

# Stopping Summer Melt

What Students Say &  
What Tennessee Can Do

SUMMER 2021





# Stopping Summer Melt

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

**03.** A Dream Disrupted

**06.** Quantifying Summer Melt In Tennessee

**11.** Student Stories:

11. Affordability And Access

13. Regional Opportunities And Waitlists

15. Advising Support And Postsecondary Preparedness

**18.** What Tennessee Can Do

**22.** About SCORE & References

# A Dream Disrupted

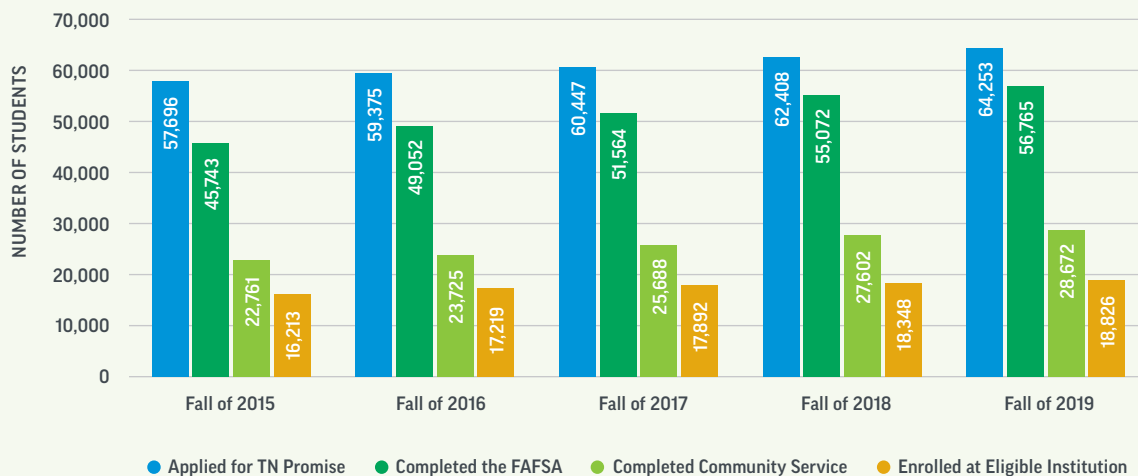
In the spring of 2020, the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) interviewed high school graduates across the state of Tennessee who intended but were unable to pursue postsecondary education due to circumstances beyond their control. One graduate described college as a “key step for the future after high school to ensure job opportunities” but ultimately never enrolled because of financial reasons and lack of confidence in being college ready. Despite these challenges, these young adults still see college as a future possibility, with one of them saying, “I would need financial support and a mentor to steer me in the right direction to prepare for college.”

For more than a third of Tennessee high school seniors, formal education ends with high school graduation. For students of color and low-income students, college-going rates are even lower.<sup>1</sup> Many of these students not only could not succeed in college but they also showed the intention to enroll in college by applying for Tennessee Promise, the “last dollar” scholarship available

to new high school graduates to cover tuition and fees at the state’s community colleges and Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs).

“Summer melt” refers to when a college-intending student drops out of the education pipeline during the transition between high school and higher education. Each year about 80 percent of high school seniors apply for the Tennessee Promise scholarship and complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), but most of those applicants do not enroll at an eligible institution. In all, summer melt impacts roughly 40 percent of all high school graduates. While some of these students may have pursued higher education out of state or enrolled at a four-year institution, nearly 20,000 students are disengaging from the education system entirely each year.<sup>2</sup> Too many Tennesseans are missing out on earning the postsecondary degree or credential that would improve their workforce opportunities and life outcomes.

## SIZABLE OPPORTUNITY GAPS PERSIST ACROSS POSTSECONDARY PREPARATION MILESTONES



Attrition numbers for students who applied for Tennessee Promise across postsecondary preparation milestones, 2015-19

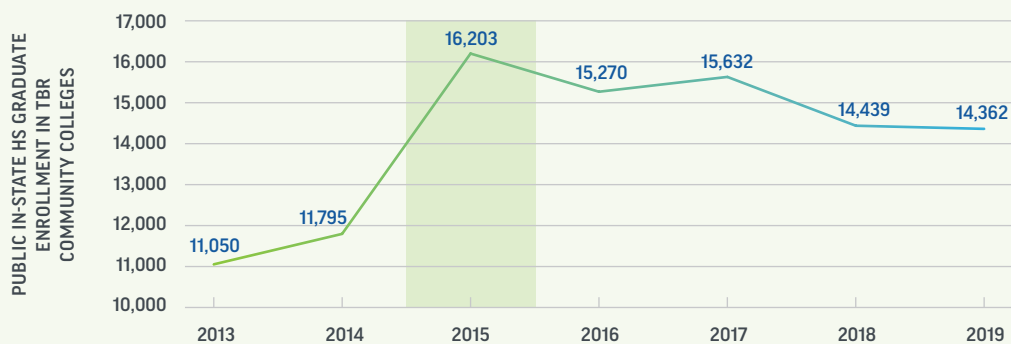
Source: tnAchieves, 2020



Despite the magnitude of summer melt, research on the topic is limited. Most research focuses on student postsecondary preparedness as a key factor in predicting summer melt. While preparation for the academic and nonacademic challenges of college is important for postsecondary persistence and completion, readiness does not outweigh the systemic barriers that students face when planning for and enrolling in college. Tennessee can meaningfully reduce summer melt by addressing the lack of student-centered, equity-driven systems that could not only improve preparedness but close opportunity gaps students face in the state’s K-12 and higher education systems.

Tennessee has been a national leader in increasing college access and success for a decade. In 2015, the first year of Tennessee Promise, community college enrollment rates rose nearly 50 percent. This policy took a groundbreaking step in addressing college affordability, yet only about 60 percent of Tennessee high school graduates are successfully enrolling in postsecondary education the following fall.<sup>3</sup>

### COMMUNITY COLLEGE ENROLLMENT RATES SOARED WITH FIRST TENNESSEE PROMISE COHORT



Community college enrollment, 2013-19

Source: THEC, 2020

In Tennessee, the average income for a class of 2016 high school graduate who did not pursue any form of higher education is less than \$30,000 a year. Comparatively, the average income for a postsecondary degree-holder from the same class is roughly \$45,000—approximately 1.5 times more annually.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the personal monetary value of a college degree or certificate, completing a credential ensures more skilled individuals meet the state’s changing workforce opportunities. Beyond economic gain, degree holders, on average, are more civically engaged, less likely to interact with the criminal justice system, and have better health outcomes over their lives.<sup>5</sup>

