

SUPPORTING STUDENT COMPLETION

March 29-30, 2021

INTRODUCTION

This third virtual gathering of the 2020-21 Complete Tennessee Leadership Institute (CTLI) program will focus on supporting postsecondary completion for all students. These topics build on the themes of the first CTLI meeting, which focused on equity and quality of access to higher education, as well as the second meeting that focused on supporting student success in persistence and completion.

THE IMPORTANCE OF POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION

Students not only need to be able to access and afford higher education, but it is also important to ensure that students are able to complete their degrees in a reasonable amount of time. Students who do not complete their degrees on-time are more likely to accumulate student loan debt and are not able to realize the earnings benefits that come with a postsecondary degree.

Postsecondary completion is a key gateway to obtaining social and economic mobility. On average, individuals with postsecondary credentials have higher wages than those without. In Tennessee, 16 of the top 25 high-demand occupations by projected growth require some sort of postsecondary credential, from certificates to bachelor's degrees.¹

NATIONAL COMPLETION STATISTICS

According to nationwide data from the National Student Clearinghouse, completion rates have increased steadily over the last decade with the rate of growth slowing slightly in recent years.² College completion rates vary by the type of institution of higher education (IHE). Students at private nonprofit four-year IHEs are considerably more likely to complete their postsecondary degrees. Students at private for-profit four-year IHEs and students at public two-year IHEs have completion rates that are below the national average. The graph below shows these rates for first-time students who entered higher education between the years 2006-2014 and enrolled either full- or part-time.

Overall completion rates can mask important differences between student completion rates by age and racial and ethnic subgroups. The following breakdown of national completion rates by age and race/ethnicity shows:

- There are concerning equity gaps in the students that complete postsecondary credentials, with white and Asian students significantly more likely to receive a credential than Black and Hispanic students; and
- Breaking down completion rates nationally by age shows that students at IHEs who are over the age of 21 are at greater risk of not completing their degree.

FIGURE 1

COMPLETION RATES OVER TIME | 2006-2014³

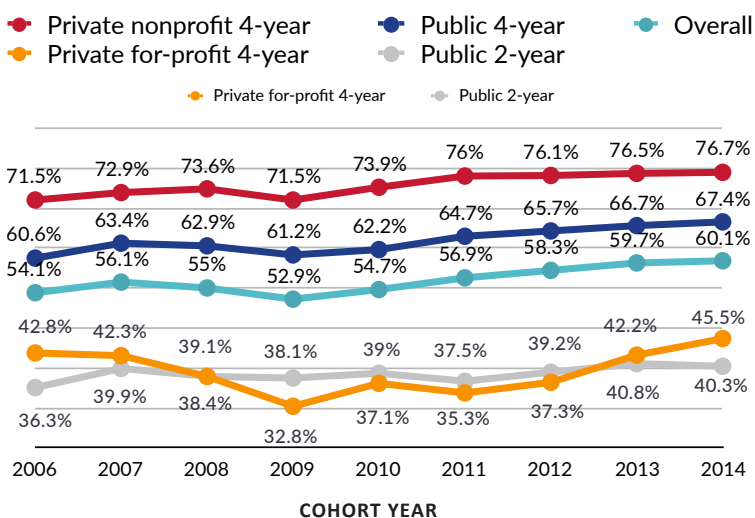
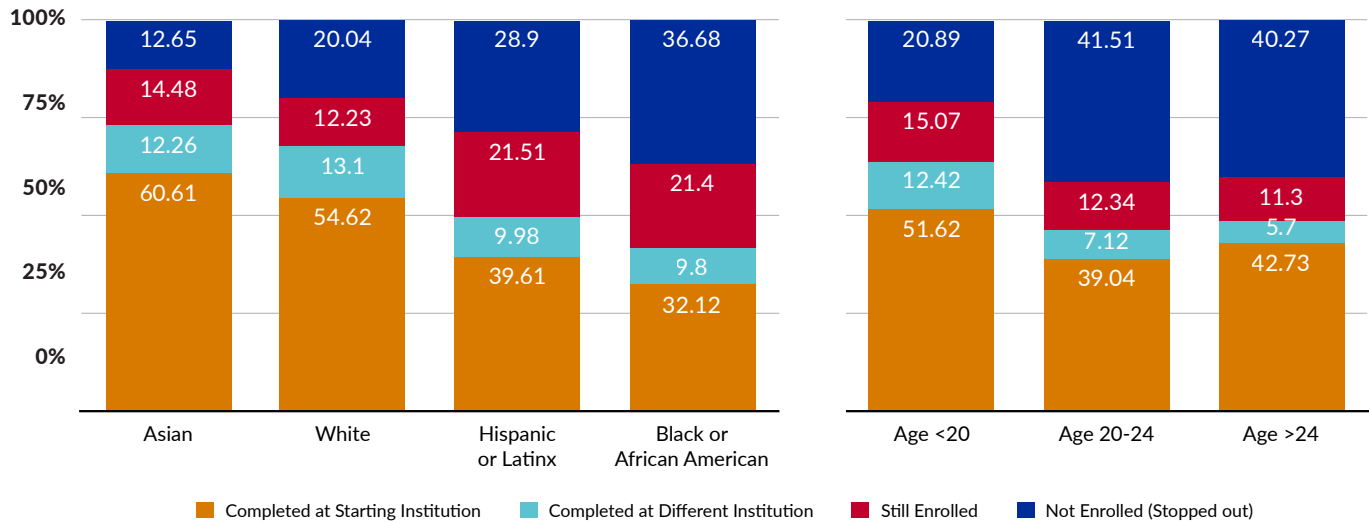


