



Complete Tennessee Leadership Institute

A PROJECT OF SCORE & THE HUNT INSTITUTE

POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION AND ATTAINMENT

ISSUE BRIEF

INTRODUCTION

[Postsecondary attainment goals](#) articulate a statewide vision for higher education systems that meet workforce needs. With estimates suggesting that [over 60 percent](#) of Tennessee’s jobs will soon require some sort of postsecondary training beyond high school, the state’s [Drive to 55](#) goal serves as a north star for attainment. Specifically, the goal calls for 55 percent of the Tennesseans to hold a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2025.

In [January 2024](#), Lumina Foundation released the [Stronger Nation](#) update to highlight national and state progress toward attainment goals. Between 2021 and 2022, Tennessee increased its overall postsecondary attainment rate by 0.6 percentage points to reach 47.9 percent. As the data is lagged, there are three more reporting years to close the 7-percentage point gap between current attainment and the Drive to 55 target. To meet attainment goals, the state and its institutions of higher education (IHEs) must improve graduation rates and ensure all students who enter higher education have the support needed to earn a quality credential.

A Look at Tennessee’s Retention Data

States and institutions of higher education use a variety of indicators to monitor student progress toward a credential, with one of the most important being retention. In [Tennessee](#), retention rate refers to the percentage of first-time, full-time freshman who remain enrolled in *any* Tennessee postsecondary institution one year after initial enrollment.

Figure 1 shows that Tennessee community colleges have consistently lower fall-to-fall retention rates than the national average for two-year public institutions. Since the pandemic, this retention gap has widened, putting Tennessee’s public two-year institutions nearly 15 percentage points behind the national average. Two-year institutions are falling short in adequately supporting students

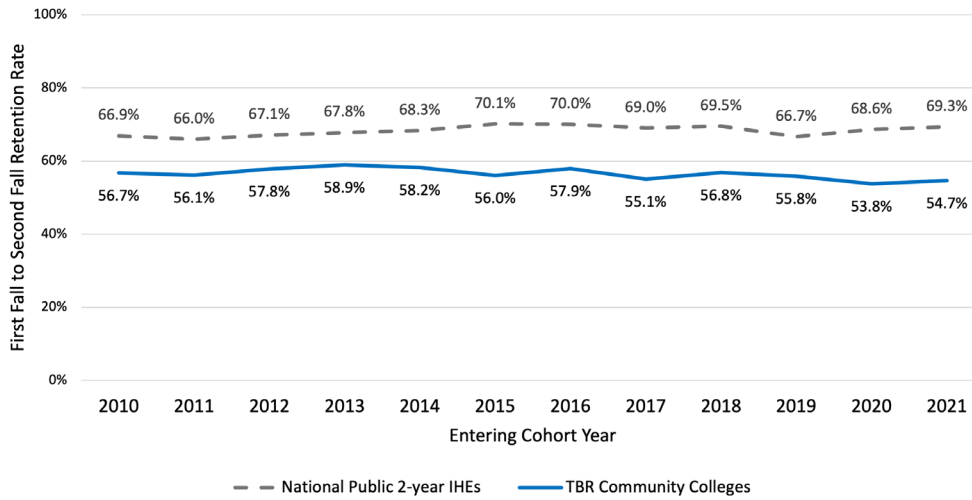
toward completion, resulting in nearly half dropping out before reaching their second year. Four-year institution retention data in Figure 2 show that University of Tennessee (UT) institutions have consistently matched and at times exceeded the national retention average. However, Locally Governed Institutions (LGIs) lag over 10 percentage points behind. For both the UT system and LGIs, retention rates fare no better than they did a decade ago.