## COLLEGE GRADUATES, ON AVERAGE, EARN 1.5 TIMES MORE THAN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

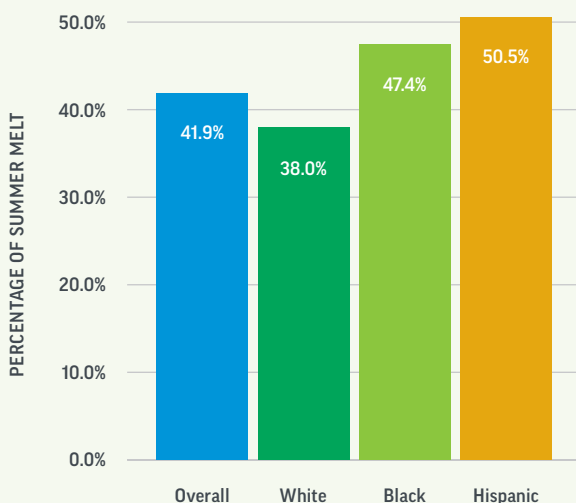
Median salary three years after completion by degree type, class of 2016



Source: Tennessee Department of Labor & Workforce Development, 2020

## SUMMER MELT DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTS STUDENTS OF COLOR

Percentage of students, by student group, who applied for Tennessee Promise but never enrolled in any form of postsecondary education after high school, 2019



Source: THEC, 2020

Tennessee cannot build the workforce the state economy needs with the current level of summer melt, which is disproportionately impacting students of color and low-income students. Education sector leaders and policymakers must work together to create a more coordinated pathway of support that identifies at-risk students early in high school and offers them the resources and opportunities necessary for successful transition to the higher education system. Given the compounding effect of COVID-19 on summer melt, it is imperative that Tennessee acknowledge how current systems and policies may not be serving all students effectively and then implement solutions that place equity at the forefront.

# Quantifying Summer Melt In Tennessee

Given the complexity of summer melt and the lack of research on the topic, SCORE conducted a qualitative study to better understand which college-intending students were derailed during the summer. For the purposes of this report, college-intending has been defined as high school seniors who applied for the Tennessee Promise scholarship and completed the FAFSA. Summer melt has been defined as affecting those college-intending students who did not enroll in higher education the subsequent fall semester. Through a combination of surveys and focus groups, SCORE was able to identify the students most at risk for summer melt and elevate the experiences of students who are often overlooked and underserved.

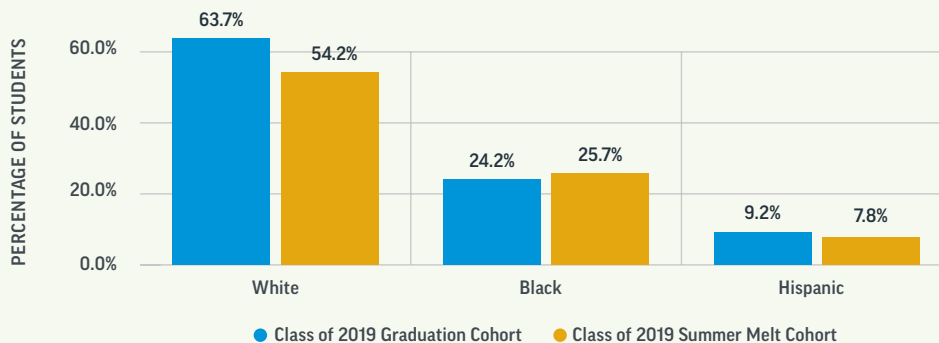
to students expected to graduate high school in spring of 2019 to avoid confounding enrollment factors related to COVID-19. Of the roughly 50,000 students who applied for Tennessee Promise and completed the FAFSA, nearly 17,000 did not enroll in higher education in the anticipated fall term. This means that one-third of all college-intending students in the state of Tennessee are not successfully transitioning from high school to postsecondary. We also learned that summer melt happened more often to graduates who belong to one or more historically underserved groups:

## The Students Lost To Summer Melt

To conduct this study, SCORE partnered with tnAchieves, a partnering organization to the Tennessee Promise scholarship, to identify a sample of college-intending students who did not enroll in higher education the following fall. SCORE limited the sample

- **58 percent would have been first-generation college students**
- **79 percent were economically disadvantaged, with higher rates for Black and Hispanic students**
- **66 percent were identified as academically underprepared for higher education**
- **White students were underrepresented in the summer melt cohort**

### THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF SUMMER MELT WHITE STUDENTS ARE UNDERREPRESENTED IN THE SUMMER MELT COHORT

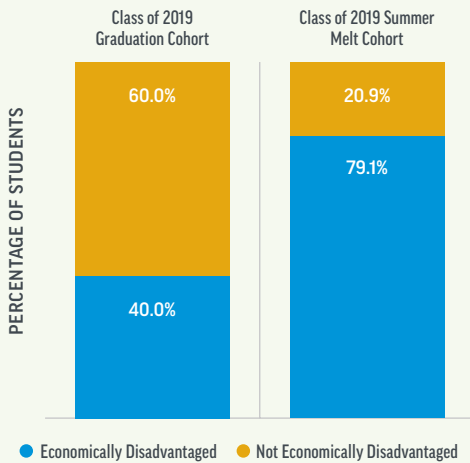


Class of 2019 graduation and summer melt cohorts race/ethnicity distributions

Source: TDOE and tnAchieves, 2020

## LOW-INCOME STUDENTS ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED BY SUMMER MELT

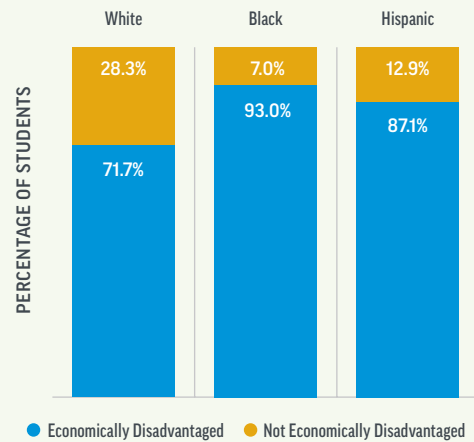
Class of 2019 graduation and summer melt cohorts economic status distributions



Source: TDOE and tnAchieves, 2020

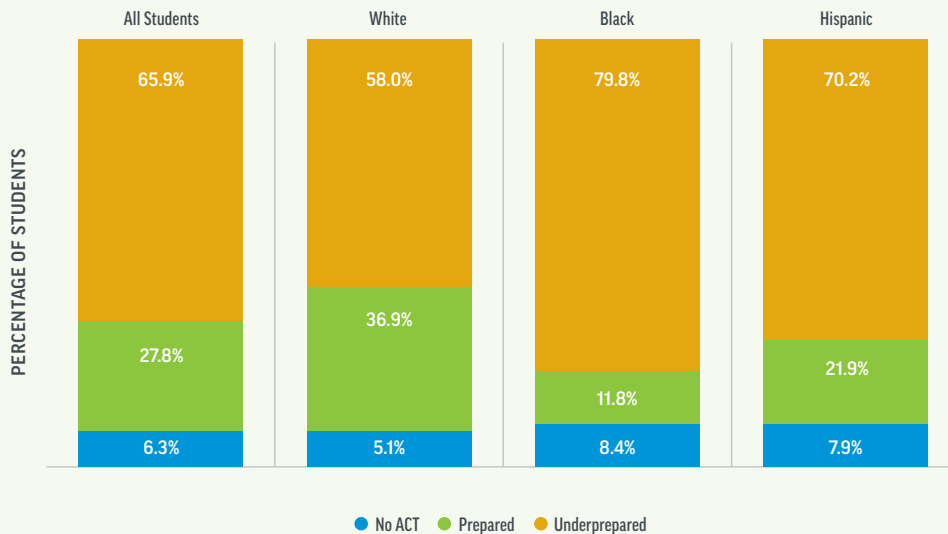
## LOW-INCOME STUDENTS OF COLOR ARE AT THE HIGHEST RISK FOR SUMMER MELT

Class of 2019 summer melt cohort economic status distribution by race/ethnicity



Source: tnAchieves, 2020

## ACADEMIC PREPAREDNESS IS A KEY INDICATOR FOR SUMMER MELT



Class of 2019 summer melt cohort academic preparation by race/ethnicity. Academically underprepared is defined by whether a student was eligible for postsecondary learning supports based on their ACT scores

