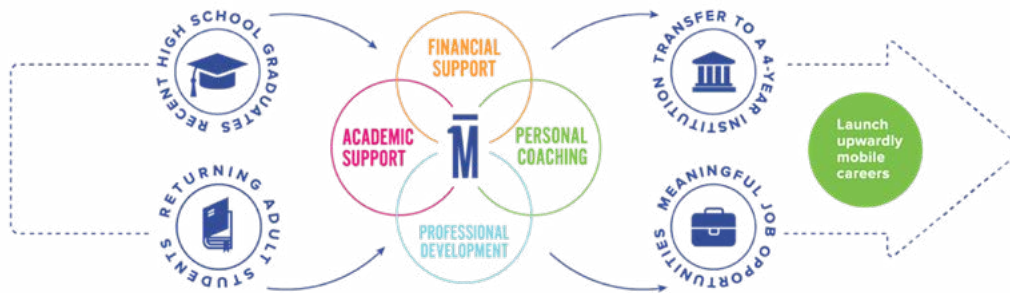


# POSTSECONDARY INNOVATION SPOTLIGHT

## One Million Degrees: What Tennessee Can Learn From This Scalable and Research-Backed Model



### Highlighting Innovative Strategies: Why It Matters in Tennessee

By scaling innovative, evidence-based strategies like One Million Degrees (OMD) – a model that accelerates progress for community college students – we can drive student success in higher education, which is critical for Tennessee’s educational attainment and its workforce, now and into the future. Providing a platform for colleges and universities to expand learnings and leverage evidence-based strategies can support the postsecondary sector as it furthers the opportunity for students to not only access but complete quality degrees and credentials of value.

In Tennessee, a postsecondary credential beyond high school is necessary for many existing and future jobs. Ultimately, it also impacts the state’s economic competitiveness. For over a decade, Tennessee has been a trailblazer for higher education innovation, policy, and funding. Notably, Tennessee has taken strides to address postsecondary access, attainment, and outcomes-based funding, which led to the nation’s first attempt at tuition-free community college (Tennessee Promise Scholarship, 2014), setting the statewide Drive to 55 attainment goal in 2015 (for 55% of adults to hold a postsecondary credential by 2025), and shifting state appropriations for funding institutions of higher education from an enrollment-based model to one based on performance outcomes.

As a national leader, Tennessee has also led the nation in economic growth while uplifting these postsecondary priorities. The state has made progress toward stabilizing postpandemic benchmark data and growing in certain areas (e.g., the college-going rate has steadily increased over the last two years to 56.7% for the class of 2023). Despite all the momentum, Tennessee has yet to meet the goal of 55% of adults earning a postsecondary degree or credential. Today, new data indicate that the percentage of Tennessee jobs requiring a degree or credential is roughly 60%. Institutions of higher education and partnering organizations must do more to continue providing students with the in-demand skills linked to quality credentials that lead to family-sustaining wages. As the state’s working-age population ages, and with historically low unemployment rates – we must move with urgency to ensure that students in the postsecondary pipeline are being equipped with the skills needed to compete in Tennessee’s marketplace.

### A Scalable Model

One Million Degrees is an independent nonprofit that provides a promising student support model for accelerating community college students’ progress on career pathways to economic independence. Based in Chicago, OMD is designed to provide holistic, research-backed support to students enrolled in City Colleges of Chicago. The program is aimed at mitigating sys-

temic financial, academic, personal, and professional impediments that community college students are faced with daily.

OMD scholars must:

- Be enrolled or plan to enroll in one of the colleges where the program operates
- Be eligible for a federal Pell Grant or for the Chicago STAR scholarship
- Have a grade-point average of at least 2.0
- Be pursuing their first college degree
- Have at least one full year remaining to graduation

Students may join the OMD program in high school or after they enroll in community college. Returning adult students may also opt for these services.

OMD scholars have access to four pillars of wraparound supports:

1. **Academic support:** Accountability calls with a program coordinator and guidance to help students navigate existing resources at each campus.
2. **Financial support:** Stipends that aid students with books, transportation and other college-related costs.
3. **Professional development:** OMD conducts student development sessions addressing topics like time management, self-care, resume building, LinkedIn training and mock interviews.
4. **Personal coaching:** One-on-one and group sessions with OMD staff and coaches (i.e., volunteers from various businesses and industries).