Questions for Thought

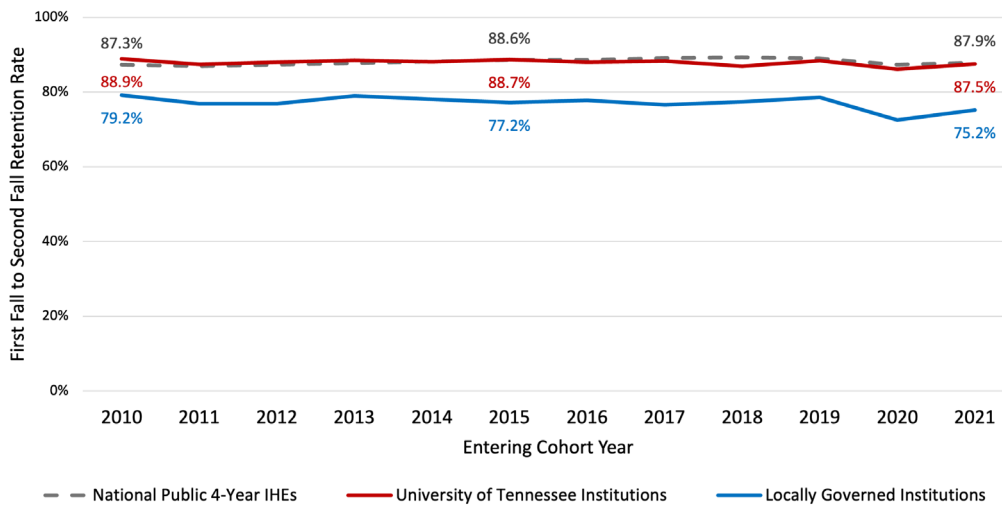
- How should enrollment and retention data be interpreted alongside one another?
- What indicators should institutions of higher education monitor to know if students are on track to stay enrolled?

Figure 1. Nearly 15 Percentage Points Separate Tennessee’s Community College Retention Rate From The National Average



[National Source](#), [Tennessee Source](#)

Figure 2. UT System’s First Year Retention Rate Mirrors National Average, But LGI Rate Trails Behind



[National Source](#), [Tennessee Source](#)

Note that overall retention rates do not capture important differences across race, gender, and socioeconomic status. While the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) does disaggregate retention by racial group and gender, that information is not

available for other institutions. Further, there is no publicly available data for retention at any IHE by Pell-eligibility. As such, more nuanced insights about retention are better found at the institution level.

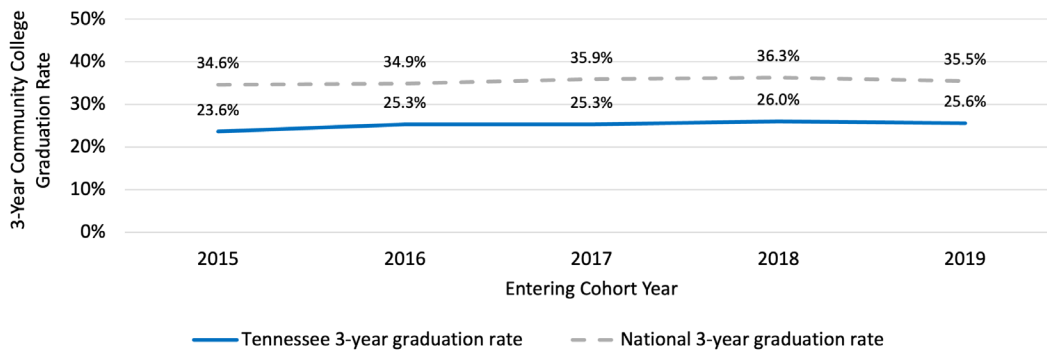
A Look at Tennessee’s Completion Data

Tennessee’s IHE graduation rates made modest gains over the last few years before falling slightly with the most recent cohort. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the 150 percent graduation rates for Tennessee community colleges and universities compared to national averages. Tennessee’s community college three-year graduation rate follows a similar trend as the national rate but would need to grow by nearly 10 percentage points to catch up to the national aver-

age. In contrast, the overall six-year graduation rate at Tennessee universities is 63.3 percent, exceeding the national average. However, Figure 4 illustrates the variation across institutions, with LGI graduation rates below the national average.