Source: tnAchieves, 2020



## Why Does Summer Melt Happen?

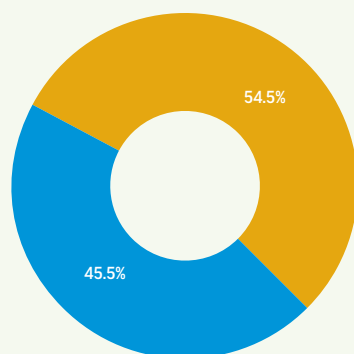
Beyond the identification of the sample, SCORE wanted to know why these students did not pursue postsecondary education and what barriers prevented them from matriculating. To gather this data, we sent out a brief, multiple-choice survey to our summer melt cohort via text.<sup>6</sup> Engaging with the summer melt cohort presented specific challenges because the group had exited high school over a year prior to survey administration and were likely to not be engaged with the education system. Despite these factors, SCORE received survey responses from over 600 students and gleaned important insights from the data:

- **45 percent of the summer melt cohort had intended to enroll at a Tennessee community college upon graduating high school**
- **55 percent of the summer melt cohort indicated they had not planned to enroll in college upon graduating high school**
- **53 percent of respondents who are still not enrolled in any form of higher education indicated they started working after exiting high school**
- **25 percent of respondents who are still not enrolled in any form of higher education indicated that they hope to enroll in college within the next 12-18 months**
  - Over one-third of respondents have since reengaged with the education system. (These engaged students are likely overrepresented compared to disengaged graduates in survey response data.)
- **For the students who have reengaged with the education system, enrollment is fairly evenly distributed across TCATs, community colleges, and four-year institutions.**

### COLLEGE PLANS IN HIGH SCHOOL

Did you want to go to college in the fall immediately after graduating high school?

- Yes
- No



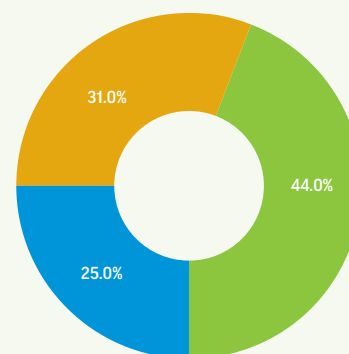
Proportion of summer melt respondents who wanted to go to college immediately after high school

Source:  
SCORE, 2021

### COLLEGE PLANS NOW

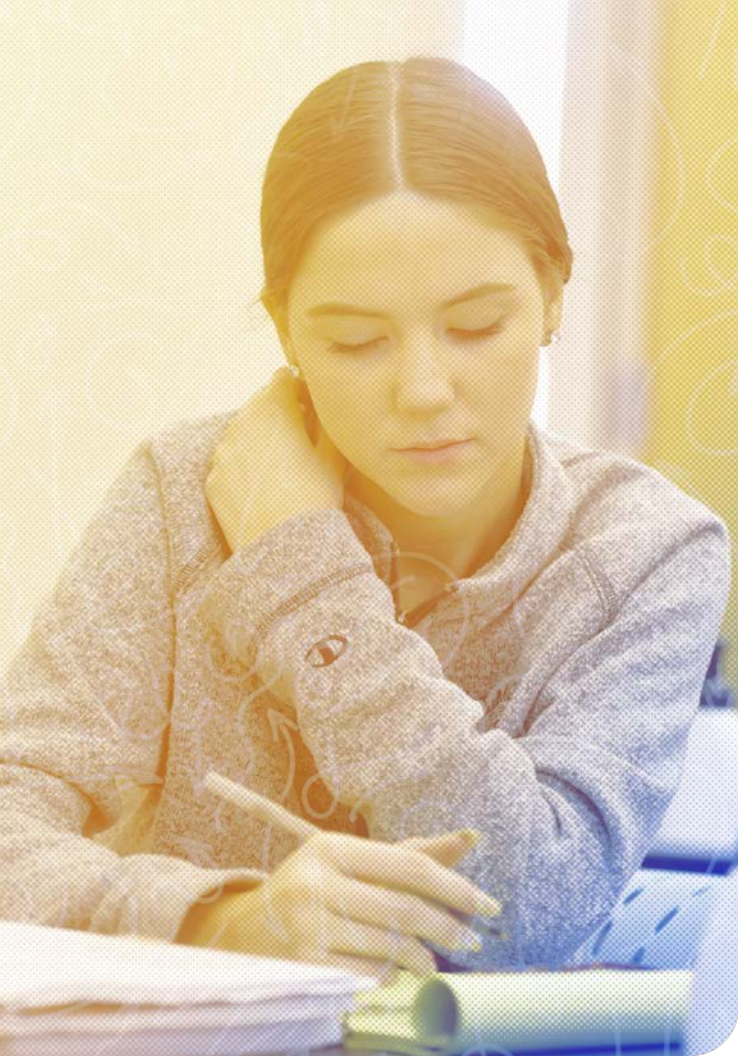
Do you plan to go to college in the next 12-18 months?

- Yes
- No
- Undecided



Among respondents who have not enrolled in college since graduating high school, what are their future postsecondary plans

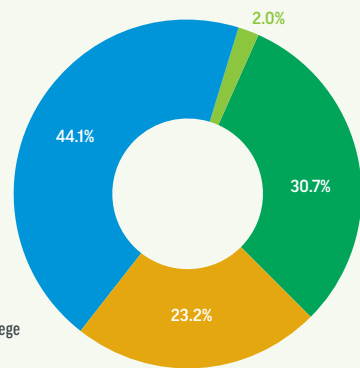
Source:  
SCORE, 2021



### TYPE OF INSTITUTION

What type of institution did you intend to enroll in after high school?

