the national trend overall. Leading reforms, including Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect, have encouraged more students to pursue a technical certificate or associate's degree, and the increased earning potential for postsecondary credential holders attracts first-time and returning students to Tennessee's colleges and universities.

Despite Tennessee's commitment to increasing college affordability, fewer than a third of the state's low-income students enroll in postsecondary programs, trailing all but two other states in the Southeast and falling far behind the national average. Moreover, while Tennessee's public institutions have gotten better at retaining students from their first to second year, improved community college retention rates have not matched the pace of Tennessee's four-year institutions.

Despite these retention challenges, community colleges graduation rates have increased by nearly 70 percent—from 13 percent to 22 percent—since 2013. Still, fewer than one out of every four community college students graduate within three years. Only one in ten Black students will complete a community college degree. According to data from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, the average graduation rate among African Americans across Tennessee's six locally-governed, four-year institutions has declined each year since 2013, while increasing each year across the University of Tennessee system.

¹ Lumina Foundation. (2018). *A stronger nation*. Retrieved December 2018 from <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2018/#nation>.

² Cahalan, M., Perna, L. W., Yamashita, M., Wright, J. & Santillan, S. (2018). *2018 Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: Historical Trend Report*. Washington, DC: The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education, and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania (PennAHEAD). Retrieved January 2019 from http://pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications-Indicators_of_Higher_Education_Equity_in_the_US_2018_Historical_Trend_Report.pdf.



Increased graduation rates deserve celebration, but this celebration must be coupled with an intense commitment to ensuring success rates are improving for all students, especially historically underserved students of color and low-income students.

Insisting on Equity

In January 2019, Governor Bill Lee took office and the General Assembly welcomed the largest number of new members since 1973. The University of Tennessee system now has an interim president, and the flagship public institution in Knoxville will soon have a new chancellor. New leaders—including newly constituted boards at six public universities—have also taken their positions statewide. In this time of unprecedented leadership transition for higher education and public policy in Tennessee, we cannot afford to lose momentum in driving progress.

Recent years have brought historic policy changes, but inequities in educational outcomes remain an urgent concern. Black and Latino Tennesseans graduate and hold postsecondary credentials at lower rates than Asian and White Tennesseans, and striking differences in educational attainment can be found in communities separated by only a few miles. To deepen our state's commitment to opportunity for all Tennesseans, the time is right to set targets within our overall credential completion agenda to narrow the gaps that continue to hold back too many Tennesseans.

Envisioning Opportunity for All Tennesseans

Building on our recent progress, now is the time to engage in an intensive, statewide effort to eradicate equity gaps entirely. In this report, Complete Tennessee makes the case for the state's higher education systems and institutions to set meaningful targets for increasing graduation rates and narrowing college completion gaps across income, racial and ethnic background, and geographic area. The Drive to 55 catalyzed efforts statewide to increase attainment levels to meet workforce demands. Our economy and democracy demand equal energy to equitably accomplish this attainment goal.

To achieve this vision, we call for:

- Elected officials, higher education stakeholders, and institutional leaders to come together and identify ambitious but attainable annual goals to increase on-time graduation rates and narrow gaps separating student achievement across racial and ethnic populations, income level, and geography. This commitment should also take into account the need to broaden the racial and ethnic diversity of faculty and expand supports to meet the needs of all students, regardless of background or circumstance.
- Students to use their voice in the process of setting these targets, as well as holding leaders accountable for meeting them.
- Advocates—including Complete Tennessee—to play the important role of elevating equity concerns across higher education, remaining in partnership with policy leaders, researchers, philanthropic and business leaders, and on-campus professionals.

Tennessee has set a national example for collaboration and bold policy action, coupled with an intensive commitment to promoting student success. Still, too many students and potential students across the state have yet to benefit from this work. Complete Tennessee stands ready to partner with a diverse set of leaders to address these challenges and promote a more equitable and economically prosperous Tennessee for everyone who calls it home.





WHAT LED US HERE?

A National Completion Agenda

Ten years ago, the country faced a Great Recession that left many Americans out of work and facing an uncertain future. A shrinking job market led many working-age adults to pursue postsecondary credentials to gain new skills to compete for career opportunities in the new economy. In a time of economic transition, business leaders, policymakers, and educators alike raised growing alarm about the need for employees with the credentials and preparation they needed to succeed in the 21st century economy. Authors of a 2012 report sponsored by the US Chamber of Commerce stated bluntly,³

Our youngest workers rank a disappointing 15th out of 34 industrialized countries in the percentage with a college diploma. Although the United States has been successful at getting more young people to start college, far too few finish a degree: 70 [percent] of our high school graduates now move on to some form of postsecondary education, but fewer than half of those who enroll finish a degree or certificate within six years. Graduation rates for [B]lack and Latino students are even worse. And there is growing skepticism about whether those lucky enough to graduate have acquired the skills and knowledge necessary for success in the 21st century economy.

Shared concern across the education, business, and workforce development sectors led to a national effort to increase rates of postsecondary attainment and workforce readiness nationwide. In 2013, the Lumina Foundation initiated a degree attainment movement, setting an ambitious goal for 60 percent of adults to hold a college credential by the year 2025. The foundation's staunch commitment to this goal has inspired 41 states to publicly announce degree attainment targets.⁴

Tennessee's higher education reforms have opened opportunities for thousands of traditional-age and adult learners statewide.

Tennessee was among the first states to pursue comprehensive higher education reforms and has remained a national model of innovation in education. The state's programs and initiatives continue to inspire states throughout the country. Appreciating Tennessee's recent progress is critical to understanding what is possible in the future.

³ Institute for a Competitive Workforce. (2012). *Leaders & laggards: A state-by-state report card on public postsecondary education*. Retrieved January 2019 from <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/leaders-and-laggards/app/docs/2012.pdf>.

⁴ Lumina Foundation, 2018.



Assessing TENNESSEE'S PROGRESS

After years of historic efforts, increasing the number of Tennesseans with an educational credential beyond a high school diploma remains a critical need to empower the state's people and strengthen our state's economy. By 2025, more than half the jobs in our state will require a postsecondary credential. This projected need prompted the Drive to 55 postsecondary attainment initiative. As a state, we must quickly make dramatic attainment gains to equip enough Tennesseans with the credentials necessary to meet workforce demands.

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Employers and educators have expressed concerns about challenges affecting the state's postsecondary completion. As documented in Complete Tennessee's June 2017 report *Room to Grow: Regional Perspectives on Higher Education Improvement*, these challenges range from housing, transportation, and food insecurity to educational program offerings unaligned to regional job requirements.⁵ Meanwhile, many of our communities also confront an opioid epidemic while some have rates of incarceration among the highest in the country.⁶

Between 2005 and 2015, Tennessee had the second-highest increase nationally in postsecondary education attainment (16 percent).⁷ Despite recent progress, stark attainment gaps persist across income, race, and geography. Students who are economically disadvantaged, students of color, and students from urban and rural districts overall continue to lag their more affluent, White, and suburban peers. ACT results indicate far too few students from all backgrounds graduate high school ready for college-level coursework.

With a set of nationally-recognized policies now in place, Tennesseans must deepen our commitment to address ongoing inequities in access, affordability, and attainment among historically underserved populations in our state—including students of color, first-generation students, and students from low-income backgrounds and rural communities.

This report provides a broad overview of the current condition of Tennessee's higher education landscape and highlights needed areas of attention to advance educational equity. Progress on these fronts will lead to a healthier, more prosperous population and economy for our state. Failure could put Tennessee at a disadvantage for decades.

⁵ Complete Tennessee. (2017). *Room to grow: Regional perspectives on higher education improvement*. Available online at <http://completetennessee.org/advocacy-and-accountability/>.

⁶ Looney, A. & Turner, N. (2018). *Work and opportunity before and after incarceration*. Brookings Institution. Retrieved November 2018 from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/es_20180314_looneyincarceration_final.pdf

⁷ Cahalan, Perna, Yamashita, Wright, & Santillan, 2018.

Enrollment Trends

Public institutions enroll nearly a quarter-million Tennesseans. Between 2016 and 2017, overall enrollment increased by nearly 2 percent. Compared to 2014, enrollments have increased across the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology, community colleges, and University of Tennessee system and declined slightly among four-year locally-governed institutions (LGIs).⁸

In addition to public colleges and universities, more than a quarter of all higher education students in Tennessee are enrolled in the state's private institutions. The 34 member institutions of the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association (TICUA) enrolled 74,016 full-time students in the Fall 2018 semester.⁹ These institutions comprise a critical and diverse postsecondary sector in Tennessee. For the purposes of this report, however, we focus primarily on public four- and two-year institutions, where the greatest number of students enroll and state policy interventions may have the most direct impact on postsecondary attainment rates.

Figure 2 compares the racial and ethnic composition of student populations in Tennessee's four- and two-

⁸ Locally-governed institutions consist of 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.

⁹ TICUA. (2018). *Characteristics*. Retrieved January 2019 from https://cdn.ymaws.com/ticua.org/resource/resmgr/advocacy_research_files/publications/characteristics2018fall.pdf.