OMD deploys embedded campus-level program coordinators to provide wraparound support to students. Program coordinators at OMD have much lower caseloads (1:65) than the student-to-adviser ratios typically used at many colleges and universities. Lower caseloads allow program coordinators to leverage and build strong connectedness with students, which, in turn, provides targeted individualized support that helps students overcome barriers to academic and career success.

Students receive annual stipends of \$1,000 used to address any financial challenges. A critical practice that OMD deploys is linking the stipend (a critical financial support that is needed for students), but it has also coincidentally been a tool of both recruitment and retention — as receiving the stipend is linked to meeting program participation requirements. In addition,

scholars can tap additional resources (up to \$250) to offset costs that help them advance academically or professionally (for example, membership dues to honor societies, conference registrations, four-year university application fees, among others). OMD offers a regular cadence of professional development events and workshops designed to build professional skills and connections and, ultimately, enhance their career readiness while completing degrees in their chosen career paths. Students who engage in these development sessions regularly can receive a performance-based stipend in addition to their last-dollar scholarship. These support services are driving positive outcomes for students who take up the program.

Furthermore, OMD scholars experience career exploration and support through a mentorship program with local professionals who volunteer their time and expertise to mentor and coach scholars. These coaches aim to provide career development opportunities through direct support, job shadowing engagements and networking experiences. To ensure a more effective mentorship experience, a key strategy of OMD is matching scholars with like-minded professionals working in fields aligned to the student's field of interest.

## OMD Outcomes + Rigorous External Evaluation

OMD's strategy is rooted in research, and, given its success, City Colleges of Chicago is now scaling the program across all of its colleges.

In 2017, OMD partnered with the University of Chicago's Inclusive Economy Lab to evaluate its impact with the use of a randomized control trial. The study found that students who joined the OMD program during high school were 73% more likely to enroll in college and complete a degree in three years. The results from the study purported a "statistically significant and substantively meaningful increase," on associate degree attainment three years after randomization (which yielded results similar to the randomized control trial of a comparable but smaller program, CUNY ASAP).

The effects of OMD were larger for students who took up its program engagement than for their peers who did not receive this model's support. The study's sample included nearly 60% first-generation college students — mostly Black and Hispanic students — with approximately two-thirds identifying as female.

## Key Stakeholders

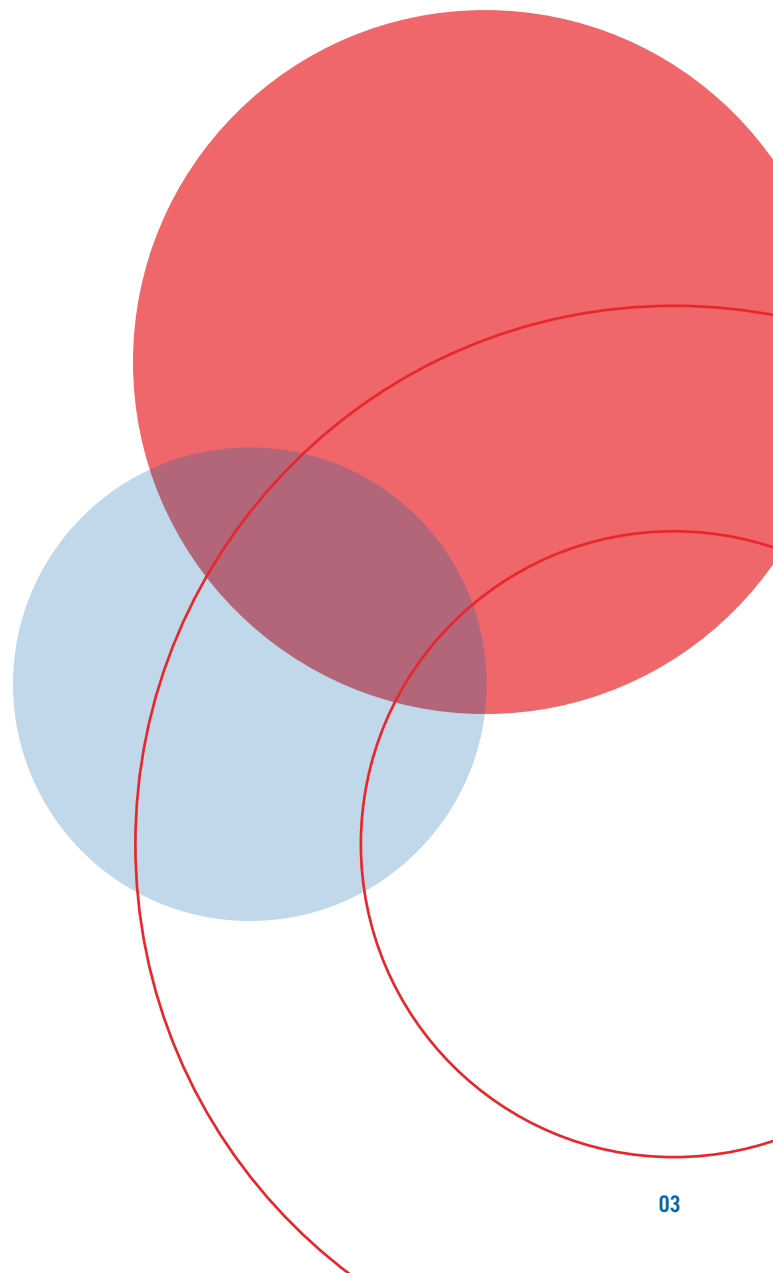
- City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), chancellor
- One Million Degrees
- Business and organizations (employers) providing apprenticeships, internships, job shadowing, etc.
- Local professionals (coaches)
- Pritzker Foundation
- Private foundations & philanthropic partners