- Community College
- For Profit College
- Four-Year Institution
- TCAT or Technical College

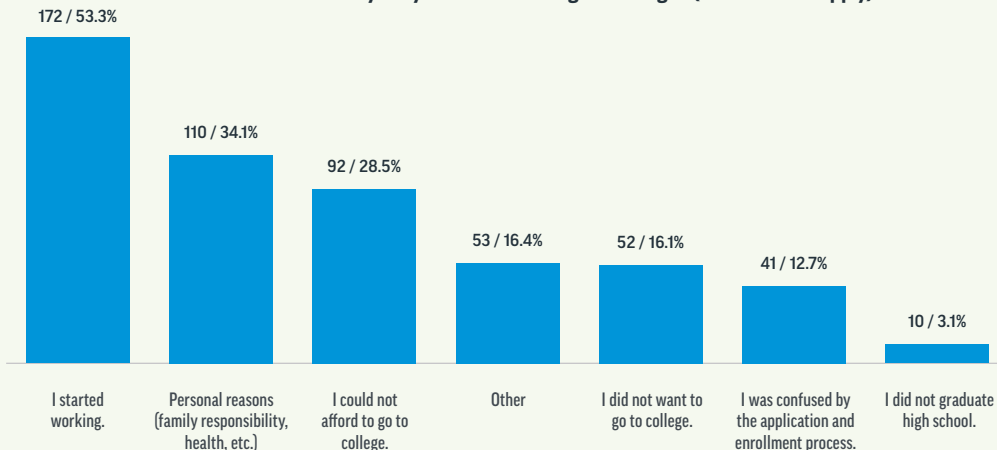


Intended institution type indicated on FAFSA for summer melt cohort

Source:  
TSAC, 2021

### REASONS FOR NOT ENROLLING IN COLLEGE

Why did you choose not to go to college? (Select all that apply)



Among respondents who have not enrolled in college since graduating high school, reasons for choosing to not go to college

Source:  
SCORE, 2021

## Going Deeper

Based on our initial survey, SCORE was able to identify four key groups among the respondents. To gain a more complete understanding of these groups, SCORE invited a smaller subset of interested respondents to participate in virtual focus groups or complete a longer open-ended survey to share more about their experience<sup>7</sup>:

- **Disengaged: Respondents who indicated they were not interested in attending college and still have not enrolled in any form of postsecondary education**
- **Barriers To Enrollment: Respondents who indicated they wanted to go to college after high school but still have not enrolled in any form of postsecondary education**
- **TCAT Waitlist: Respondents who planned to attend a TCAT after high school but were identified in the melt cohort due to extended time on the enrollment waiting list**

- **Delayed Enrollment: Respondents who enrolled in higher education after the anticipated fall term**

In all, SCORE collected insights from 25 young people who shared their personal experiences with summer melt in greater depth and offered insight into how our state can better support high school graduates to successfully enroll in higher education.

Across these conversations, three major themes emerged about these students' summer melt experiences:

- **Affordability and access**
- **Regional opportunities and waitlists**
- **Advising supports and postsecondary preparedness**

In the following sections, SCORE highlights three student stories that demonstrate how graduates are navigating the barriers to college and suggests potential solutions to reduce summer melt and improve matriculation.



# Student Stories

## Affordability And Access

Noah grew up in East Tennessee with the goal of going to college and being the first in his family to earn a postsecondary degree. He graduated from high school but found that the costs have kept his college goal out of reach. **“Even with Tennessee Promise, I simply couldn’t afford to support myself and go to college,” Noah said.** Since graduating, Noah has found that enrolling in college has become even more inaccessible. “In order to scrape by, I was forced to go into low-paying entry-level jobs, and I honestly don’t know how to get out of it now,” he said.

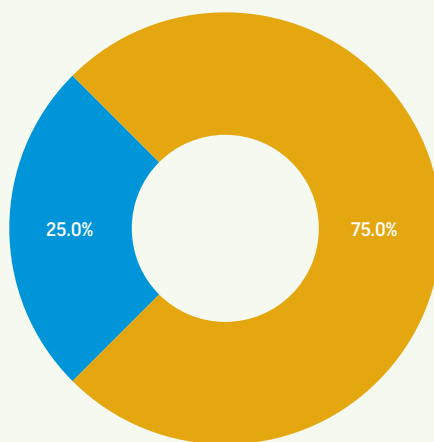
Across our surveys and focus groups, graduates consistently shared that cost was a primary barrier to postsecondary enrollment. Even with the strides made in Tennessee to improve college access and affordability through the Tennessee Promise scholarship, many

students still struggle to enroll due to inadequate financial support. Many others we spoke to shared experiences that were similar to Noah’s. “Having four other siblings around my age, my parents can’t afford to send all of us to college. Even with scholarships, books and housing costs really add up,” one respondent said. Across surveys, 25 percent of respondents cited finances as a primary reason they did not enroll in college immediately after graduating high school. “I wanted to go to TCAT after high school, but it wasn’t an option for me. My mom has health issues, and it has always been my responsibility to make money to help support us,” one said.

Once melt students begin working, they find it difficult to reengage with the education system. In a survey of aspiring adult learners, 40 percent of respondents indicated that it would be difficult to take time away from work to go back to school.<sup>8</sup>



### AFFORDABILITY CONTINUES TO BE A KEY BARRIER TO POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT



- Yes
- No

Across surveys, percentage of summer melt respondents who indicated finances as a primary barrier to college enrollment

Source:  
SCORE, 2021

Noah said he didn't feel like the college-going process was set up for young adults like him. "The system doesn't take into account that not everyone has family they can live with or have to help support them." Noah finds it difficult to imagine enrolling in college as within his reach. "My job requires 10-hour days, so I can't even think about college right now because I have to keep my warehouse job so I can pay my bills."

In his current position, Noah is working full time and earning just enough to meet his needs. Without a degree or certificate, he may not have access to the higher-paying job opportunities that will bring more financial stability. Trends continue to point toward an economic future that will heavily favor individuals with postsecondary credentials. Since the Great Recession, 99 percent of all new jobs have gone to workers with at least some college education.<sup>9</sup> Moving forward, access to postsecondary education will be essential for future employment and financial security.

Currently, completion grant programs such as Knox Promise and Nashville GRAD, which are programs available to a limited number of students, offer some support for students like Noah who need additional funding to cover nontuition costs. These community-

based initiatives are meant to support eligible students to succeed in earning college degrees and credentials. While the Tennessee Promise scholarship meets tuition needs, completion grants can cover other costs such as textbooks, gas, groceries, and technology that can deter students from postsecondary enrollment or persistence. In addition, many of these completion grant programs also offer personalized advising support to ensure students have the information necessary to stay on track for success.

When asked what he would need to enroll in college, Noah responded: **"If I could have rent or utility assistance so I could work part time instead and balance school, then I would go to college in a heartbeat."**

The expansion of completion grant programs would enable Tennessee students like Noah to see college as an attainable goal. For a more inclusive pipeline, education leaders and advocates must work to ensure our education system offers the additional financial aid opportunities necessary for all students to pursue their postsecondary goals and be better poised to effectively contribute to the Tennessee workforce in the future.

## SUPPORTING SUCCESS: COMPLETION GRANTS FOR NONTUITION POSTSECONDARY EXPENSES

A completion grant pilot program created by the General Assembly awards eligible Tennessee Promise students with additional funds to cover nontuition costs that otherwise might force a student to not enroll or drop out. Launched for the 2021-22 school year, these need-based grants use a research-supported way to increase Promise persistence and completion rates.