Figure 1. Tennessee Public Higher Education Enrollment 2014-2017

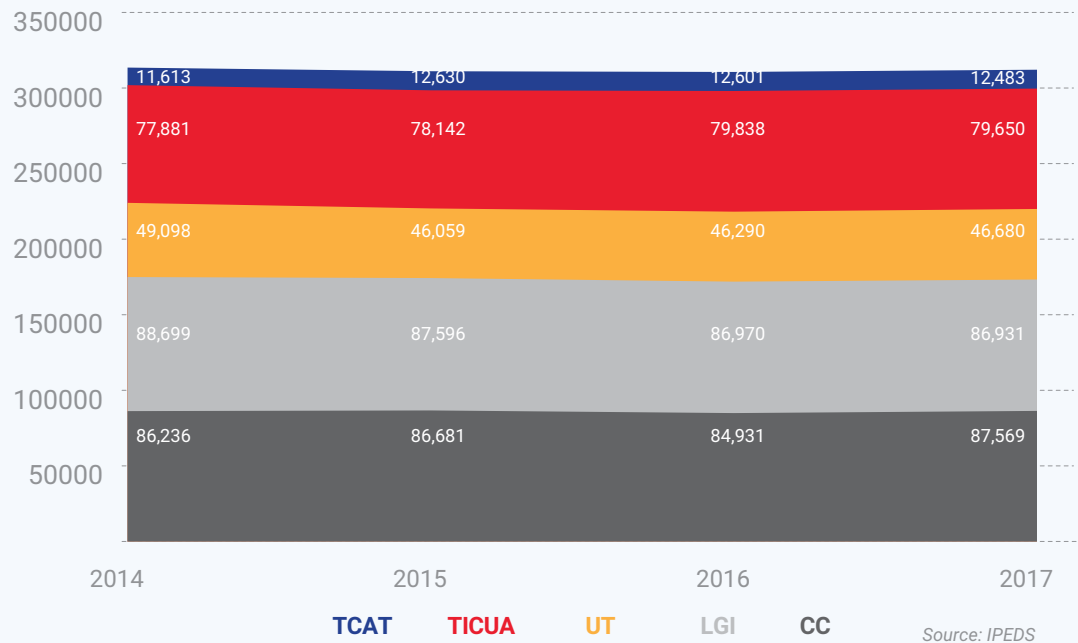
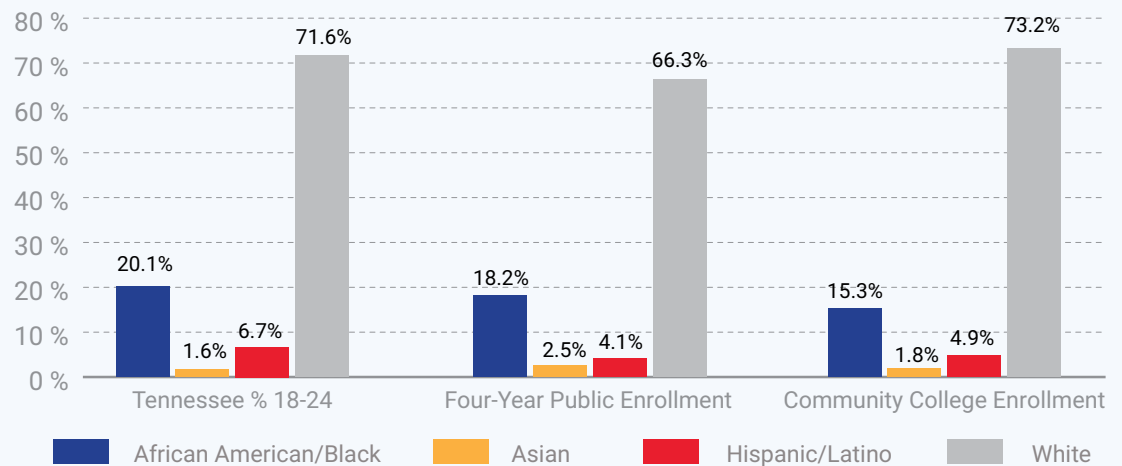


Figure 2. Race and Ethnicity of Students by Public Higher Education Sector Compared to Traditional-Age Student Population



year sectors to the composition of the state's overall traditional-aged (18-24) student population.

Approximately 30 percent of Tennessee students from low-income families enroll at a college or university, falling behind the national average of 34 percent. Using 2016 data—the most recent year for which these data are available—Figure 3 compares Tennessee's enrollment of low-income students to border states and the national average.¹⁰

Retention Rates

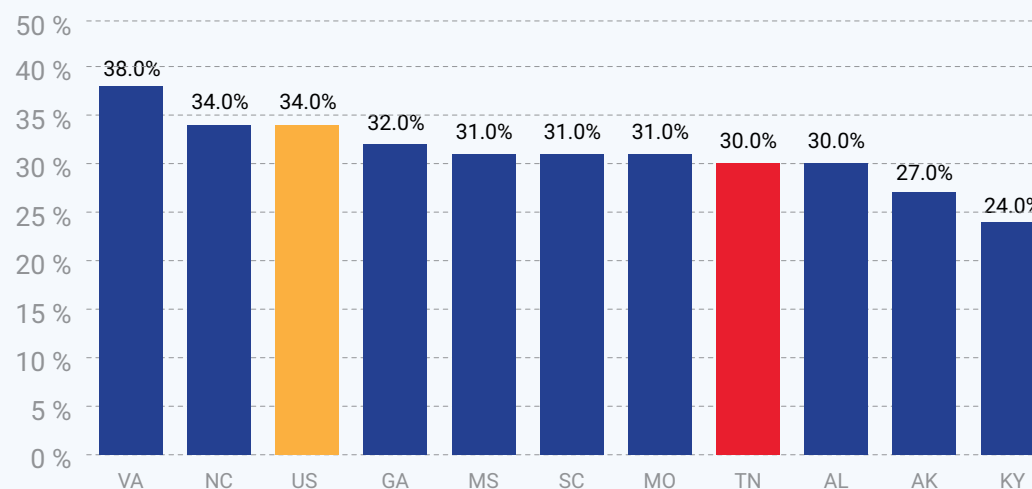
National retention rates have remained relatively constant in recent years. Approximately three out of four students enrolled in bachelor's degree programs return for their second year. This trend can be seen in retention across four-year institutions in Tennessee. Retention in the UT system has increased from 76 percent in 2014 to 78 percent in 2017. Among locally-governed four-year institutions, the retention rate in 2017 increased from previous years to go beyond 72 percent.¹¹ Community college retention declined by 3 percentage points between 2015 and 2016, but rose again to more than 54 percent in 2017. These open-access institutions provide critical entry points to postsecondary education and economic opportunity. Nationally, public two-year institutions retained 62

¹⁰ Mortenson, T. (2017). College participation rates for students from low-income families by state and sector: 1998 to 2016, *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, 290.

¹¹ IPEDS

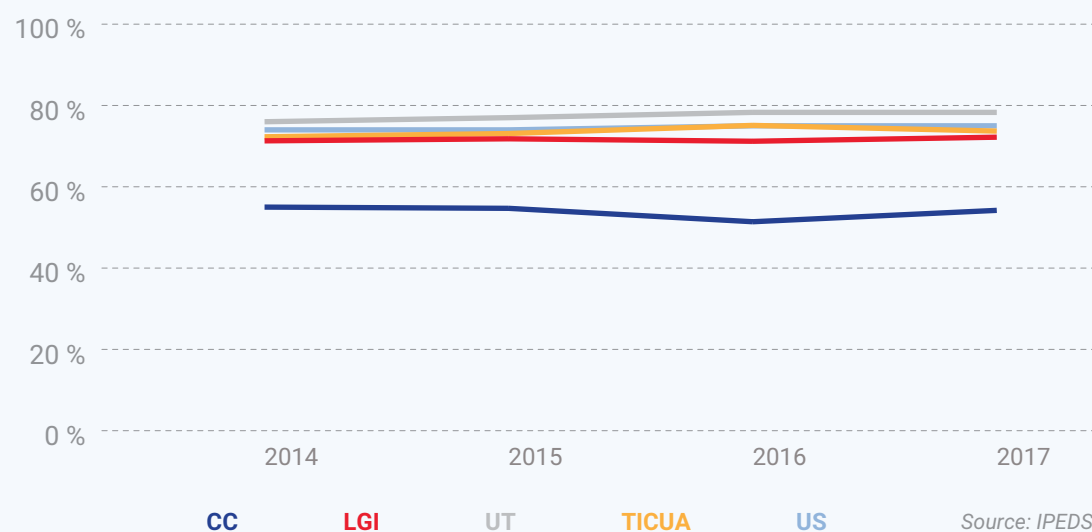
* Participation rates for low-income students are estimated based on: 1) public school enrollment; 2) and percent of 4th to 9th graders that were approved for a free or reduced-price lunch 9 years earlier; and 3) numbers of dependent Pell Grant recipients from each state each year.

Figure 3. Percentage of Low-Income Students Enrolling in Postsecondary Institutions after High School by State, 2016*



Source: Mortenson, T. (2017). College participation rates for students from low-income families by state and sector: 1998 to 2016, *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*, 290

Figure 4. First- to Second-Year Student Retention Rates, 2014-2017



Source: IPEDS

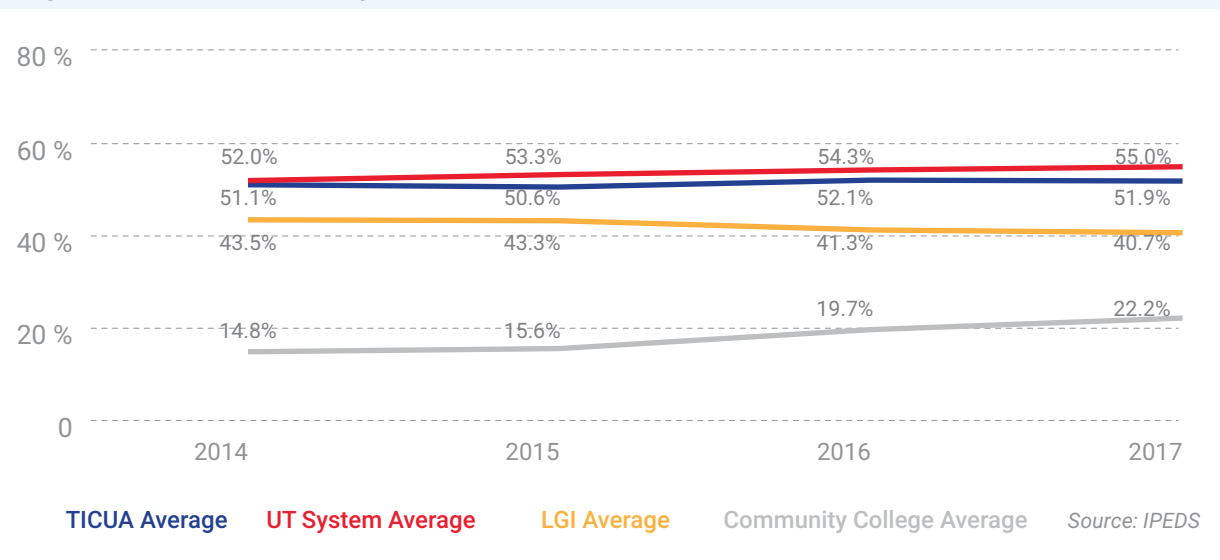
percent of first-time students from 2015 to 2016, the most recent years for which data were available when preparing this report.¹²

Graduation Rates

Earning a degree is a major milestone that opens career paths and leads to new opportunities. Postsecondary credential holders not only are better prepared for the workforce and earn more over their lifetimes, but they also have better overall health¹³ and higher levels of community engagement.¹⁴ These individual, economic, and social benefits underscore the importance of the national effort to increase postsecondary completion.

Among bachelor's degree-granting public institutions nationally, 59 percent of all students who enrolled in Fall 2010 completed their degree programs within six years.¹⁵ In Tennessee, 58 percent of first-time students who enrolled at TICUA institutions in Fall 2011 had graduated by 2017.¹⁶ This rate compares to a six-year graduation rate of 55 percent across the UT system. UT-Knoxville's graduation rate of 70 percent exceeded that of the campuses at Chattanooga (45 percent) and Martin (50 percent). Across the six locally-governed

Figure 5. Graduation Rates by Institution Sector, 2013-2017



institutions, 44 percent of students graduated within six years. Tennessee Tech led these institutions with a six-year graduation rate of 49 percent; Tennessee State had the lowest rate at 29 percent.¹⁷

Examining graduation rates across institutional types and student populations reveals a more complex story. By 2017, 22 percent of students who

enrolled in Tennessee's community colleges in 2014 had completed a degree. This three-year graduation rate represents a 69 percent increase compared to the 2013 graduation rate of 13 percent. Over that time period, the three-year African American graduation rate increased from 6 percent to 9 percent. White community college students generally graduate at slightly higher rates, while

12 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2017, Fall Enrollment component. See Digest of Education Statistics 2017, Table 326.30.