## Key Insights To Consider

1. Research-backed approaches are often lauded by researchers, organizations and institutions, but we struggle to scale these practices within the sector piloted. CCC leaders are changing the narrative and partnering with One Million Degrees to scale these research-backed strategies across all seven of their community colleges.
2. Connecting students in the higher education pipeline with the workforce takes additional capacity, relationships and resources. OMD is providing financial support, career coaches and cocurricular experiential learning (job shadowing, apprenticeships, etc.) to drive skills development, social networks and, eventually, enhance employability of future graduates attending CCC institutions. At a time when much of the national and state conversation is focused on ensuring graduates are earning credentials that lead to high-wage, in-demand jobs, OMD is activating key steps and partners to realize these goals.
3. City Colleges of Chicago is making bold financial investments to position its campuses to leverage an innovative model with proven success. They are partnering with local nonprofits, philanthropists and foundations to raise funds that directly meet the needs of college-going students throughout the Chicago area.
4. As the focus on connecting education to the workforce is elevated, it is important to note that there's not just one component in OMD's model that is driving degree attainment and career connection. Rather, it is the comprehensive program (access work with high school students, high-touch coaching at critical transition points, financial stipends, and connecting with employers for opportunities like job shadowing, micro-internships, apprenticeships, internships, etc.) that is driving the program's success.

## Building Partnerships and Connecting With Employers

Employers have an opportunity to partner with local postsecondary institutions to enhance existing relationships or establish new ones that expose students to the skills needed to thrive in today's jobs. Given the challenges students face to balance work with attaining a quality credential, we need to invest in more opportunities for students to earn and learn while building meaningful skills and networks. OMD's success has allowed them to build their staff capacity and strengthen their volunteer network. OMD is also convening a group of over 20 Chicago business leaders and executives to serve on an executive advisory board. The central focus of the board is to establish employer partners that are committed to supporting OMD scholars' academic and professional development by providing industry counsel on career readiness programming and cultivating coaching and career related opportunities for students.



## Opportunities for Tennessee's Advising Organizations

A critical component of OMD's model is its relationship with institutions and the community college system office. As Tennessee advising organizations, community partners and educational leaders continue to support community college campuses, they might look to the OMD model as a promising practice for providing holistic student support.

OMD's work has led to an increase in college enrollment for students who are transitioning from high schools to community colleges. This layered support provides an additional connection point for high school students and campuses to avoid the phenomenon of summer melt. With the added coaching and nudges for high schoolers to complete college enrollment onboarding components, OMD's model helps increase engagement across the summer, and, eventually, leads to successful enrollment for students.

The practice to engage in strategic communication with program coordinators across the summer doesn't stop at access but continues through semester touch points that prompt students to engage with campus advisors to fulfill registration requirements, complete course schedules, access tutoring and other college supports, submit financial aid documents, and access support with transfer to a four-year university.

OMD's strategic partnership with City Colleges of Chicago has much to offer advising, access, and other related intermediaries in terms of how to better coordinate services available to students both on and off campus.

One Million Degrees has launched its advisory and capacity building services to scale its impact with partners nationally. To learn more about OMD, [visit their website](#). If you're interested in discussing the OMD model and related work in SCORE's postsecondary strategic practice portfolio, [contact us](#).