A program that began in Knox County in 2019 is providing early evidence of the effectiveness of the completion grant approach. Funded by the Haslam Foundation, Knox Promise provides intensive advising and nontuition support to Tennessee Promise students. As of December 2020, Knox Promise has disbursed roughly \$98,000 in need-based aid to postsecondary students. Students receiving completion grant funding are outpacing their peers by 13 percentage points in fall-to-fall retention rates (78 and 65 percent, respectively).

While Tennessee Promise covers the largest cost of college – tuition – smaller costs related to attending higher education can quickly add up. Over 50 percent of Knox Promise students who get completion grants use the money to cover the costs of transportation and books, while 36 percent put grant money toward housing, food, and specific class fees. Without this additional support, many Knox Promise students would either not enroll or persist through postsecondary education.

## Regional Opportunities And Waitlists

Makayla, who graduated from a West Tennessee high school, is currently struggling with a delay in her academic journey. After graduating, Makayla chose to enroll at the University of Tennessee at Martin. At the conclusion of her first spring semester, she decided to transfer to a nearby TCAT campus to work toward becoming a licensed practical nurse (LPN). Despite Makayla's clear goals, she has struggled to make them a reality. **"I am currently delayed because of the waitlist," she said.**

Through our class of 2019 survey, we learned that some students in the summer melt cohort had reentered the education system. Interestingly, this group of students most often did not enroll in college due to nonfinancial reasons, such as family responsibilities or health concerns. But one of the more consistently reported reasons for a disruption in education plans was TCAT waitlists.

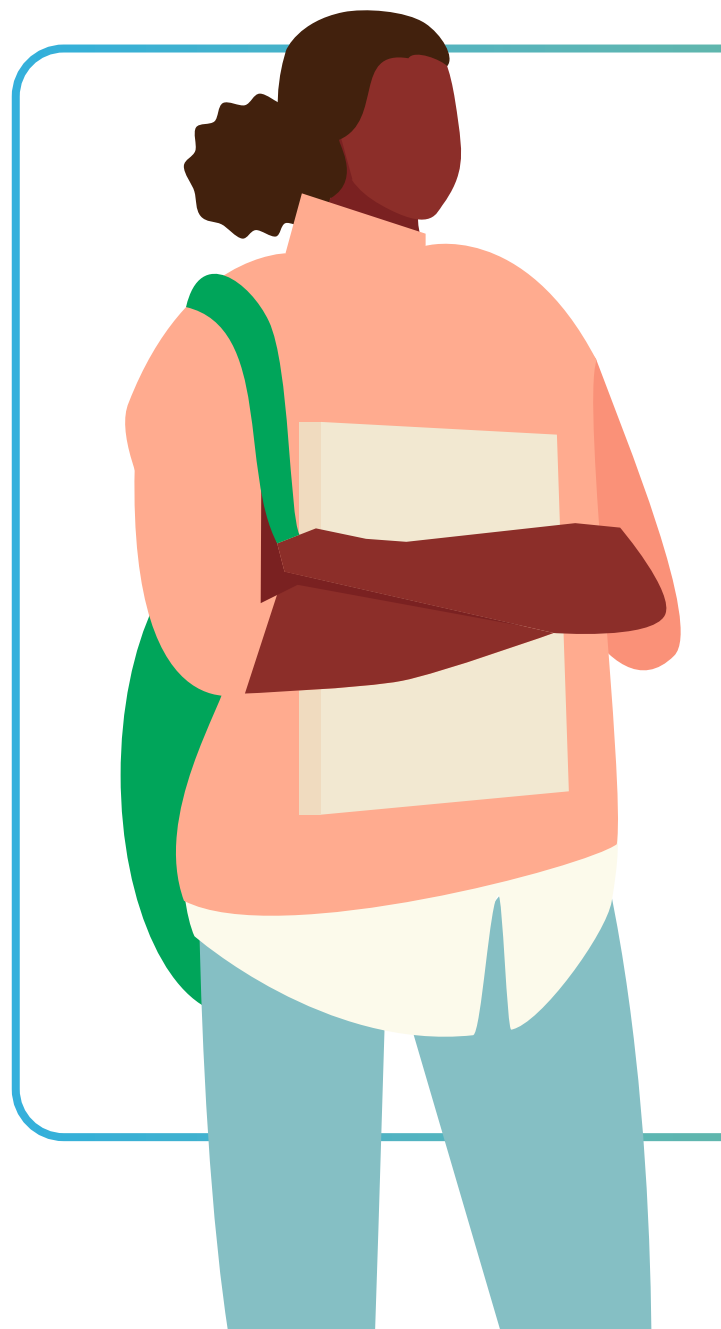
Makayla was still out of school a year after leaving UT Martin in spring of 2019. "People ask me where I'm going to school ... it's embarrassing, and I hate it. People don't think I'm doing anything with my life." Along with Makayla, we heard from 10 others on TCAT waitlists during our focus group who shared similar frustrations. One student said, "I've been on the waitlist as long as it would have taken me to earn my certification." While students feel hopeful about the opportunities afforded by the high-demand certifications, many feel anxious and frustrated about the lack of clarity they have had during their time on the waitlist.

Makayla is currently living at home and working a part-time job while her enrollment is delayed. Like many other students, she sees postsecondary education as an opportunity to expand her horizons. "There isn't much opportunity where I'm from," she said. **"I'm really hopeful that the LPN program will open more doors for me."**

Dedicated rural student support programs from the Ayers and Niswonger foundations offer individualized student resources to equip graduates with the tools to be successful and provide advisement to students on TCAT waitlists. Makayla said that without her Ayers counselor, she probably would have given up on the waitlist and college by now. Another student said, "My Ayers counselor helped figure out where I am on the waitlist and makes sure I don't get removed by accident." The student clarified that their program automatically removes waitlistees if they miss a

response deadline. "My friend had to rejoin the waitlist and start all over because he missed one notification."

Increased transparency about TCAT program demand and student-centered enrollment practices that keep students updated about their position on the waitlist would enable students like Makayla to feel more confident about their postsecondary goals and timelines. For students without close access to institutions of higher education, close partnerships between high schools and colleges would expand student options by placing more TCAT instructors in high schools and providing transportation to TCAT campuses for dual-enrollment course opportunities. These integrated practices and transparent TCAT data would foster increased postsecondary enrollment and completion.





## **AYERS FOUNDATION COUNSELORS: CONNECTING EARLY, CONNECTING OFTEN**

The Ayers Foundation places dedicated postsecondary counselors in rural school districts across the state. For the eight high schools served, Ayers reports an average postsecondary enrollment rate of 85 percent and a completion rate of 75 percent. The effectiveness of this program is rooted in early contact and culture building, individualized connections, and frequent touchpoints.

The Ayers Scholars Program recruits and trains college and career counselors to provide personalized advising through the postsecondary planning process and continue to support them beyond enrollment. The counselors are solely focused on the college and career pathways of their students, allowing them to develop effective long-term and trusting relationships.