FIGURE 2

NATIONAL COMPLETION RATES BY AGE & RACE/ETHNICITY, 2014 COHORT

Source

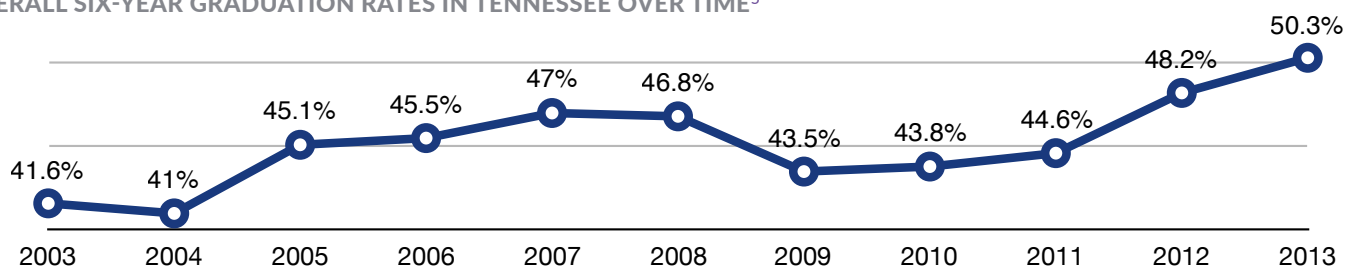


TENNESSEE COMPLETION STATISTICS

In Tennessee, overall completion rates have risen over time – reaching just over 50 percent for the most recent cohort (who entered higher education in 2013). Tennessee’s increasing completion rates are not driven by one type of institution; they are consistent across the different types of IHEs described below.

FIGURE 3

OVERALL SIX-YEAR GRADUATION RATES IN TENNESSEE OVER TIME⁵



There are different types of public IHEs in Tennessee, and the structure and mission of each school has an effect on its student body and its completion rate statistics. The three universities in the University of Tennessee (UT) system are four-year IHEs with relatively selective admissions rates – these IHEs have the highest completion rates in the state. There are also six public four-year IHEs that are locally governed institutions (LGIs), which generally have completion rates that are slightly lower than the UT IHEs. And there are also 13 community colleges (TBR CC) across the state. These two-year IHEs serve multiple roles and a variety of students, including adult learners – nearly 30 percent of community college students are over the age of 24. It is important to note that the Tennessee Reconnect program, first implemented in 2018, has been a driving force in boosting adult learner completion rates. In line with national averages for two-year IHEs, the completion rates of Tennessee’s community colleges are lower than the rates for LGIs and UT schools.

Across Tennessee, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission found disparities between racial and ethnic subgroups among higher education students in Tennessee. Across all IHE types, historically underserved students in Tennessee – Black students and Hispanic students – are less likely to complete a degree or certificate than white students. These gaps are most pronounced in Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) Community Colleges.