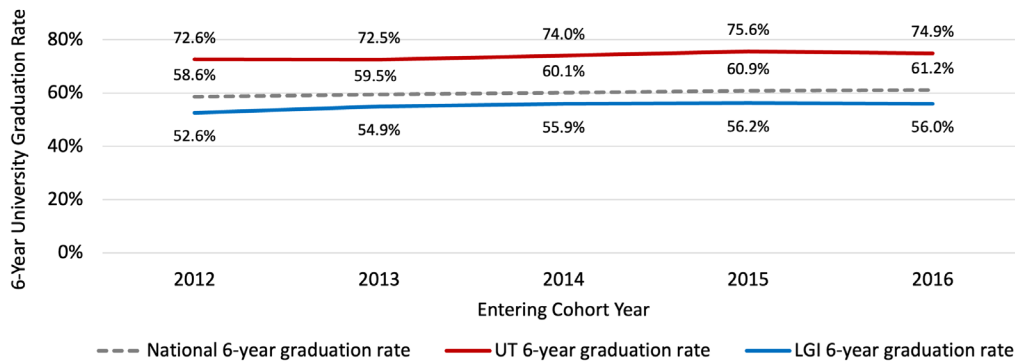
At both community colleges and universities in Tennessee, gaps in graduation rates persist based on racial and socioeconomic group. Figure 5 shows that for the last five community college cohorts, Black students are consistently around 16 percentage points less likely to graduate compared to their White counterparts. Similarly, Pell-eligible community

Figure 3. Tennessee’s Community College Graduation Rate Lags Behind National Average



[National Source](#), [Tennessee Source](#)

Figure 4. University of Tennessee (UT) System’s Graduation Rate Exceeds National Average, But LGI Rate Lags Behind



[National Source](#), [Tennessee Source](#)

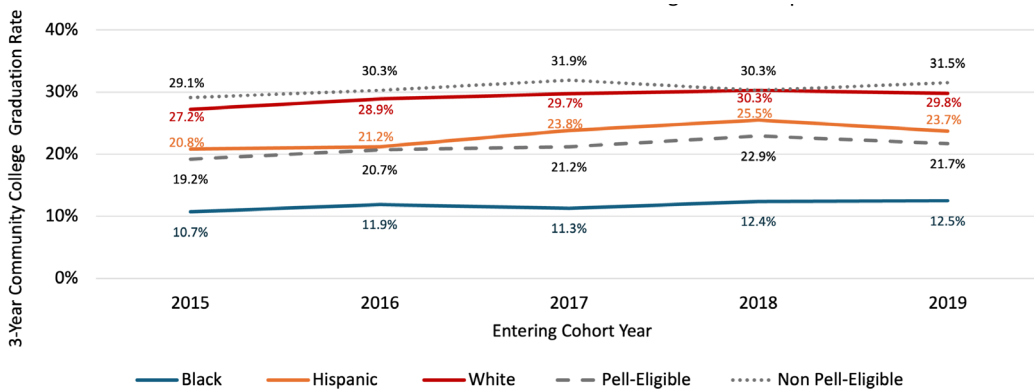
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college students are around 9 percentage points less likely to graduate in 3 years than non-Pell-eligible students. Figure 6 shows that even greater gaps exist in university rates – with a difference of over 20 percentage points between White and Black students as well as between Pell and non-Pell-eligible students.

Note that there are many factors to consider when interpreting student outcomes data and identifying strategies for improvement. One of these factors is academic preparation. Socioeconomically

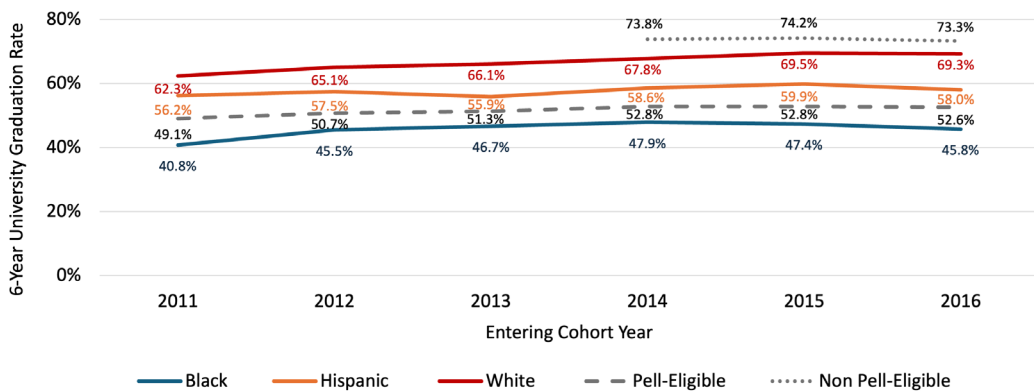
disadvantaged students and students of color often enter postsecondary education having experienced systemic opportunity gaps in academic preparation. For example, as early as grade 3, the [English Language Arts TCAP proficiency](#) of White students is more than twice that of Black students. Likewise, the grades 3-8 ELA proficiency rate of non-economically disadvantaged students is also more than twice that of the rate for economically disadvantaged students. These gaps persist and compound as students transition into postsecondary education. Additionally, different institution types