13 State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE). (2017). Better health, better learning: Research on improving student health and academic success. Retrieved December 2018 from <https://tnscore.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Better-Health-Better-Learning-2017.pdf>; Sycamore Institute. (2017). How education influences health in Tennessee. Retrieved December 2018 from <https://www.sycamoreinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017.12.21-FINAL-How-Education-Influences-Health-In-Tennessee.pdf>.

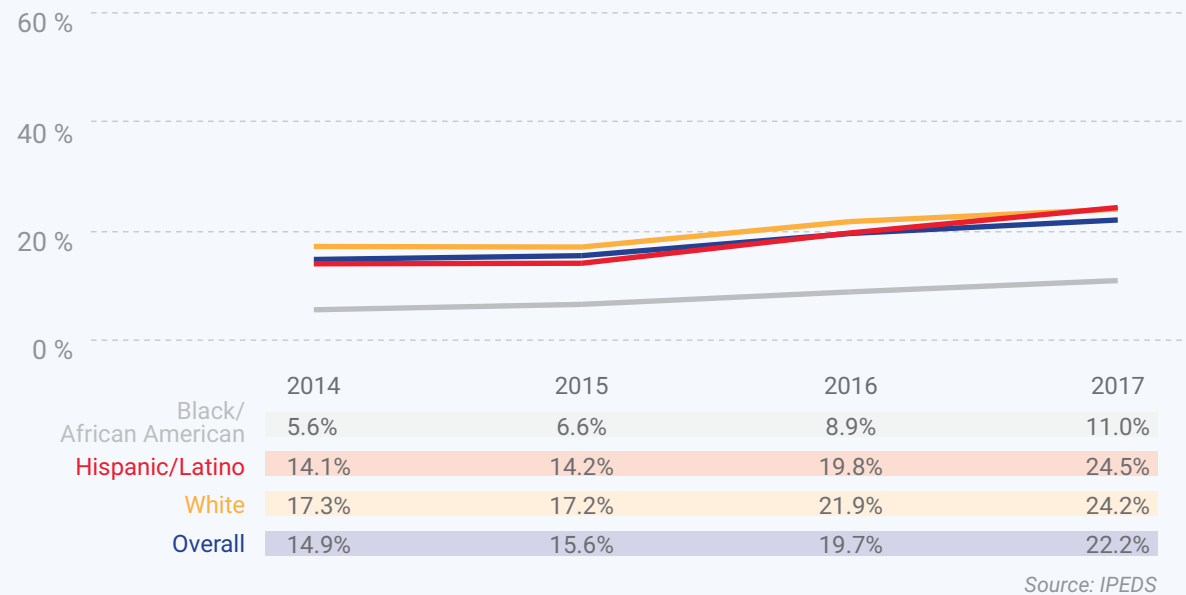
14 Think Tennessee & Complete Tennessee. (2018). State of our state: Education and youth civic engagement. Retrieved December 2018 from <http://thinktennessee.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/State-of-our-State-Policy-Brief-Education-and-Youth-Civic-Engagement-FINAL.pdf>.

15 U.S. Department of Education, (2018). *The Condition of Education 2018* (NCES 2018-144), Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved January 2019 from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>.

16 IPEDS.

17 Ibid.

Figure 6. Community College Three-Year Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity



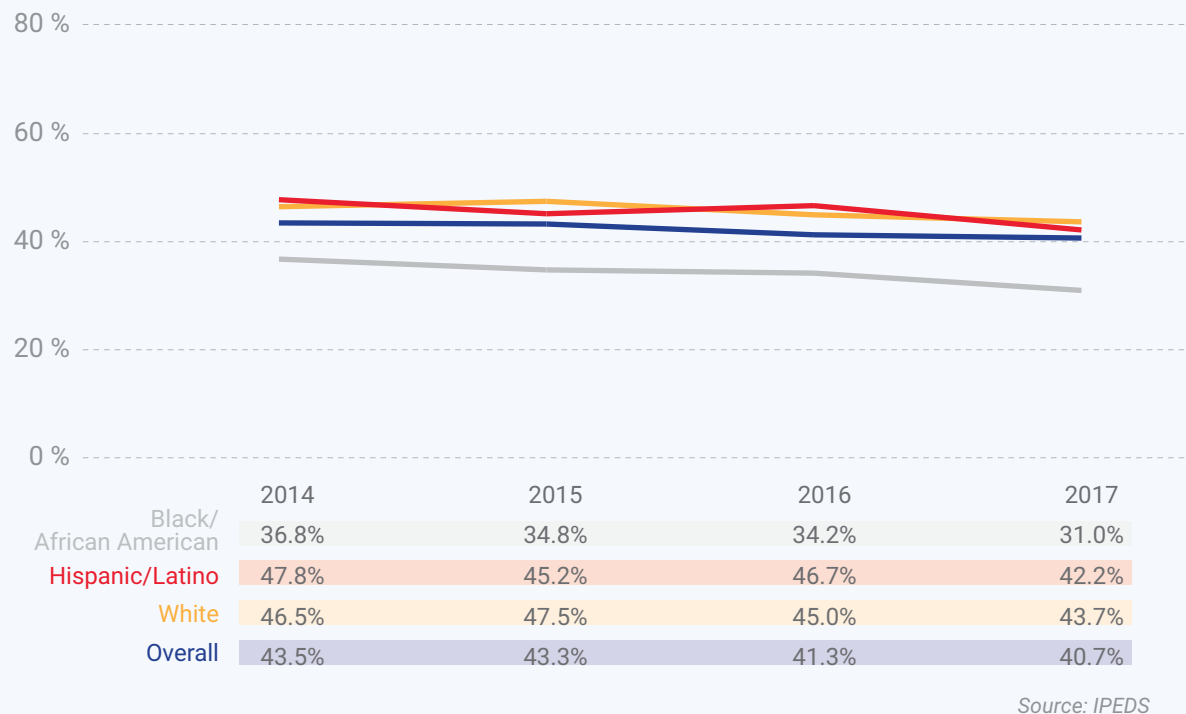
Latino rates have closely followed overall average rates. Tennessee's community college graduation rates compare to a national average three-year graduation rate of 24 percent.¹⁸

Nearly half of all students who pursue bachelor's degrees at an LGI complete their degrees within six years. White students graduate at slightly higher rates. Data from 2017 show 12 percent more White students than African American students graduate within six years.

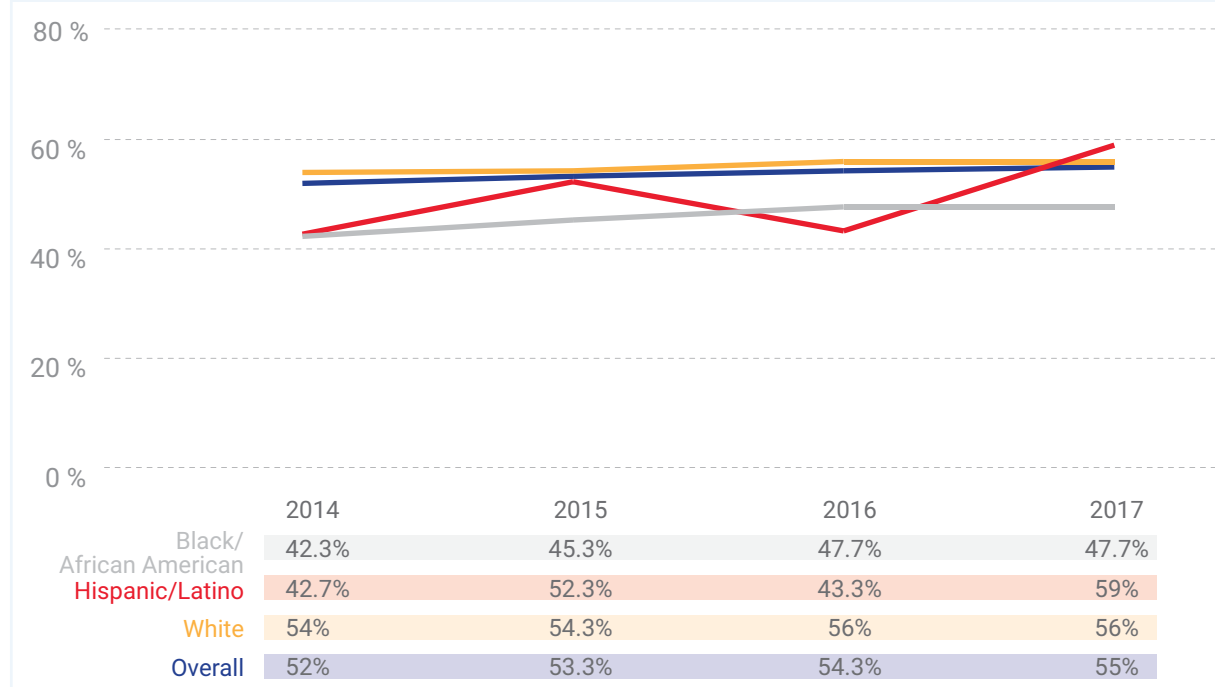
Graduation rates among locally-governed four-year institutions have remained generally unchanged over the last five years, with some noticeable declines across racial and ethnic groups. African American six-year graduation rates have declined each year since 2013. Today, only a third of Black students graduate within six years of enrollment among these universities, representing a decline of more than 5 percentage points since 2014.

Students graduate at higher rates from institutions within the University of Tennessee system than from LGIs or community colleges. The Knoxville campus's six-year graduation rate of 71 percent drives a good deal of the UT system's higher overall graduation rate. The system's campuses at Chattanooga and Martin had six-year graduation rates for the Fall 2011 cohort of 45 percent and 48 percent, respectively.¹⁹ Although a gap of more than 8 percentage points

Figure 7. LGIs Six-Year Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity



18 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Winter 2016–17, Graduation Rates component. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2017*, Table 326.20.
 19 2017–2018 Tennessee Higher Education Fact Book, Table 3.7.

Figure 8. UT System Six-Year Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity

Source: IPEDS

separates the six-year graduation rate for students who identify as White and those who identify as African American, this gap has narrowed from nearly 12 percentage points in 2013. Latino students now graduate at rates roughly equal to their White classmates across the system.

Although 17 percent of Tennesseans identify as Black or African American, enrollment data show only 6 percent of UT-Knoxville students

identified as Black or African American in Fall 2017. Latino students comprised 4 percent of Fall 2017 enrollment at UT-Knoxville, compared to a statewide Latino population of nearly 6 percent.²⁰ Low enrollment rates for these populations and students from other racial and ethnic groups can have significant effects on graduation rates from year to year.