FIGURE 4
COMPLETION RATES BY INSTITUTION TYPE⁶

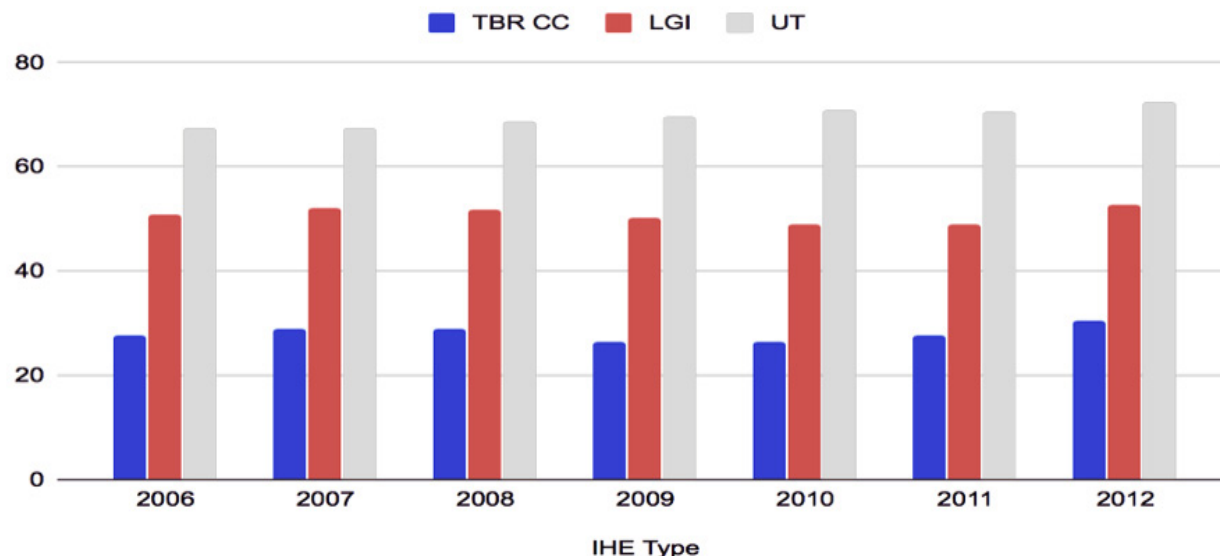


FIGURE 5
COMPLETION RATES BY RACIAL AND ETHNIC SUBGROUPS (2013 COHORT)⁷

IHE Type	White	Black	Hispanic	Other	Unknown
TBR CC	37.1%	14.9%	32.6%	29.8%	45.1%
LGI	59.5%	43.8%	51.8%	55.1%	61.5%
UT	74.4%	58.1%	63.8%	72.6%	80.1%

OVERVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION CERTIFICATES

Higher education certificates vary based on length and credential type. There are a number of statewide postsecondary attainment goals that use “high-quality” certificates as a benchmark for progress.

NATIONWIDE CERTIFICATE STATISTICS

The following graphics from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce show which industries nationwide are most likely to require certificates, as well as the average earnings of certificate holders in each industry:

FIGURE 6
PREVALENCE OF CERTIFICATES BY INDUSTRY⁸

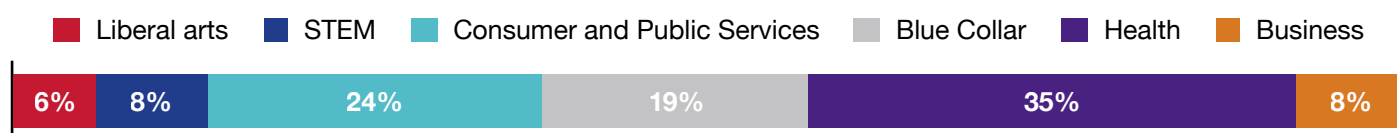
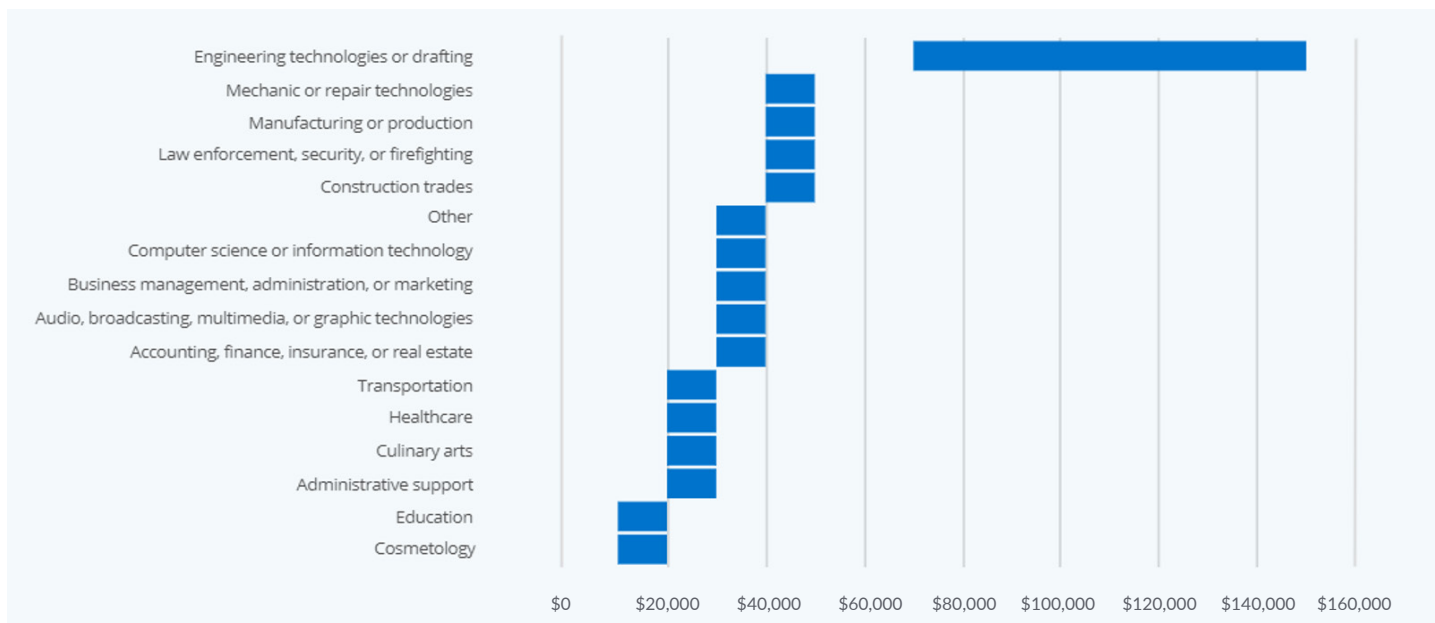