Counselors start early by meeting with eighth-grade students and families. They continue to provide information about postsecondary opportunities during the first two years of high school, along with periodic workshops, college fairs, and presentations from other external organizations. By engaging early, Ayers can create a culture of attainability and belonging for students around their postsecondary options and counselors can provide an accessible on-ramp into the enrollment process.

Ayers counselors use a data-supported approach with students by creating individualized profiles for each of their students containing relevant information and detailed tracking of their postsecondary enrollment progress. Counselors use this data with students to explore career interests and opportunities moving forward.

Counselors also meet with students frequently through the summer after high school graduation, helping them navigate enrollment tasks and connecting them with nonacademic resources. By providing students with connections to assistance for housing, mental health care, food insecurity, and childcare, counselors can help mitigate the risks of students falling out of the enrollment process.

## Advising And Postsecondary Preparedness

Salvador completed high school in East Tennessee without a clear plan for his next move. "I was lost for about a year until I figured out college was my best option." Salvador said he remembers feeling like he wasn't good enough for college during his senior year because his grades were not the best. He regrets waiting to enroll in college because of how difficult it was to apply to school on his own without the support of high school teachers and counselors.

For first-generation college students, it is significantly more difficult to navigate the college-going process.<sup>10</sup> **"I wasn't sure where to start, and my parents didn't know what to do either," Salvador said.** For students who didn't enroll in college after graduating in 2019, nearly 60 percent would have been first-generation college students. Without clear guidance and support, the enrollment process felt like a guessing game for Salvador. "It took a lot of trial and error and anxiety to figure everything out," he said.

Two-thirds of the class of 2019 students impacted by summer melt were academically underprepared for higher education based on their ACT scores. For many students, this can lead to feelings of self-doubt and not seeing college as a realistic option. Shifting student mindset about college is not an easy feat and should begin in advance of a student's senior year in high school. In addition to academic supports, students who are most at risk for summer melt

could benefit from having a trusted adviser or mentor who can answer their questions and help them see that college enrollment and completion is attainable and important for long-term success in life.

In stark contrast to Salvador, our focus group with Ayers students revealed a much different experience navigating the college-going process. As one said, "My adviser made the enrollment process easy and helped every step of the way." One student felt similar to Salvador about being lost in high school but was ultimately able to build out his college plan with some support. **"My counselor guided me to explore every potential pathway for success."** Research points to increased college-going rates for students with individualized advising. Particularly for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds or those who are academically underprepared, advising throughout high school can ensure they see themselves as "college students."<sup>11</sup>

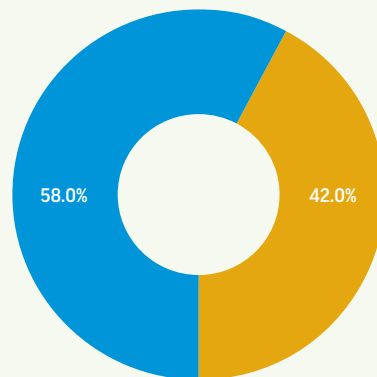
Despite a difficult enrollment process, Salvador said he feels motivated to succeed in postsecondary education. "Since I was a lackluster student in high school, I really want to do well in college and earn my degree by 2022." He went on to say that his first year in community college studying business administration has been going great and his grades are high. For students like Salvador, enrollment supports or a summer bridge program could have prevented summer melt.

### THE STUDENTS WHO COULD BENEFIT MOST FROM POSTSECONDARY ARE NOT SUCCESSFULLY ENROLLING

- First Generation Student
- Not First Generation

Class of 2019 summer melt cohort first-generation student status

Source:  
tnAchieves, 2020





## **BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS: EASING POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT FOR TENNESSEE STUDENTS**

Successfully applying to a higher education institution does not always lead to enrollment. Students face multiple hurdles to successfully enroll in college, from complex financial aid processes to required tasks and paperwork that may be unfamiliar to parents and families. To address this issue, Southwest Tennessee Community College started bringing student enrollment and orientation to high school seniors through its free NSO (New Student Orientation) on the Go program.

Southwest launched NSO on the Go as a pilot program in 2019 with five participating high schools. Recruiters, staff, and advisers travel to school locations over the summer and meet with students and families who were accepted for the upcoming year. These events include sessions for completing required documents and financial aid information and ultimately conclude with helping students to formally enroll in courses for the upcoming semester so they are ready on day one of classes. Once a student attends an NSO on the Go event, Southwest follows up with the student regarding any incomplete documentation, news and events, and general communications to keep the student engaged and ensure successful enrollment.

Although barriers continue to exist, Southwest saw enrollment numbers jump by 50 percent or more from participating high schools, causing other schools in the region to reach out about joining the program. Although program expansion was halted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, Southwest intends to grow NSO on the Go and continue to improve access to postsecondary opportunities for all students. This program serves as an example of how innovation can break down barriers keeping students from attaining postsecondary education and create greater opportunities for students across Tennessee.

tnAchieves is a partner organization to the Tennessee Promise scholarship that offers supports to students in 90 of 95 counties in the state to improve college enrollment and success. tnAchieves offer multiple free summer bridge programs at all 13 community colleges for students like Salvador who may need additional academic support prior to enrolling. These bridge programs, which serve nearly 4,000 students across Tennessee, enable 88 percent of participants to test out of remedial courses in their first year, and feel prepared for day one of college.<sup>12</sup> Encouraging more students to enroll in these programs could reduce summer melt rates and positively contribute to student persistence.

Highly effective student support organizations like the Ayers Foundation and tnAchieves serve students in every county across the state with advising support and access to free bridge programs at every community college, but not enough students are aware of or taking advantage of these opportunities. Based on ACT scores, 43 percent of Tennessee Promise students are academically unprepared for college, yet only 5 percent of these enrollees participate in summer bridge programs.<sup>13</sup> School districts and higher education institutions could make a coordinated effort to elevate awareness of these important programs as a key strategy for reducing summer melt.



## Missed Opportunities

With increased access to resources during the college enrollment process, the barriers faced by Noah, Makayla, and Salvador could have been avoided.

If a completion grant program like Knox Promise had helped Noah enroll in Fall 2019 by covering his nontuition costs, he could have used his Tennessee Promise scholarship to attend community college. Noah would have already earned a degree or certificate that unlocked the opportunity to enter the workforce at a higher level with greater opportunities for career growth.

If Makayla's high school had a strong partnership with the local TCAT campus, she could have learned about the LPN program and applied early enough to avoid time spent out of school and on the waitlist. By now, Makayla would be a licensed practical nurse working in her field for more than a year.

If Salvador's high school had identified him as at risk for summer melt and provided additional advising and academic support, he could have started his senior year with the confidence he needed to apply for community college. By participating in the tnAchieve's summer bridge programming and postsecondary advising, he could have received the support to enroll and persist. Today, Salvador would be the first in his family to hold a college degree.