Figure 5. Tennessee Community Colleges Graduate Black, Hispanic, and Pell-Eligible Students At Lower Rates Than Their White And Non-Pell-Eligible Counterparts



Source

Figure 6. Racial and Socioeconomic Graduation Rate Gaps Persist at Tennessee Universities



Source



are designed to serve different student populations, which should be considered when comparing outcomes across sectors. Institutions should be taking a comprehensive approach to evaluating data to identify strategies to better support students in their unique contexts and improve outcomes. Every postsecondary student at every postsecondary institution in Tennessee deserves the supports they need to earn a credential that prepares them for a career enabling economic independence.



Addressing Student Need

There are various challenges students face in postsecondary education that pose barriers to retention and completion. The role of institutions and policymakers is to identify those challenges and provide students with the support they need to succeed. Some challenges include:

Challenge	Data	Promising Practices
<p>Academic Readiness</p>	<p>The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) factbook shows the percentage of first-time freshmen requiring learning supports at Tennessee’s community colleges has declined nearly 11 percentage points since 2014. Still, over half of first-time freshman at Tennessee community colleges require learning support. Some of this decline may be attributed to the fact that beginning in Fall 2020, TBR began permitting community colleges to use GPA to place students into learning supports.</p>	<p>Coaching is a strategy to give students the information they need to succeed academically and beyond, and can help students with time management, study skills, and self-advocacy. A randomized study of a coaching program found students assigned a coach were significantly more likely to persist even a year after treatment.</p> <p>Summer bridge programs are designed to assist with academic integration and are positively associated with postsecondary attainment.</p> <p>A Tennessee study found students in corequisite remediation (as opposed to prerequisite) were 15 percentage points and 13 percentage points more likely to pass math and English gateway courses within one year of enrolling, respectively.</p>

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<p style="text-align: center;">Financial Support</p>	<p>The leading reason students stop out of higher education is due to the stress of having to work and go to school at the same time – with work being a necessity for financial reasons. When the National Center for Education Statistics considered postsecondary students who stopped out in 2004 without completing a credential, they found that 31 percent reported leaving due to financial reasons.</p> <p>In Tennessee the average net price for in-state students is \$6,019 at two-year colleges and \$14,684 at four-year colleges after all aid is applied.</p>	<p>Georgia State offers Panther Retention Grants for students on track for graduating who have unmet financial need and modest balances for tuition and fees. The program provides emergency funding to ensure students are not dropped from classes for lack of payment. Over 86 percent of grant recipients graduate, most within two semesters.</p> <p>In 2021, the Tennessee General Assembly passed legislation to launch a four-year pilot program to award completion grants for Tennessee Promise students experiencing financial hardship that may lead them to stop out. Students in the Fall 2022 Promise cohort who received the grant alongside coaching were 34 percent more likely to remain enrolled following their first year, with impacts even larger for Black students.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Food Insecurity</p>	<p>The University of Tennessee System estimates that 33.8 percent of their students are food insecure. Nationally, a HOPE Center survey of postsecondary students found that 38 percent and 29 percent of students were impacted by food insecurity at two- and four-year institutions, respectively.</p>	<p>The University of Tennessee has a variety of efforts to address student hunger, including hosting Hunger and Homelessness Summits, operating a meal share program for students to donate meal swipes and offering an on-campus food pantry.</p> <p>Ten states have passed versions of the Hunger Free Campus Bill, which focuses on creating food pantries, a swipe out hunger program, opportunities for SNAP enrollment opportunities, and funding for public colleges to address student hunger.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Housing Insecurity</p>	<p>A national HOPE Center survey of postsecondary students found that 52 percent and 43 percent of students were affected by housing insecurity at two- and four-year institutions, respectively. Additionally, 14 percent of students surveyed were affected by homelessness.</p>	<p>Identifying a single point of contact on campus for students can simplify students’ experiences navigating on-campus resources to deal with housing insecurity. Every public college in Colorado has appointed a staff member as the single contact for students experiencing homelessness.</p> <p>While the majority of community colleges do not provide on-campus housing, housing security is associated with reduced student anxiety and depression and higher GPA. As the housing costs for students continue to rise, some community colleges, including in Mississippi, are offering on-campus housing as a key component of their strategic plans to support students.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Mental Health</p>	<p>In a 2021 survey of 373 campuses, more than 60 percent of students met criteria for at least one mental health problem – representing a nearly 50 percent increase from 2013. The Center for Collegiate Mental Health reported a nearly 30 percent increase in the number of students seeking campus counseling services between 2009-2015.</p>	<p>UT Knoxville utilizes proactive partnerships between campus departments and with organizations such as JED Campus, a suicide prevention non-profit, to support the whole student.</p> <p>The University of North Carolina has provided Mental Health First Aid training to over 900 faculty members, who are often a student’s main point of contact with the university.</p> <p>At the University of Virginia, the Project RISE initiative is a university-sponsored peer counseling service in which trained peer educators support Black students experiencing alienation, depression, and anxiety.</p> <p>The Ohio State: Wellness App allows its more than 240,000 users to create personalized wellness plans, access crisis support, receive tips on stress management, and interact with friends.</p>