FIGURE 7
MEDIAN EARNINGS OF CERTIFICATE HOLDERS BY INDUSTRY⁹



TENNESSEE CERTIFICATE STATISTICS

In Tennessee, many policy discussions about certificates are framed by the occupations that have targeted by the Labor and Education Alignment Program 2.0 (LEAP 2.0) manufacturing projects, which are:

- Computer-Controlled Machine Tool Operators;
- Electrical and Electronic Equipment Assemblers;
- Assemblers and Fabricators;
- Welders, Cutters, Solderers, and Brazers.¹⁰
- Cutting, Punching, and press Machine Setters, Operators, and Tenders;
- Machinists;
- Team Assemblers;
- Plant and System Operators;
- Tool and Die Makers; and

The majority of higher education certificates are awarded by Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCAT) and TBR CC institutions. TCATs offer both “regular” certificates, which are for-credit programs that count toward the state’s postsecondary attainment goal, and supplemental certificates, which are workforce training opportunities such as first aid courses that do not count under the attainment goal metrics.

FIGURE 8
CERTIFICATES AWARDED BY IHE TYPE¹¹

IHE Type	# of Certificates Awarded	# of Supplemental Certificates Awarded	% of Total Awards (Incl. All Certificates)
TCAT	2,517	2,730	46%
TBR CC	4,168	0	27%
LGIs	20	0	0.001%
UT	No certificates awarded		

Tennessee uses data on higher education certificates as part of the state's outcomes-based funding formula. The number of short- and long-term certificates that are awarded is an outcome metric for community colleges and TCATs, but not for universities. Importantly, THEC weights this outcome to ensure institutions are not incentivized to prioritize short-term certificates over continued student learning.

COMMON CHALLENGES IN CERTIFICATE POLICY ^{12, 13}

There are a number of barriers to implementing successful state-level policies that drive progress on certificate completion:

- State leaders need the data that allows them to tie postsecondary credentials to high-wage, high-demand fields;
- Policymakers must work to identify the competencies that are embedded within degree-bearing programs of study;
- Stakeholders must explore ways to quantify the value that employers place on higher education certificates using data such as job postings, wage premiums, and industry portability assessments;
- Leaders should ensure that certificate programs allow students to earn course credit that can be transferred toward completion of additional degrees;
- Students and their families should have access to clear information about the value of certificates; and
- State leaders can develop micro-credentialing programs to confer targeted skill sets.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the CTLI meetings you have engaged in policy discussions that span the continuum of higher education policy: from equity and quality of access, to supporting student success in persistence and retention, and now helping all students complete. This knowledge base should help inform the action plans you develop and the work that you will do in your communities for years to come. Please note that The Hunt Institute and SCORE are always available as thought partners in your work.

CITATIONS

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- 2 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Completing College." Retrieved from: <https://nscresearchcenter.org/completing-college/>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
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- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, "The Overlooked Value of Certificates and Associate's Degrees." Retrieved from: <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/subba/>
- 9 Ibid.
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