Advancing Equity for Tennessee Students

Even as Tennessee has made important strides to open access to higher education and improve postsecondary affordability, significant gaps still separate the experiences and outcomes of students across race, income, and geography. The 2015-2025 Master Plan for Tennessee Postsecondary Education recognizes the persistent attainment gaps for student subpopulations. Data in this section show troubling disparities across student subpopulations that must be eliminated to ensure more equitable opportunities for all Tennesseans.

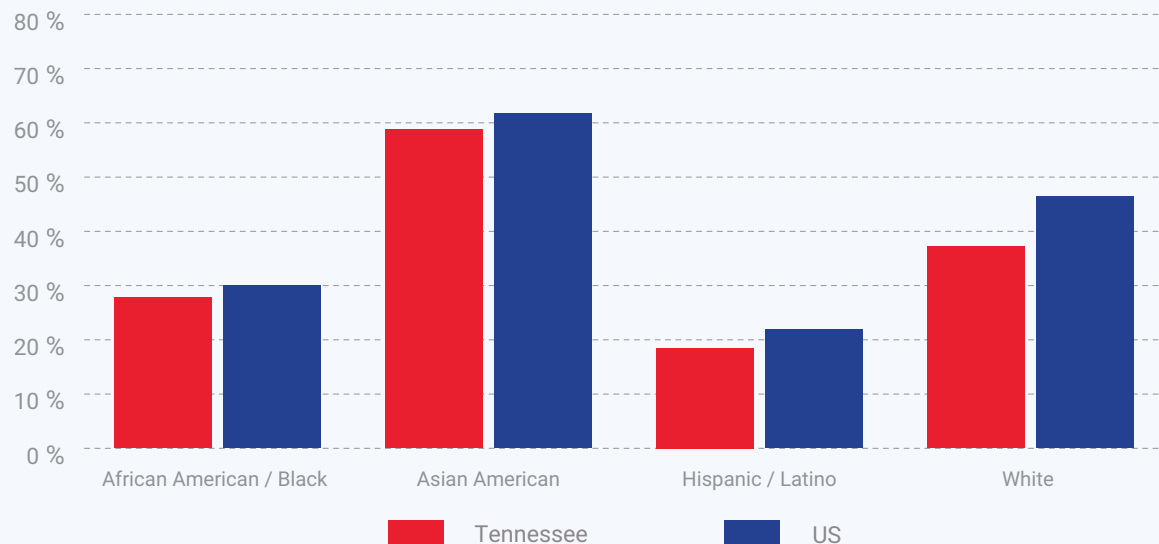
Racial and Ethnic Attainment Disparities.

With support from the Lumina Foundation, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission committed in the 2015-2025 higher education master plan to increase by 50,000 the number of African American and Latino Tennesseans with a postsecondary degree by the year 2025. Achieving this goal requires institution-level action and implementation of practices that lead to increased enrollment and on-campus support for students of color degree completion.

Black and Latino postsecondary attainment trails that of Tennesseans who identify as White and Asian American. Further, compared to their same-race peers, Tennesseans across racial and ethnic subpopulations have lower postsecondary attainment rates than national averages.

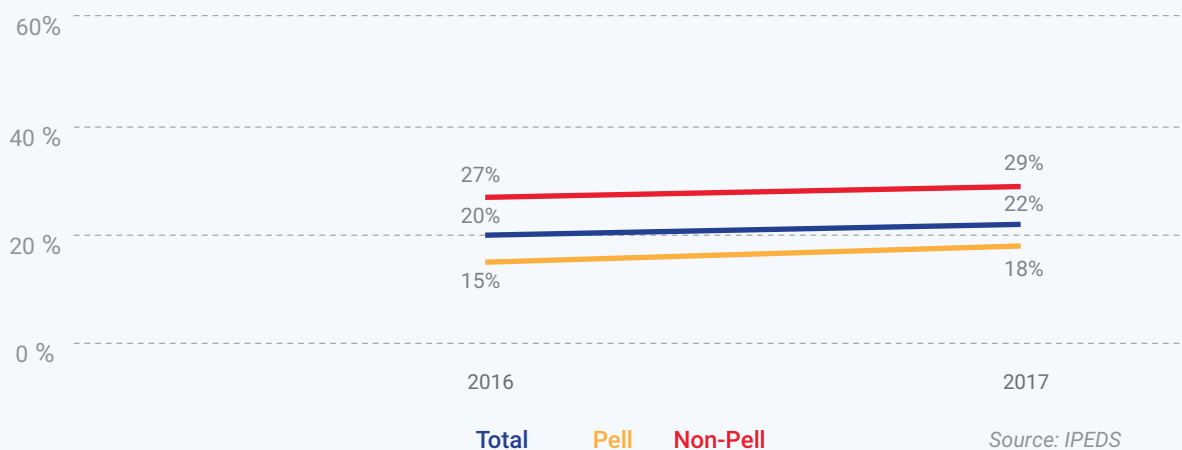
²⁰ IPEDS and US Census.

Figure 9. US and Tennessee Postsecondary Attainment Levels by Race/Ethnicity



Source: Lumina Foundation. (2018). *A stronger nation. Tennessee State Report*. Retrieved October 2018 from <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/b86130c5-c92e-4864-a891-54191e5df5ad>.

Figure 10. Community College Three-Year Graduation Rates by Pell Eligibility



Source: IPEDS

Disparate Outcomes by Income Background.

The federal Pell grant is intended to make higher education more affordable for low-income students. Receiving this grant, however, does not guarantee a degree. Only 18 percent of Pell-recipient first-time students who entered Tennessee community colleges in Fall 2014 had graduated by Fall 2017. This rate compares to a graduation rate of 29 percent for non-Pell-recipient students. Still, the graduation rate for both groups increased compared to the three-year rate for students who first enrolled in 2013. Nationally, 25 percent of Pell recipients graduate within three years from two-year institutions.²¹

Between 2016 and 2017, the gap separating graduation rates across the six locally-governed institutions for Pell-eligible and non-Pell students increased, as the rate decreased for those students with Pell and increased for their more affluent peers. This gap narrowed slightly in the community college sector. While graduation rates improved for both groups, rates increased at a slightly higher rate among lower-income students. Six-year graduation rates across the UT system's undergraduate institutions remained essentially at the same rate in 2017 as 2016, separate by a gap of approximately 15 percentage points. Future versions of this report will provide longer longitudinal views of gaps separating graduation rates across student income backgrounds.

²¹ Rossman, D. (2017). New graduation data on Pell recipients reveals a gap in outcomes. Ithaca S+R. Retrieved January 2019 from <https://sr.ithaca.org/blog/new-graduation-data-on-pell-recipients-reveals-a-gap-in-outcomes/>.

Without an aggressive, comprehensive approach to increase graduation rates for all students while simultaneously narrowing graduation rate disparities for historically underserved populations, higher education attainment rates will continue to have a strong relationship to income and race—and run the risk of perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Rural Opportunity Inequity. Inequitable access to postsecondary options and under-preparation of rural youth require action at the state and regional levels to enhance equity for Tennessee's rural students.²² In 2018, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission launched a \$1.4 million grant program to support dual-enrollment programs in 19 economically-distressed rural counties. These one-time grants fund courses that lead to technical certificates that enhance students' future workforce potential. Still, cultural attitudes toward postsecondary education pose an ongoing challenge in many rural communities.²³ For high school graduates who leave their home rural communities to pursue further education, rural community leaders have shared their struggle to expand opportunities and amenities that attract young adults back after completing their degrees.

22 Koricich, A., Chen, X., & Hughes, R. P. (2018). Understanding the effects of rurality and socioeconomic status on college attendance and institutional choice in the United States. *The Review of Higher Education*, 41(2), 281-305.

23 Tamburin, A. (12 November 2018). Tennessee's next college goal is playing out in Hardeman County. Here's what it means for the state. Retrieved December 2018 from <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2018/11/12/tennessee-rural-counties-college-high-school-grant/1538520002/>.

Figure 11. LGI Six-Year Graduation Rates by Pell Eligibility

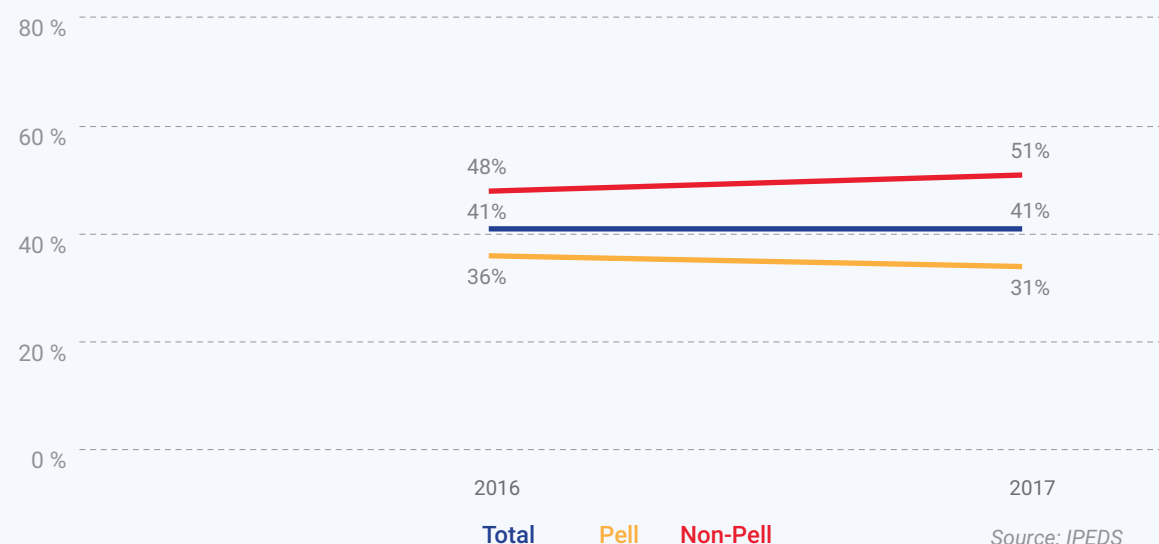
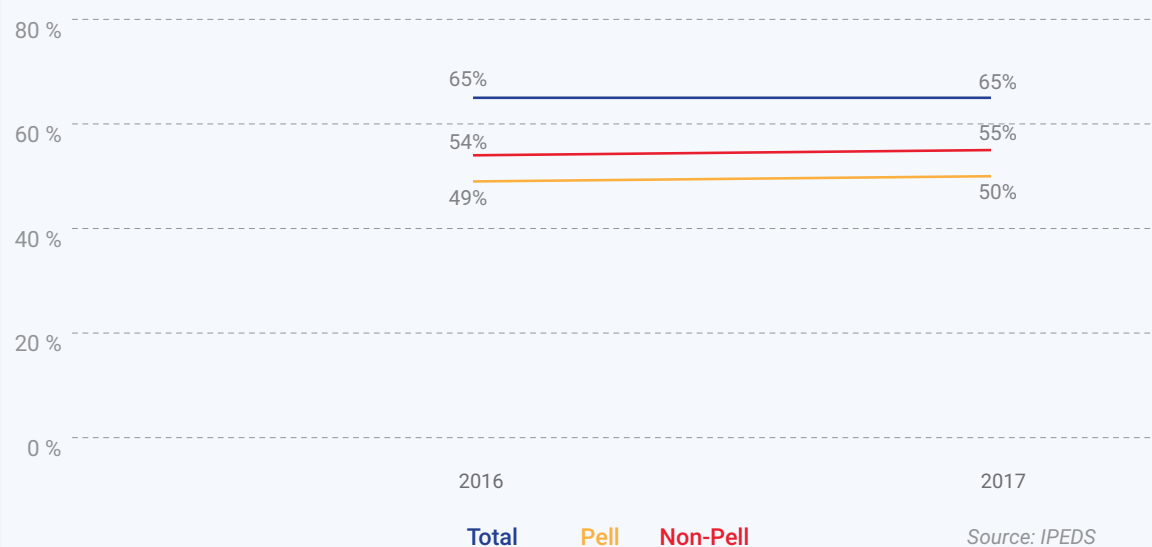