Questions for Thought

- Many student support services are costly. With limited funds, how should states and institutions prioritize investments to address student need?
- What are strategies to encourage student participation in available support programs?

As many students experience multiple challenges while enrolled in postsecondary education, institutions can offer wraparound supports through a cohesive program or model rather than having students address their varying needs through siloed supports. A study by the [University of Chicago Inclusive Economy Lab](#) found that participation in a Chicago-based non-profit's holistic support program significantly increased first-year retention, ultimately resulting in an 18 percent increase in three-year degree attainment. As another example, [MDRC's study](#) of the City University of New York's (CUNY) [Accelerated Study in Associate Programs \(ASAP\)](#) model (designed to address financial burdens, inadequate support, and academic underpreparedness) found significant impacts on retention leading to an 18 percentage point impact on degree attainment – nearly doubling the number of students graduating. Nashville State Community College modeled its [Nashville GRAD program](#) after the ASAP initiative and has been clearing financial barriers and providing advising to Tennessee students since 2020.

There are also several national initiatives and organizations created with a mission to address postsecondary completion challenges. Some examples include:

- [15 to Finish/Stay on Track](#): This Complete College America strategy leverages advising, advisors, and institutional policy and practice to encourage

students who are able to take at least 15 credits a semester and graduate on time. Originating at the University of Hawaii, there are now more than 200 institutions participating in the strategy. Several Tennessee IHEs participate in 15 to Finish or similar initiatives, including [Tennessee State University](#) and the [University of Tennessee Knoxville](#).

- [Guided Pathways](#): The Guided Pathways movement, originated by the Community College Research Center, offers a model to systematically change IHE practice to clarify educational paths and career goals, help students get on and stay on a path, and ensure students are learning across programs. [Practices](#) include creating standardized program maps across the institution and providing flexible class options.
- Policy and advocacy organizations focused specifically on postsecondary completion include: [Complete College America \(CCA\)](#), [Institute for Higher Education Policy \(IHEP\)](#), the [Institute for College Access & Success](#), and the [Tennessee College Access and Success Network \(TCASN\)](#).

Questions for Thought

- Should completion strategies be targeted toward students with the highest need or implemented institution-wide? In which cases should each of those approaches be implemented?
- What data is critical to inform state and IHE completion efforts?

Career Readiness

[Career readiness](#) refers to a foundation of competencies that prepare graduates for success in the workforce over a lifelong career. SCORE [polling](#)