# What Tennessee Can Do

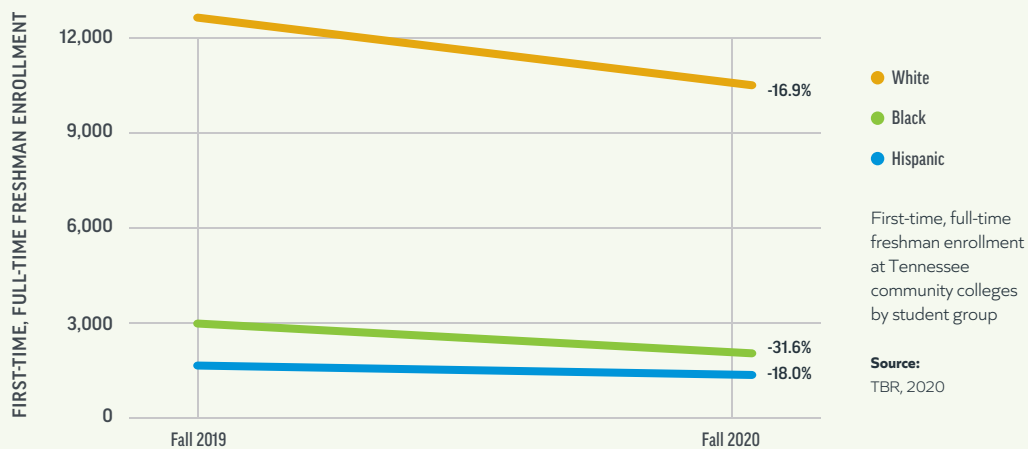
Despite the positive strides Tennessee has made toward increasing college access, many students are unable to navigate the transitions required to continue their education beyond high school. Because a postsecondary degree or credential is essential for economic

success in the 2020s, Tennessee must reduce summer melt and can do so by building on promising education policy foundations to prioritize equitable, student-centered support systems.

## COVID-19 IMPACT ON SUMMER MELT

Notably, summer melt hindered the academic pursuits of the students surveyed before the significant disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fall of 2020, high school graduate enrollment rates in college were the lowest in 20 years.<sup>14</sup> In Tennessee, community college enrollment rates dropped significantly with the largest declines for Black and Hispanic students.<sup>15</sup> Addressing summer melt in Tennessee is more critical than ever given the compounding effect that COVID-19 will have on college enrollment, persistence, and completion.

**COVID-RELATED DECLINES IN COLLEGE ENROLLMENT  
DISPROPORTIONATELY IMPACTED STUDENTS OF COLOR**



## Recommendations

In addition to supporting students to overcome summer melt, these recommendations address broader postsecondary issues including entry, persistence, and completion. Reducing barriers to higher education and improving student success will require coordinated work across several state agencies and partner organizations.

- **Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE)**
- **Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC)**
- **Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR)**
- **Tennessee Office of Evidence and Impact (OEI)**
- **Tennessee State Board of Education (SBE)**
- **tnAchieves**
- **Ayers Foundation**

### **Improve clarity for students, families, and educators about postsecondary opportunities and student progress toward those opportunities.**

- » Because early planning is crucial to being prepared for college and career, Tennessee should create a checkpoint at the end of ninth grade for every student and report it to students and families. TDOE and OEI can encourage an early focus on postsecondary readiness by adopting a readiness indicator for ninth-graders that measures a student's progress toward postsecondary goals based on data such as course credit accumulation, grades at the end of ninth grade, course failure, attendance, and prior academic achievement. A variety of stakeholders such as THEC, TBR, tnAchieves, and Ayers Foundation should have the opportunity to inform the development of the indicator.
- » Each student's family, guidance counselor, and college and career adviser should receive easy-to-use reports about the indicator measures at the end of each semester in ninth grade. TDOE should develop a process for districts to use to formally notify parents and counselors when a student is below the readiness standard. For these students, the school should prioritize a meeting with the student, the student's parents or guardian, and the school counselor or faculty adviser to review the student's High School and Beyond plan and discuss what should be done to help the student get back on track toward goals, postsecondary options, and pathway planning.

- » The SBE should explore the feasibility and usefulness of a new college and career advising licensure endorsement. Educators with this endorsement would provide college and career advising for students, which would add much needed capacity to the existing demands on school counselors.

- » SBE should strengthen the High School and Beyond planning process by updating its policy to ensure students set clear career and education goals, develop a course plan that includes automatic enrollment in advanced coursework for students that meet the school's enrollment criteria (as required by Public Chapter 170 of 2021), plan for the possible inclusion of relevant work-based learning (e.g., apprenticeships, internships, service, etc.) into their course of study, and remain on track for on-time graduation. Districts should ensure that the annual meeting requirement of the SBE Middle and High School Policy is fulfilled and that students discuss and/or update goals, track academic progress, and consider postsecondary opportunities through the CollegeforTN platform.

- » THEC should partner with TDOE to provide enhanced professional development on using the CollegeforTN platform to school counselors and other educators who serve as faculty advisers. The CollegeforTN platform shows a student the postsecondary opportunities available to them across the state's public colleges and universities. In particular, professional development should be provided after THEC overhauls the platform with easily accessible postsecondary and workforce data, as required by the Students' Right to Know Act. School counselors should be offered professional development on the updated platform, including how to use the High School and Beyond tool during student check-ins and for sharing information with families.

### **Invest in high-quality summer programs to decrease student remediation rates and support students between high school graduation and the fall semester of college.**

- » In addition to existing, shorter summer bridge programs administered by tnAchieves in partnership with community colleges, Tennessee should invest in scaling the Summer Institute model across Tennessee's community colleges. This model offers a 10-week program with 18 hours of corequisite English and math instruction, enhancing student confidence in a postsecondary setting and increasing their exposure to a college environment and college-level coursework.

The tnAchieves Summer Institute at Southwest Tennessee Community College is a high-impact program designed specifically to combat summer melt. The institute relies on student cohorting, prescriptive scheduling, academic tutoring, and intrusive advising in addition to corequisite instruction to ensure students are prepared for postsecondary success.

- **The population served is 73 percent low income and 39 percent first generation with an average ACT composite score of 16.**
- **Implementation costs \$1,300 per student with 98 percent of Summer Institute students testing out of learning supports.**
- **Summer Institute participants outpaced their peers in first-to-second year persistence by 17 percentage points.**
- **96 percent of Summer Institute participants felt more prepared for college.**

» tnAchieves should support school districts to enroll more students in summer bridge support programs by offering real-time data insights on student eligibility and signup status. This could look similar to the dashboard used to track Tennessee Promise and FAFSA application status. Through collaboration with districts and local institutions, bridge programs should be more prominently promoted as an essential step for academically underprepared graduates to place out of learning support courses, which do not earn college credit, and build self-confidence for postsecondary success.

» THEC should offer grants to develop partnerships between institutions and local school districts focused on facilitating a smooth transition between high school and higher education. These funds would support data-sharing between institutions and their feeder school districts. Grant funding would facilitate the development of innovative practices and infrastructure focused on increasing the number of high school students, particularly those students who are underrepresented in postsecondary education who successfully enroll and complete a credential.