Figure 12. UT System Six-Year Graduation Rates by Pell Eligibility

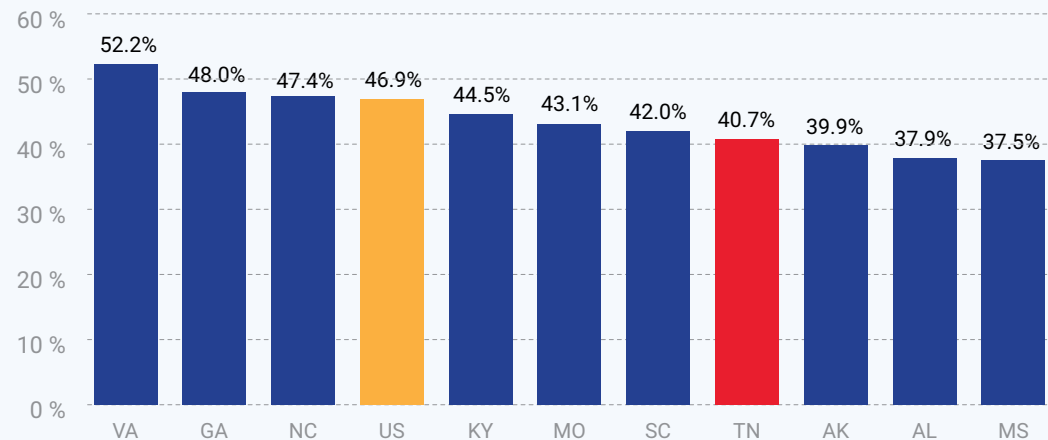


Declining employment prospects in many rural communities contributes to other challenges, including addiction. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Tennessee has the 13th highest ranking for opioid overdoses, with the rate of overdoses increasing by nearly 140 percent over the past decade. Researchers at UT-Knoxville received a \$200,000 federal grant in 2018 to support a 10-county consortium in East Tennessee dedicated to combating the opioid epidemic through treatment and prevention.²⁴ Concerted efforts to increase hope and opportunity should build on the strength and resilience of rural communities across Tennessee.

Attainment Rates

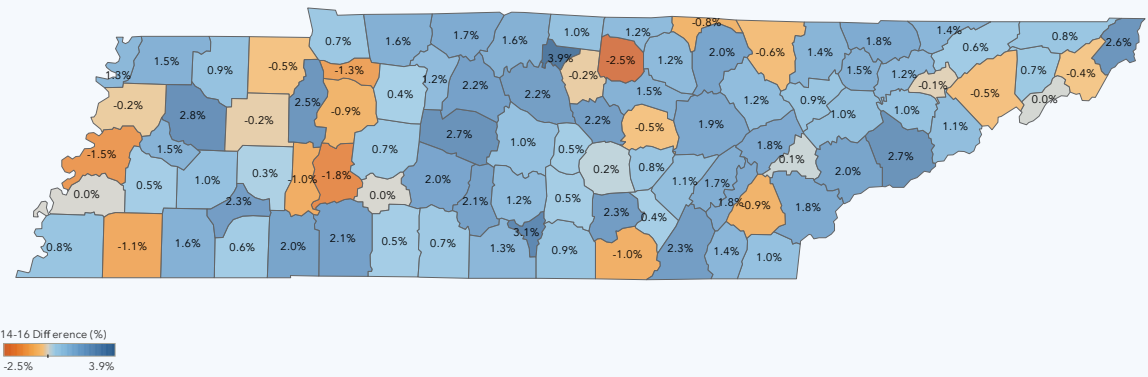
According to a report from the Lumina Foundation using US Census data, Tennessee's attainment rate for high-quality industry certificates and postsecondary degrees exceeds that of only three of its neighbor states: Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi. The national average attainment rate of 46.9 percent exceeds Tennessee's by nearly 7 percentage points. Figure 13 compares Tennessee's attainment rates to other states in the region and the national average.²⁵

Figure 13. Certificate and Degree Attainment, 2018



Source: Lumina Foundation. (2018). *A stronger nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent*. Retrieved November 2018 from <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2018/#nation>.

Change in Overall Attainment Rates 2014-2016



Source: US Census, American Community Survey Population Estimates (2012-2016).

24 University of Tennessee Knoxville. (2018). UT wins HRSA funding for rural consortium to fight region's opioid epidemic. Office of Research and Engagement Press Release. Retrieved January 2019 from <https://research.utk.edu/ut-wins-hrsa-funding-for-rural-consortium-to-fight-regions-opioid-epidemic/>.

25 Lumina Foundation. (2018). *A stronger nation*.

Case Studies

Table 1. College Completion Community Priority Focus Areas

Focus Strategy	Completion Communities
Secondary to Postsecondary: Increasing high school students' exposure to postsecondary programs, coursework, and institutions	• Greene, Hamblen, and Washington Counties • Humphreys and Perry Counties • Lake, Obion, and Weakley Counties
Adult Reconnect: Raising the number of adult returning students who complete a college degree or credential	• Bradley and Meigs Counties • Lauderdale and Tipton Counties
Postsecondary Support: Launching programs and initiatives that help low-income students complete a postsecondary program	• Greene, Hamblen, and Washington Counties • Lauderdale and Tipton Counties
Industry Engagement: Strengthening the education-to-career pipeline by fostering connections between industry and education leaders	• Bradley and Meigs Counties • Greene, Hamblen, and Washington Counties • Humphreys and Perry Counties • Lake, Obion, and Weakley Counties

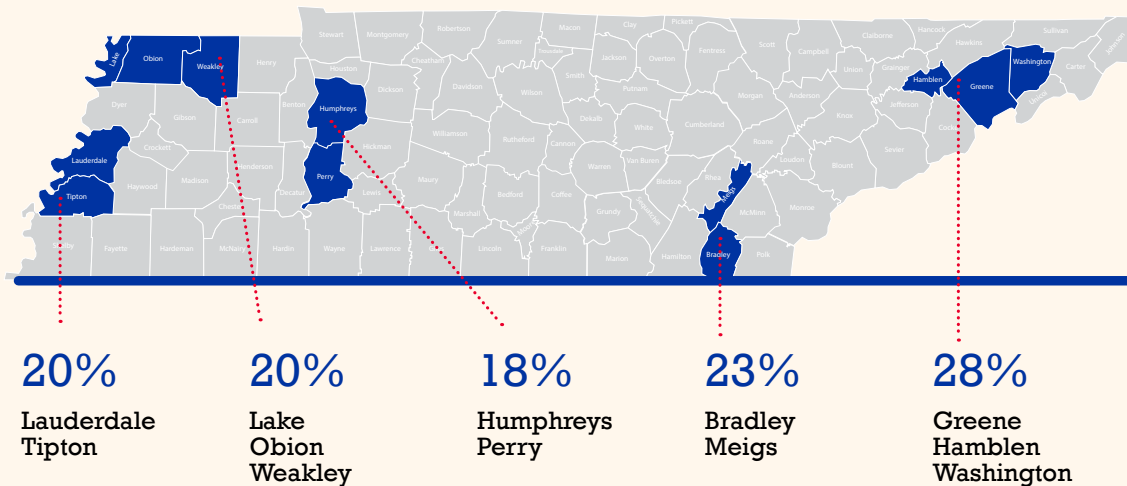
Case Study: Tennessee's College Completion Communities

Recognizing that addressing barriers to postsecondary progress for rural students in Tennessee requires involvement from people across many sectors, in 2018 Complete Tennessee launched a five-region College Completion Communities (CCCs) initiative. The program engages rural communities to develop and implement comprehensive strategies to raise regional postsecondary attainment, while also launching strategies to raise awareness of the value of higher education for prospective students and their families.

Through the CCCs, each community assembled a Completion Council of regional leaders that includes educators, elected officials, and business and community representatives; developed completion plans of action to address the barriers most present in their areas; and selected at least two specific opportunity areas of focus from among four potential intervention areas.

In September 2018, CCC leadership teams presented their strategies at a statewide summit in Nashville. These leaders participate throughout the year in web-based information sessions on proven strategies to increase postsecondary attainment. By elevating and celebrating efforts in College Completion Communities, this initiative encourages a cultural shift in the perceived value of higher education, promotes grassroots advocacy, and inspires other regions to establish their own completion strategies.

Postsecondary Attainment Rates in College Completion Communities



Case Study: California's Statewide Equity Agenda

In California, the community college system's Equity Initiative requires each campus to develop a student equity plan. Exemplar student equity plans are posted on the community college system's website for reference. Campuses identify populations for dedicated attention and needed student services to increase completion rates. The California State University system also has undertaken a comprehensive equity-oriented agenda. The CSU campuses have committed to specific target graduation rates for first-time and transfer students, as well as to eliminating achievement gaps by 2025. While Tennessee differs in many ways from California, a robust, clear agenda for closing our own state's equity gaps should reflect the urgency of addressing these challenges.

In 2016, leaders of the 23-campus CSU decided to establish specific goals for the system—the largest and most diverse higher education system in the United States. The Graduation Initiative 2025 set three primary goals for the system:

- Increase the four-year first-time student graduation rate from 19 percent to 40 percent; increase the six-year graduation rate from 57 percent to 70 percent.