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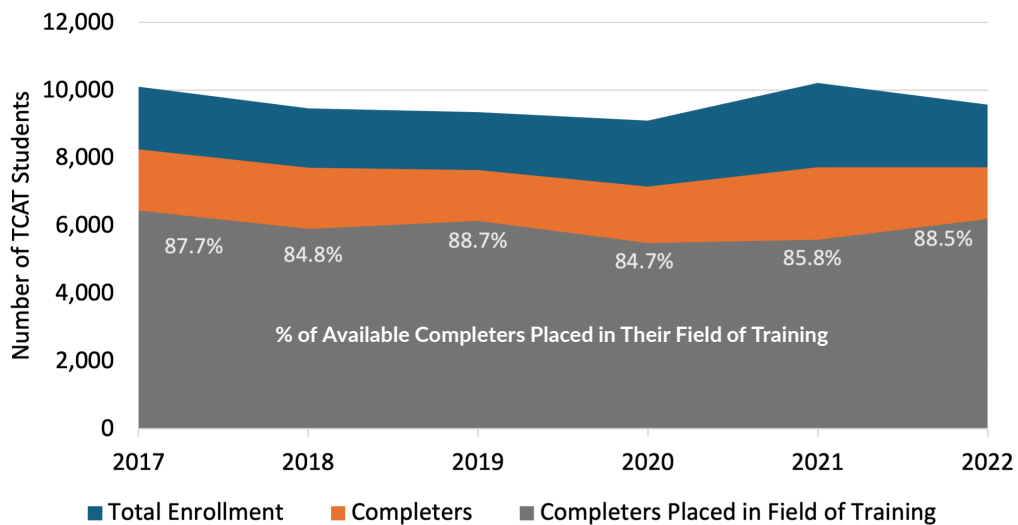
results reveal that approximately two-thirds of Tennesseans believe the purpose of higher education is to prepare for a career, not just to create a well-rounded citizen. Earnings and employment data reinforces that postsecondary education sets students up for success in the workforce. For instance, recent research investigates the income difference between college-educated workers and high school-educated workers over the course of the work life – that difference is described as return on investment. The study finds a 14.5 percent return on investment for earning a bachelor’s and a 9.5 percent return to those earning an associate’s degree. However, the research also highlights that returns vary based on a student’s program of study. Not all students experience the same benefit from higher education.

One strategy to improve student outcomes is to make stronger connections between postsecondary

education and career preparation. UT Knoxville is leading the way with its new College of Emerging and Collaborative Studies, where students can gain in-demand skills through credit-bearing internships and customizable degrees in emerging fields. As another example, TBR’s “Reimagining the Community College Experience” initiative allows students to receive career advising and earn a workforce-focused certificate in the first semester.

TCATs are state leaders in workforce alignment, with workforce development central to their mission. TCATs exemplify career alignment by publicly reporting both their completion and job placement data. Figure 7 illustrates how TCATs consistently complete over three-quarters of their total enrollees. The job placement rates are even higher, with nearly 9 out of 10 available graduates placed in their field of training upon graduation.

Figure 7. Nearly 9 of 10 Available TCAT Completers Are Placed In Their Field Upon Graduation



Note: Available for Placement excludes those enlisted in the military or seeking additional education. Available for Placement also excludes any completers that are documented to be unavailable for employment because of situations such as pregnancy, other serious health-related issues, caring for ill family members, incarceration, death, etc.

Source

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Though there are many recent advances and bright spots around career alignment and preparation, there is opportunity for the state and all its institutions of higher education to increase alignment to workforce and provision of career-relevant opportunities for students. Some promising strategies are responsive industry partnerships, internship and apprenticeships, and stackable credentials. By aligning educational opportunities with in-demand, high-wage careers, Tennessee can create opportunities for economic mobility and paths to economic independence.

Questions for Thought

- How should IHEs make career readiness central to their culture?
- What data should be used to measure career readiness?
- What goals beyond career readiness should play a central role in higher education?





Established in 2001, [The Hunt Institute](#) honors the legacy of James B. Hunt, Jr., the former governor of North Carolina who distinguished himself as an ardent champion of education.

The Hunt Institute brings together people and resources to inspire and inform elected officials and policymakers about key issues in education, resulting in visionary leaders who are prepared to take strategic action for greater educational outcomes and student success.

In 2016, The Hunt Institute became an independent, nonprofit entity and joined forces with Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy to pursue research, educational partnerships, and events related to improving education policy.

Learn more at www.hunt-institute.org.



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The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) is a nonpartisan nonprofit education policy and advocacy organization founded in 2009 by Senator Bill Frist, MD, former US Senate Majority Leader. SCORE advocates for changes that transform education, so Tennessee students develop the knowledge and skills to succeed in school, career, and life.

Every student in Tennessee deserves a high-quality education from kindergarten to career. With this belief in mind, SCORE has four goals for Tennessee focused on preparing students for success:

01. All students receive an excellent public k-12 education
02. All students earn a credential or postsecondary degree
03. All students are prepared for a career that enables economic independence
04. Across all goals, all students have equitable opportunities for success

Learn more at www.tnscore.org



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