### **Support new high school graduates to attend TCATs by providing greater transparency about waitlists and better enrollment support.**

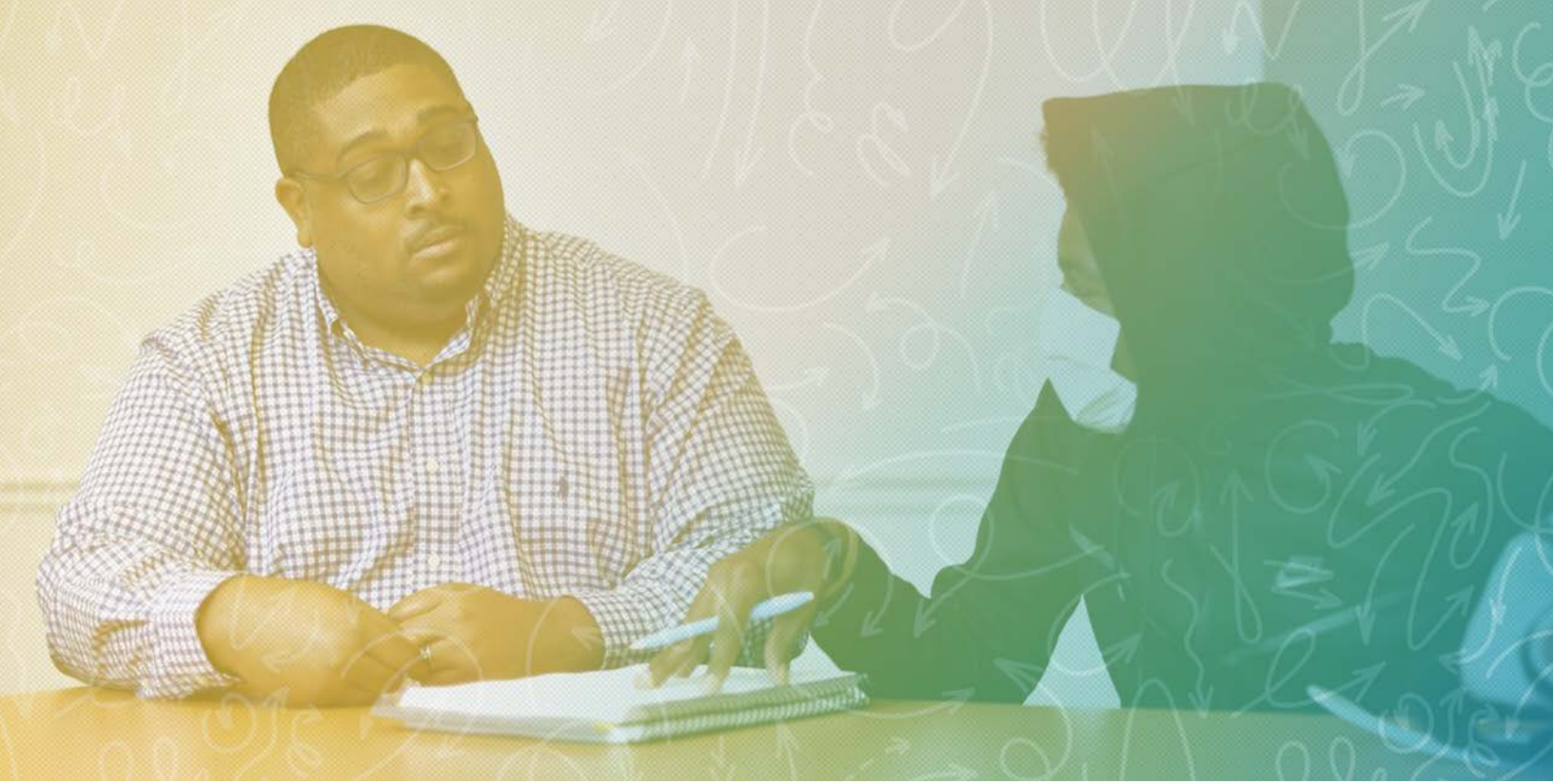
- » TBR should strengthen data collection and public reporting about the TCAT application process and waitlist system. Specifically, data should be collected by student demographic groups and program of study and should be publicly reported on TBR's data dashboard.
- » TCATs should develop partnerships with local school districts to ensure students are equipped with transparent information

on enrollment opportunities, program and workforce alignment, and coordinated student supports to navigate the enrollment and waitlist processes.

- » Where formal TCAT-high school partnerships exist, there should be new efforts to place more TCAT instructors in high schools to provide dual enrollment instruction in TCAT areas of expertise, coupled with a marketing campaign to incentivize increased entry into the TCAT instructor profession to ensure an adequate number of instructors to serve in these roles.

### **Strengthen the Tennessee Promise Scholarship.**

- » School districts should prioritize eliminating barriers for students to complete community service requirements tied to Tennessee Promise. Virtual community service opportunities that were offered during the COVID-19 pandemic should become an ongoing option in addition to in-person service. High schools should be encouraged to offer at least one opportunity during the school day to complete service to eliminate time or transportation concerns. Additionally, schools should offer a clear list of potential service opportunities in the community to ensure students are aware of multiple options for completing the requirement.
- » The state should provide a funding mechanism for Pell-eligible Promise students to cover additional costs to attend college, such as books, transportation, and room/board. Additionally, all Promise students who are Pell-eligible should receive a completion coach from an institution or partnering organization to provide frequent advising as they transition into and persist in higher education.



**Expand scholarship opportunities for students unable to enroll in higher education immediately after high school graduation and not yet eligible for Tennessee Reconnect.**

» TSAC Rule should increase the maximum value of the Tennessee Student Assistance Award, which is available for economically disadvantaged students between the ages of 18-24 who did not enroll in postsecondary immediately after high school graduation. Tennessee also should increase its investment in the program so that more students are able to access the opportunity.

» Tennessee Promise partnering organizations should help ensure students who graduate high school and do not attend postsecondary are aware of the TSAA opportunity. Information about the TSAA award should be texted to students who express interest in using the Promise scholarship to attend postsecondary but do not enroll after high school.

The Tennessee Student Assistance Award Program (TSAA) was established to provide financial assistance for high-need students pursuing postsecondary education.

- **In 2019-20, TSAA offered aid to over 64,000 students with an average award of about \$1,600.**
- **Nearly 90 percent of recipients have a household income of less than \$40,000 and about two-thirds have an expected family contribution of zero.**
- **Over half of recipients were first-generation college students.**
- **The majority of recipients are between the ages of 20 and 24, meaning that TSAA is primarily serving students who may not be eligible for either Tennessee Promise or Reconnect.**

# About SCORE

The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) is a nonpartisan nonprofit educational policy and advocacy organization based in Nashville, Tennessee. SCORE was founded in 2009 by Senator Bill Frist, MD, former US Senate majority leader, and works to transform education in Tennessee so all students can achieve success in college, career, and life.

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