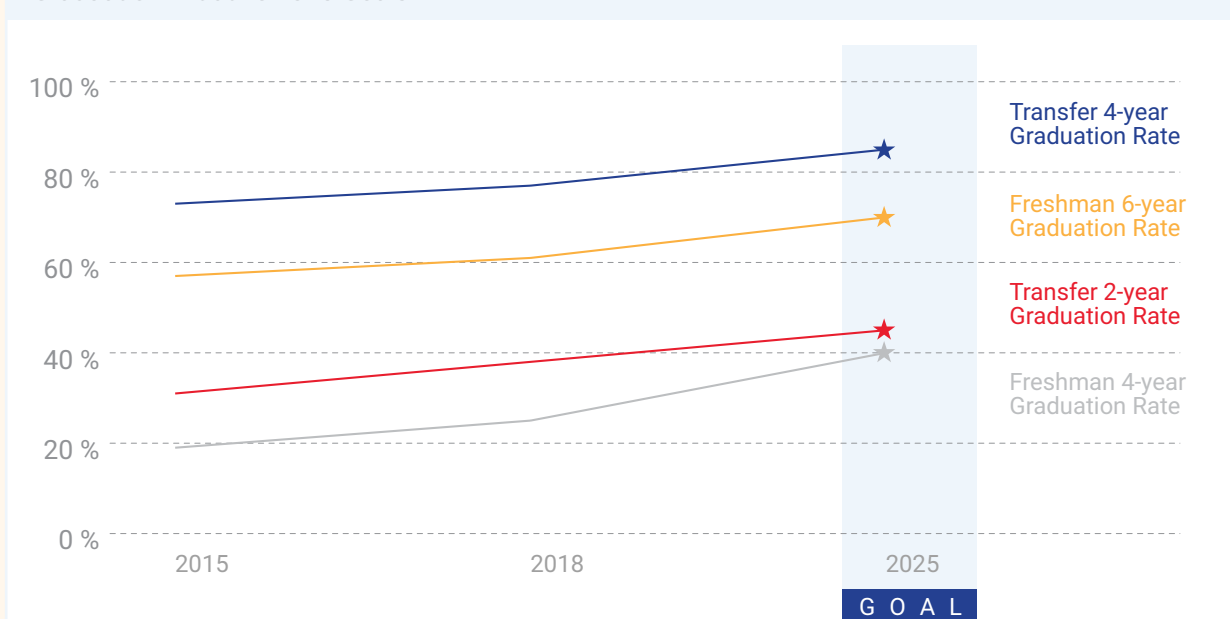
- Increase the two-year transfer student graduation rate from 31 percent to 45 percent; increase the four-year graduation rate from 73 percent to 85 percent.
- Eliminate achievement gaps for low-income students and students from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds.

CSU leaders set these goals despite concerns that higher expectations for graduation rates could harm low-income students and students of color by pushing them into courses for which they were underprepared. However, data released in November 2018 showed noteworthy gains across the system.

According to *Inside Higher Ed*, across the CSU system, “the four-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time freshmen increased six percentage points over three years, from 19.2 percent in 2015 to 25.4 percent in 2018. The six-year graduation rate also increased by four percentage points, from 57 percent in 2015 to 61.1 percent in 2018.” Graduation gaps between Pell Grant recipients and their non-Pell classmates narrowed by 1 percentage point, while gaps between African American, Native American, and Hispanic/Latino students and their White classmates narrowed by 2 percentage points over the last two years.²⁷

Cross-institutional working groups that include faculty, staff, and student leaders provide input

Graduation Initiative 2025 Goals



²⁷ Smith, A. A. (9 November 2018). Cal State sees major gains in graduation rates. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved November 2018 from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/11/09/cal-state-system-sees-record-increases-graduation-rates>.

to help CSU system leaders meet the benchmark goals necessary to realize the Graduation Initiative 2025 goals. These working groups include:

- Academic Preparation
- Enrollment Management
- Financial Support
- Student Engagement and Well-Being
- Data-Driven Decision-Making
- Administrative Barriers

These groups have collaboratively identified strategies to advance outcomes for all students while maintaining an explicit focus on eliminating longstanding equity gaps that closely resemble those in Tennessee's higher education outcomes. The CSU system also hosts an annual two-day Graduation Initiative 2025 Symposium featuring workshops and nationally-recognized speakers who share evidence-based student success strategies. Institutional leaders from across the state attend the symposium to learn about effective practices that could be implemented at their campuses.

The approach taken by the California State University system may hold promise for targeted goals along Tennessee's path toward achieving or surpassing our state's 55 percent attainment goal by 2025, coupled with a focus on eliminating systemic disparities in completion outcomes across income, geographic, and racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Case Study: Illinois Legislative Resolutions to Close Equity Gaps and Increase Graduation Rates

In 2018, both the Illinois Senate and House of Representatives passed resolutions committing to close the state's large racial and economic achievement gaps in college degree attainment by 2025. SR 1647/HR 1017 urges the Illinois P-20 Council to "include equity-focused targets aimed at closing institutional racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps." Members of the Illinois state legislature recognized achieving the state's 60 percent postsecondary attainment goal by 2025 requires a comprehensive strategy with specific progress metrics for "all critical benchmarks, including increasing degree completion rates for low-income, first generation, African American and Latino students, and adult learners."²⁸ These actions by the Illinois legislature make a values statement about the importance of focusing attention on and working to eliminate persistent equity gaps.

Everybody in our university community believes we should effectively serve students and improve graduation rates. People may have different opinions about how to do that, but everybody agrees with the goal. It's impossible to do the same thing we've done for the last 50 years and expect gains in graduation rates and closing equity gaps.

James Minor

California State University Senior Strategist for Academic Success and Inclusive Excellence

²⁸ Project for College Completion. (26 November 2018). Illinois House passes resolution to close college racial, economic achievement gaps and increase graduation rates. Retrieved December 2018 from <http://partnershipfcc.org/newsroom/illinois-house-passes-resolution>.

Among counties in Tennessee, only Williamson County's attainment rate of 66.7 percent exceeds the statewide 2025 goal of 55 percent attainment. Thirty-one counties have attainment rates between 25% and 54 percent, but 63 counties have attainment rates at or below 25 percent among residents 25-64 years old. In some less populous communities, a relatively small increase in the number of degree-holders would substantially raise the county's overall degree attainment rate. Although achieving the Drive to 55 goal will not require every county to reach a 55 percent rate of postsecondary attainment, local and regional leaders can assess their workforce needs and set their own attainment goals.²⁶

Targeted interventions in Tennessee's rural communities hold promise for advancing county-level attainment rates. But, Tennessee cannot reach our ambitious statewide postsecondary attainment goal until we address longstanding disparities across not just geographic areas, but also racial and socioeconomic populations.

²⁶ Ibid.





WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Tennessee earned national recognition for its ambitious college completion goal that has driven the state's policy considerations and education reform conversations. Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect, HOPE Scholarships, and other programs are helping to advance a college-going culture from the Mississippi River to the Great Smoky Mountains.

To empower more Tennesseans with the education and experiences necessary to compete and succeed in the 21st century economy, higher education and state leaders must remain focused on tackling inequitable institutional resources and student outcomes. Too often, students in need of the most support are enrolled at institutions with the least amount of resources available to improve students' odds of success. Poverty's effects are as real in rural corners of our state as Tennessee's urban centers. An explicit equity agenda with specific, measurable graduation rate targets and strategies should serve as the foundation for Tennessee's higher education agenda. This agenda presents the most meaningful path to meet the 55 percent attainment goal in a way that benefits all Tennesseans.

Data, research, and the expertise of researchers and practitioners alike should be the basis for Tennessee's public higher education equity agenda. To design the most effective interventions, students also must have a place at the table. Specific targets and interventions to improve access and outcomes should reflect the decades of research about what works best for Black, Latino, rural, low-income, and

other historically underserved student populations pursuing higher education.

College and career counselors, community-based nonprofit groups, and business leaders can and should all be involved in engaging students even before they begin high school to encourage them to make a plan for their future that includes education and training beyond a diploma. Intervening with students who have not thought about college by their 11th or 12th grade year can make a real difference, but more proactive attention earlier in a student's schooling holds even greater promise.

We know progress is possible; we have seen it in our own state and others. In December 2018, Nashville Mayor David Briley and leaders of the city's community college and TCAT announced Nashville Getting Results by Advancing Degrees (GRAD) to cover the costs not included under the state's Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect programs. Subject to Metro Council approval, this \$1 million investment will initially support approximately 400 students in need of assistance to cover costs beyond tuition—including transportation, books, and supplies. Drawing from the example of the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) model at City University of New York, Nashville GRAD will also provide intensive advising services to further support students toward completing their programs of study. When fully implemented, Nashville GRAD will be a \$2.5 million public-private partnership seeking to raise the three-year graduation rate at Nashville State Community College to 50 percent from the

Tennessee Board of Regents Equity Efforts

In October 2018, the Tennessee Board of Regents hosted the system's **Biennial Conference on Diversity, Equity, and Completion**. This two-day conference featured nationally recognized diversity scholars and advocates and provided spaces for institutional leaders to examine equity data, share strategies, and learn from best practices now under implementation at institutions across the country. Resources from the conference are available online at <https://www.tbr.edu/oesi/we-all-rise>.

2018 College Profiles published by the Tennessee Board of Regents provide systemwide and institution-level data on graduation and retention gaps across racial and ethnic student populations. These profiles detail the number of additional students institutions would need to retain and graduate to eliminate these gaps. Find the reports online at <https://www.tbr.edu/2018-college-profiles>.

2017 rate of 18 percent,²⁹ and the TCAT Nashville certification completion rate to 66 percent.³⁰ Nashville GRAD is one example of bold community-driven action to increase support for student success.

Setting Clear Targets and Timelines

Just as the CSU system set clear targets and timelines, so should Tennessee. Working together, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, Tennessee Board of Regents, boards of locally-governed institutions, and University of Tennessee system are well-positioned to set and report on institution- and system-level graduation rate and equity gap closure rates for the years ahead. Action

on these goals will align with the goal of maximizing degree completion and narrowing gaps year after year to the point where they become a relic of Tennessee's past rather than part of its present.

As Tennessee develops annual graduation and equity gap closure rates, a statewide agenda to address faculty racial and ethnic diversity is also due. In recent years, the Tennessee Department of Education, State Board of Education, and nonprofit partners have identified and directed resources to address the underrepresentation of teachers of color in Tennessee's public schools. Just as research shows more representative teaching populations lead to better outcomes for K-12 students, more representative faculties can lead

to better outcomes for postsecondary students of all backgrounds. Regular, clear reporting on equity measures should inform further action. The Indiana Commission on Higher Education produces a model report of this kind.

Faculty Racial and Ethnic Diversity

In Tennessee as across the country, representation of faculty of color does not reflect the demographics of the state's student population. This underrepresentation means students are exposed to less diverse teaching methods, a narrower set of available courses and research opportunities, and—especially significant for students of color—fewer mentors with shared

²⁹ IPEDS.

³⁰ Gonzales, J. (5 December 2018). Nashville Mayor David Briley proposes \$1 million investment to boost college graduation rates. *The Tennessean*. Retrieved December 2018 from <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2018/12/05/nashville-mayor-david-briley-program-boost-college-graduation-rates-scholarship-program/2206524002/>.

Table 2. Racial and Ethnic Representation among Faculty and Students at Tennessee's Public Four-Year Institutions.

	Asian		Black /African American		Hispanic / Latino		White	
	Faculty	Students	Faculty	Students	Faculty	Students	Faculty	Students
Austin Peay State University	4%	2%	6%	21%	2%	7%	79%	61%
East Tennessee State University	5%	2%	2%	7%	2%	2%	80%	80%
Middle Tennessee State University	7%	3%	7%	19%	2%	5%	79%	64%
Tennessee State University	10%	1%	44%	67%	2%	2%	36%	18%
Tennessee Technological University	7%	1%	3%	4%	2%	3%	82%	82%
University of Memphis	9%	4%	9%	33%	3%	5%	72%	50%
University of Tennessee – Chattanooga	6%	2%	7%	10%	2%	4%	83%	76%
University of Tennessee – Knoxville	9%	3%	4%	6%	4%	4%	80%	76%
University of Tennessee – Martin	3%	1%	6%	13%	2%	3%	85%	79%

Source: IPEDS (including all students enrolled, Fall 2017).

backgrounds. Extensive research shows all students benefit from a more diverse faculty, and institutions and academic departments should examine their recruitment, hiring, and early-career faculty support practices to address the critical need in Tennessee to have a more representative faculty teaching, conducting research, and mentoring students.³¹

Table 2 compares the representation of faculty and students across Tennessee's public four-year institutions. These data show some striking imbalances between racial and ethnic composition of faculty and student populations at some of Tennessee's public universities. Researchers from the University of Southern California (USC) Center for Race and Equity noted these disparities in a 2018 report examining faculty diversity nationwide.³²

Among TICUA member institutions, Fall 2016 data show 79 percent of full-time faculty identified as White, 8.5 percent as Black or African American, 4.2 percent as Asian, and 2.5 percent as Latino. These demographics are broadly comparable to public four-year institutions.

Faculty diversity is a key component of a comprehensive strategy to address inequity in student outcomes in higher education. According

31 Smith, D. G. (2009). *Diversity's promise for higher education: Making it work*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; Umbach, P. D. (2006). The contribution of faculty of color to undergraduate education. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(3), 317-345.

32 Harper, S. R., & Simmons, I. (2019). *Black students at public colleges and universities: A 50-state report card*. Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Race and Equity Center. Retrieved November 2018 from <https://race.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Black-Students-at-Public-Colleges-and-Universities-A-50-State-Report-Card-Harper-and-Simmons-1-9-26.pdf>.



to USC Dean's Professor in Educational Equity Estela Bensimon, "The only way we will successfully close the racial equity gaps produced by our higher education system when it comes to [B]lack, Latino, Native American, and marginalized Asian-American students is to address racial imbalance on our faculties. Many such minority students are poor and the first in their families to attend college, and they are too often blamed for their own difficulties navigating our complex systems."³³ Institutions and systems of higher education across Tennessee should heed Dr. Bensimon's guidance and examine ways to transform search, hiring, faculty mentoring, and promotion and tenure practices that research confirms have significant effects on efforts to develop more racially and ethnically representative faculties.³⁴

Although higher education institutions face an imperative to have more racially and ethnically representative faculties, more must be done to make institutions fully supportive of all students' academic and personal success. The tendency to hire instructors for non-tenure-track and short-term or adjunct appointments may change numbers for representation purposes but does little to bring about needed cultural change.

Higher education scholar Daryl Smith has noted a comprehensive faculty diversity agenda must go beyond emphasizing the need for greater racial and ethnic diversity. She identifies seven rationales for systems and institutions to pursue a broad-based diversity agenda:³⁵

1. Diversity in the faculty shows values concerning equity in both hiring and faculty retention.
2. Diversity is a central component of developing diverse forms of knowledge.
3. More diverse faculties open opportunities for more diverse community partnerships beyond campus walls.
4. Increased diversity in decision-making leads to more-informed strategies for institutions to address their greatest needs.
5. Faculty diversity is essential for creating welcoming environments for people of all backgrounds to work and develop professionally. Increased representation decreases feelings of isolation many faculty of color report when they are the only person of color or one of very few persons of color among their colleagues.

³³ Bensimon, E. M. (26 March 2018). Creating racially and ethnically diverse faculties. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved November 2018 from <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/03/26/new-policies-are-needed-recruit-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-faculties-opinion>.

³⁴ Cole, S. & Barber, E. (2003). *Increasing faculty diversity: The occupational choices of high-achieving minority students*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Lawrence, J. H., Celis, S. & Ott, M. (2014). Is the tenure process fair?: What faculty think. *Journal of Higher Education*, 85(2), 155-192; Tierney, W. G. & Bensimon, E. M. (1996). *Promotion and tenure: Community and socialization in academe*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

³⁵ Smith, 2009.

6. Because higher education leaders often rise through faculty ranks, fostering a more diverse faculty can lead to greater diversity in senior leadership positions.
7. Diversity among faculty creates more opportunities for role modeling and mentorship for students of all backgrounds. Smith notes, “The presence or absence of diversity sends strong signals about what is or is not possible and the degree to which talent from diverse groups is appreciated.”

Recognizing the critical nature of faculty diversity statewide, in 2019 Complete Tennessee will release a statewide faculty equity scorecard. This scorecard should serve as a starting point for institutions to examine policies and practices that affect both the representation and professional experiences of faculty of color, along with the potential effects of underrepresentation on the academic success of all their students, especially those from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic populations.

Efforts to diversify Tennessee’s higher education faculty, eliminate inequitable student outcomes, and push graduation rates to among the highest in the Southeast and the country will require a deliberate public agenda to increase postsecondary attainment with equity as a central concern.

Advancing Attainment with Equity

Tennessee is making progress in raising the degree attainment rate for adults. While the goal is for 55 percent of adults to possess a postsecondary credential by 2025, achieving this goal would

leave 45 percent of adults in Tennessee ill-equipped for the job opportunities of the future and limit options for social mobility. Complete Tennessee has engaged and mobilized local community leaders across the state to embrace collective strategies that increase postsecondary enrollment and completion rates. Moving forward, populations of Tennesseans who are from low-income backgrounds, have been incarcerated, have undocumented residency status, and who have yet to attain a high school credential or its equivalent could all be better served to maximize their potential through educational opportunities.

Comprehensive Support for Low-Income Students.

Colleges and universities have launched ambitious efforts to help address stagnant outcomes in closing achievement gaps for low-income students. Strategies to reduce barriers of access, programs to reduce the need for remediation, and a host of other initiatives are worthy investments to support Tennessee’s college students. Realizing equal outcomes for underserved and underrepresented college students will require additional investments that directly address issues related to affordability, inclusion, non-academic barriers, and social factors. Collective strategies that include resources outside of higher education offer the most promising approaches to remedying this longstanding challenge.

Many institutions across the nation have begun to achieve impressive outcomes from more targeted investments in supporting low-income students. Through data-informed processes, institutions can

proactively address non-academic student needs and challenges before these issues lead to failing grades or dropout. Knowing that greater outcomes can be achieved for low-income students means that Tennessee’s postsecondary institutions should fully embrace all known best practices at scale to demonstrate to the nation the potential for major improvement in higher education.

Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect present another opportunity to dedicate resources to close achievement gaps for low-income college students. Given the state now has provided coverage of tuition for many technical and community college students, the private and local resources traditionally used to offer access support through scholarships can now be reinvested to provide other financial resources critical to the success of students with limited disposable income.

Forward-looking community efforts made possible by Knox Promise, Sevier County’s Partners in Progress, and Nashville GRAD offer examples of a new wave of local innovation that can bring more supports to Tennessee’s community college and college of applied technology students. Sevier County redesigned a funding strategy that previously offered tuition coverage for local high school graduates to attend college. Since the launch of Tennessee Promise, the county now redirects funding to offer non-tuition financial support for area college students.

Incarcerated Tennesseans. Incarceration is strongly tied to both poverty prior to an offense and difficulty

...the debate should no longer be about whether correctional education is effective or cost-effective; rather, the debate should focus on where the gaps in our knowledge are and opportunities to move the field forward.

Rand Corporation
Researchers, 2014

securing and keeping sustaining-wage jobs after release. Rates of incarceration should be an urgent concern in Tennessee, where just one city—Nashville—includes 2 of the 40 most incarcerated zip codes in the country. ***With an incarceration rate of 14 percent, Nashville's 37208 has a larger share of its residents now under incarceration than any other zip code in the United States.***³⁶

Tennessee's 14 prisons incarcerated a total of 30,799 people at the close of the 2017-18 fiscal year. Nearly 3,000 people in this incarcerated

population are of traditional college age (18-24), and more than 40 percent are between 18 and 34 years old. The incarcerated population in Tennessee is predominately male (88.7 percent), and although 17 percent of Tennesseans identify as African American and 79 percent identify as White, 40 percent of Tennessee's incarcerated population identifies as African American, compared to 58 percent who identify as White.³⁷ Table 3 provides demographic comparisons of Tennessee's incarcerated and overall populations.

36 Looney, A. & Turner, N. (2018). *Work and opportunity before and after incarceration*. Brookings Institution. Retrieved November 2018 from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/es_20180314_looneyincarceration_final.pdf.

37 Tennessee Department of Corrections. (2018). *Statistical abstract: Fiscal year 2018*. Retrieved November 2018 from <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/correction/documents/StatisticalAbstract2018.pdf>.

Table 3. Demographic Comparisons between Tennessee's Incarcerated and Overall Populations.

	Tennessee Incarcerated	Tennessee Overall
Age		
18-24	9.6%	9.6%
25-29	16.8%	6.7%
30-34	17.2%	6.5%
18-34 Total	43.6%	22.8%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black / African American	40.0%	17.1%
White	57.6%	73.9%
All Other	2.4%	9.0%
Sex		
Male	88.7%	48.8%
Female	11.3%	51.2%

Sources: Tennessee Department of Correction and US Census.

Drug-related offenses account for more than one-in-five felony convictions in Tennessee.³⁸ Although rates of drug use are comparable across African American and White populations, African Americans are almost six times more likely to be incarcerated as a result of drug offenses.³⁹

Each year, the Tennessee Department of Correction releases between 13,000 – 14,000 people from prison facilities, while between 12,000 – 13,000 people are newly put under incarceration.⁴⁰

Initiatives across the country provide postsecondary opportunities to people who are incarcerated. In the largest study of its kind, researchers in 2014 found these programs led to significant reductions in recidivism rates and enhanced overall outcomes for incarcerated students after their release. In a review of 57 studies on correctional education published over the last 37 years, researchers found people who “participat[e] in correctional education programs are 28 percent less likely to recidivate when compared with [individuals who were incarcerated] who did not participate in correctional education programs.” Based on their findings, the research team asserted that coupled with employment placement assistance, “efforts to support successful reintegration into community postrelease would benefit from including educational programming during incarceration.”⁴¹

The **Tennessee Higher Education Initiative (THEI)** partners with Dyersburg State Community College and Nashville State Community College to offer degree-bearing college programs in two correctional institutions: Northwest Correctional Complex and Turney Industrial Complex. Full-time and adjunct faculty members from the partnering community colleges instruct the courses, and students must gain admission through the same application process as any other prospective community college student.

Once enrolled, students at Turney take between two to five courses per semester leading toward an associate's degree from Nashville State in one of two majors: Business Administration, and Political Science. Students at Northwest take two courses per semester leading toward an associate's degree in Business Administration from Dyersburg State. Students pay \$25 per academic term to help cover materials costs and must maintain a 3.0 grade point average and clean disciplinary record to remain enrolled.⁴² THEI students boast an overall grade point average of 3.67, and THEI scholars who have been released only recidivate at a rate of 5 percent. As of January 2019, THEI has graduated 50 students.

Launched in 2007, the **Lipscomb Initiative for Education (LIFE)** offers courses inside the

Many new opportunities will be available to me now because of the college education given me by the THEI. I am empowered to choose those opportunities now with complete confidence in my ability to respond to the challenges presented by them.

Christopher

THEI Program Graduate

38 Ibid.

39 NAACP. (2018). Criminal justice fact sheet. Retrieved December 2018 from <https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>.

40 Tennessee Department of Corrections, 2018.

41 Bozick, R., Steele, J., Davis, L., & Turner, S. (2018). Does providing inmates with education improve postrelease outcomes? A meta-analysis of correctional education programs in the United States. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14(3), 389-428.

42 Tennessee Higher Education Initiative, <http://www.theinitiativetrn.org/>

Tennessee Prison for Women. Classes include free world students, who learn alongside their incarcerated classmates. To date, two cohorts of incarcerated women have earned associate's degrees through LIFE, and in December 2017 six women received bachelor's degrees in professional studies. After release, some LIFE students continue their studies on Lipscomb's campus in Nashville.⁴³ In 2018, LIFE launched a master's program with 11 women currently incarcerated and 5 traditional students.

Efforts like THEI and LIFE have shown great promise for improving the lives of ex-offenders upon their release from incarceration. Although THEI and LIFE provide higher education access to cohorts of students at three correctional facilities in Tennessee, thousands of potential students across the state's facilities still do not have such access. Since the 1994 crime bill, federal law has barred people who are incarcerated from receiving Pell grant aid. Results from the Second Chance Pell pilot program now underway in 65 two- and four-year institutions across the country (although none in Tennessee) may lead Congress to remove this restriction through future legislation.⁴⁴ According a

recent analysis, lifting the ban on Pell grants could help nearly half a million people—including more than 10,000 in Tennessee—pursue postsecondary credentials and improved postrelease employment outcomes.⁴⁵ At the state level, postsecondary credentials earned by Tennesseans who are incarcerated do not count toward the Drive to 55 goal, and students who are incarcerated are ineligible for aid programs including Tennessee Promise and Reconnect.

Higher education opportunity for incarcerated Tennesseans deserves an elevated place on the state's agenda to accomplish the twin goals of equipping more citizens with postsecondary credentials to succeed in the workforce and reducing recidivism. As scholars of and advocates for correctional education have asserted, "Higher education in prison provides the opportunity to engage in self-discovery, the development of critical thinking skills, and the acquisition of the social and intellectual skills needed to navigate the world beyond the prison and the classroom. This type of education should be afforded to all individuals."⁴⁶

Immigration Status as a Barrier. Undocumented immigration status and the lack of access to federal,

state, and many institutional financial aid sources presents an affordability barrier for thousands of Tennessee high school graduates. The federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program enables undocumented youth to obtain lawful presence status in the United States, qualify for a work permit, and pay taxes on a two-year, renewable basis. Although the Migration Policy Institute estimates 13,000 Tennessee youths currently meet the eligibility criteria for DACA, as of August 2018 the Department of Homeland Security had approved just 8,110 applications from Tennessee.⁴⁷

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, "at least 18 states have provisions allowing in-state tuition rates for undocumented students." Among these states, at least six have opened eligibility to state financial aid programs. To qualify, undocumented students in these states have resided in the state for a period of time (generally between 1-4 years), have no criminal history, and have earned a high school diploma or equivalent.⁴⁸

Although undocumented Tennesseans contribute an estimated \$107 million in state and local taxes annually,⁴⁹ current eligibility criteria for in-state tuition

43 Lipscomb University. (2018). The Lipscomb Initiative for Education Program. Retrieved November 2018 from <https://www.lipscomb.edu/academics/special-programs/lipscomb-life>.

44 Smith, A. A. (6 November 2018). Momentum for prison education. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved November 2018 from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/11/06/colleges-push-more-resources-support-prison-education-programs>.

45 Oakford, P., Brumfield, C., Goldvale, C., Tatum, L., diZerega, M., & Patrick, F. (2019). *Investing in futures: Economic and fiscal benefits of postsecondary education in prison*. Vera Institute of Justice and Georgetown University Center on Poverty and Inequality. Retrieved January 2019 from <https://www.vera.org/publications/investing-in-futures-education-in-prison>.

46 Gould, M. R., Harkins, G., & Stevens, K. (2015). College civic engagement and education behind bars: Connecting communities, creating change. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 170, 101-109.

47 Migration Policy Institute. (2018). Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) data tools. Retrieved November 2018 from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca-profiles>.

48 National Conference of State Legislatures. (2014). Undocumented student tuition: State action. Retrieved January 2019 from <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/undocumented-student-tuition-state-action.aspx>.

49 Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy. (2018). Undocumented immigrants' state & local tax contributions. Retrieved November 2018 from <https://itep.org/immigration/>.

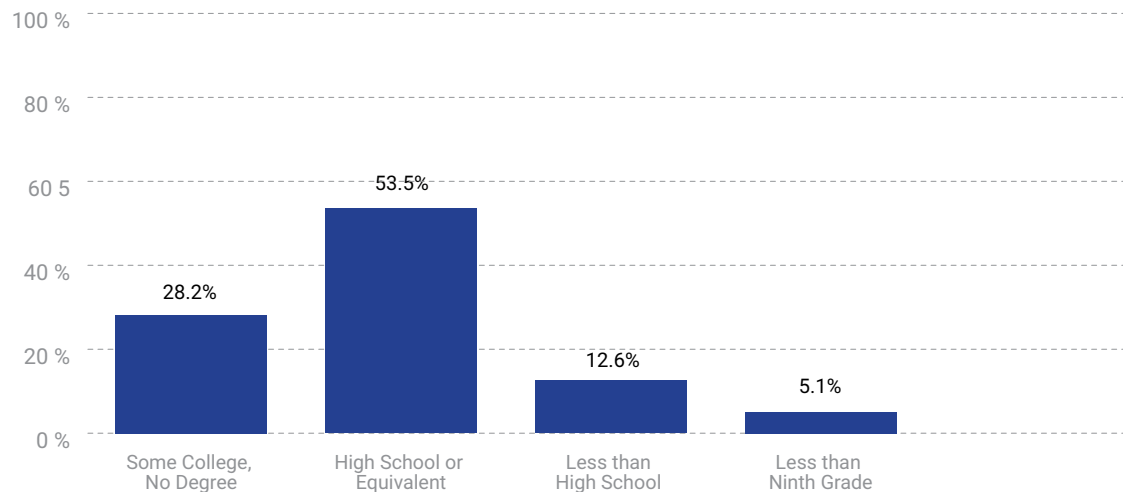
and federal and state aid programs exclude even students with legally recognized presence under DACA. According to the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, expanding in-state tuition eligibility could benefit more than 20,000 DACA-eligible young people over the coming years.⁵⁰ Leaders including former Governor Bill Haslam, Tennessee House Education Committee Chairman Mark White, and Tennessee Senator Todd Gardenhire have supported bills to increase affordability for Tennessee high school graduates who are undocumented or have approved DACA status, but none have passed the General Assembly.

Non-College-Going High School Graduates. Nearly 14 percent of adult Tennesseans have less than a high school education.⁵¹ Without a high school diploma, these Tennesseans are likely to face diminished career prospects, earning potential, and spending power. They also have poorer health than Tennesseans with higher education attainment levels, and they are more likely to commit crimes that lead to incarceration.⁵²

As Figure 14 shows, nearly one-in-five adult Tennesseans who have not attained a postsecondary credential lack even a high school diploma. Efforts at the community level should

continue outreach and engagement with adults—including young adults—who are not enrolled and face low odds of securing living-wage work.

Figure 14. Educational Attainment Levels among Tennesseans without a Postsecondary Credential



Note: Figures do not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Source: Lumina Foundation. (2018). *A stronger nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent*. Retrieved November 2018 from <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2018/#nation>.

50 Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition. (2016). *Tuition equality: A brighter future for Tennessee*. Retrieved January 2019 from <https://www.tnimmigrant.org/education/>.

51 US Census. (2017). 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-year estimates. Educational Attainment. Retrieved December 2018 from <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>.

52 Sycamore Institute, 2017.



CALL TO ACTION

For nearly a decade, Tennessee has invested a significant amount of resources to address the challenges that hinder institutions and their students from the successful outcomes needed in this state. Given this investment and the opportunities ahead to demonstrate to the nation, and our students, what can be accomplished from such an effort, there is truly no time to wait on bold moves forward to reach our goals.

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From direct investments to help low-income students to thought leadership in support of educational programs for people who are incarcerated to more intentional recruitment and hiring practices to diversify the ranks of tenured college professors, this report has provided many avenues to get involved—opportunities for readers to dedicate time and resources to addressing these challenges in the coming year.

Addressing these challenges and issues matters for Tennessee's future. For employers, an attainment and equity agenda matters because the performance of organizations relies heavily on the promise of credentialed and qualified talent to generate results and improve productivity. For community leaders, college completion matters because education—and higher education, in particular—is a recognized answer to the social

problems that hinder improved quality of life. For state leaders, growth in resources from higher tax revenues and lower burdens on social programs allow for greater investments to propel Tennessee forward. For higher education leaders, improving student success outcomes leads to financial and social benefits that encourage all Tennesseans to increase support for our postsecondary institutions. And for Complete Tennessee, driving continued collaboration and supporting continued action by all these stakeholders presents our own agenda for the year and years ahead.

With focused leadership, clear vision, and sustained commitment, our state has a unique opportunity to lead the way toward a more equitable and prosperous future.

About Complete Tennessee

Complete Tennessee is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) education advocacy organization focused on increasing postsecondary access and completion in Tennessee. Complete Tennessee believes every Tennessean deserves the opportunity to earn a postsecondary degree or certificate that leads to increased economic mobility, community engagement and a better quality of life. We pursue this vision through three areas of work:

- Engagement
- Advocacy and Accountability
- Leadership Development

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