

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to education at all levels, and the potential impact on student outcomes will be felt for months and possibly years ahead. The SCORE series of COVID-19 Impact Memos analyzes challenges, examines potential responses, and highlights student-centered solutions.

## COVID-19 Impact Memo 5: Summer Bridge Programs Spring 2020

### Postsecondary Transition Programs In Tennessee

Summer bridge programs, designed to give college-going students an academic and social boost to help students transition successfully into postsecondary education, have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many colleges in Tennessee offer these programs the summer before freshman year to expose students to the postsecondary environment and to eliminate the need for no-credit remedial courses in the first semester. Students who participate in these opportunities are more likely to pass college-level coursework and complete a degree.<sup>1</sup> The programs are especially valuable for students with the greatest needs, such as first-generation college students and academically underprepared students.

Different models of summer bridge programs exist in Tennessee, linked by the common goal of acclimating students to college to improve postsecondary success. The following three tables cover some of Tennessee’s summer bridge programs.

<b>Tennessee Promise Summer Bridge Program</b>	
<p>The partnering organization for the Tennessee Promise program in 90 of the state’s 95 counties, tnAchieves operates an optional three-week summer bridge program for Tennessee Promise students at each of Tennessee’s 13 community colleges. The program, characterized as an “academic boot camp,” strives to remove the need for remediation and to normalize college for those who have never stepped foot on a campus. The program provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily instruction in English, reading, and math with the opportunity to test out of learning support courses at the end of the program</li> <li>• Daily lunch-and-learns on topics relevant to college</li> <li>• Opportunities to network with key campus contacts like the college president and financial aid professionals</li> <li>• Opportunities to form relationships with a cohort of their peers</li> </ul>	<p>To date, the tnAchieves summer bridge program has served more than 4,000 students since 2012. The program boasts impressive outcomes: 90 percent of participants have tested out of a needed remedial course before the fall semester, and the 2019 post-test survey found that all students were more comfortable with the college transition than before enrolling in the summer bridge program. Each year, program students have higher fall-to-fall retention rates than peers who did not attend summer bridge, demonstrating the program’s positive impact on a student’s postsecondary career.</p>

### Summer Bridge Programs at Tennessee’s HBCUs

<p>To support students entering Tennessee’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in their transition into college, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission has supported summer bridge programs at these institutions since 2019.</p> <p>The first year approximately 300 students attended the programs across five HCBUs: American Baptist College, Fisk University, Lane College, LeMoyné-Owen College, and Tennessee State University. These residential programs included academic coursework and intentional campus activities, including service-learning and career exploration. Many participants have the opportunity to complete remediation in mathematics or English, select a major and register for fall classes, complete at least three credits toward general education requirements, and interact with tutoring, academic advising, financial aid, student life, and other student services.</p>	<p>The first year of the pilot program showed promising results: 99 percent of participants completed the summer program and 95 percent enrolled in the fall. Summer melt was significantly reduced at each college, and all participants earned between six and nine credit hours toward their degrees. Perhaps most important, all participants entered college with momentum. Many of the students who participated in the program have ended up becoming leaders on campus within their first year.</p>
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### East Tennessee State University’s Summer Bridge Plus Program

<p>Started in 2018, the Summer Bridge Plus program at East Tennessee State University serves a cohort of first-time African American, Hispanic, and Native American students during their transition to college, the first two years of college, and graduation. Each year, 50 underrepresented students are selected for a residential summer bridge program in June and a college transition program in August.</p> <p>In the fall semester, the Plus portion of the program begins in students’ first year and continues through the sophomore year. Cohort members take a course together and participate in biweekly programming focused on college and career success. Students also participate in weekly tutoring sessions, monthly coaching sessions, and on-and-off campus programming, and they receive a \$500 book scholarship. In junior and senior years, students may access additional programming, including professional development and study abroad and alternative spring break opportunities.</p>	<p>The Summer Bridge Plus program is valuable for first-generation students of color as it builds and fosters a supportive community that helps students feel a sense of belonging on campus. Evaluations show that the program reduces summer melt, with all program participants enrolled in the fall. In the second year, 96 percent of participants enrolled. Overall, 80 percent of program participants remain at ETSU from freshman fall semester to sophomore fall semester. Summer bridge cohort members are also retained at higher rates than students who did not attend a summer bridge program.</p>
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### COVID-19 Pandemic Impact

Colleges and universities in Tennessee closed their campuses in March because of the COVID-19 pandemic and transitioned from in-person classes to online courses through the end of the summer semester. Summer bridge programs also have had to adjust in response to the pandemic.



Program delivery and student supports will look much different this summer than in previous years, with residential programming canceled to protect students’ health and wellbeing. The following table recaps how COVID-19 is impacting summer bridge programs.

<p><b>tnAchieves</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tnAchieves will not hold the three-week Tennessee Promise Summer Bridge Program at community colleges in the summer of 2020.</li> <li>• tnAchieves has partnered with the Tennessee Higher Education Commission and 11 community colleges to offer Tennessee Promise students the opportunity to take their college’s College Success course online this summer rather than in the fall semester.</li> </ul>
<p><b>THEC’s Summer Bridge Programs at HBCUs</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HBCU Summer Bridge Programs will shift to online course delivery that includes content on how to succeed as an online learner. With these changes, program capacity has expanded – 150 to 600 students are expected to participate in the online format this summer across the five institutions.</li> <li>• For example, Tennessee State University is planning on hosting a two-week, academically focused program online for 200 students, providing laptops to all participating students. If TSU returns to on-campus learning in the fall, a weekend retreat for program participants is planned to help them form relationships with their cohort.</li> <li>• The five participating colleges are all currently focused on ensuring that students who enroll in bridge programs have the personal technology infrastructure needed to be successful in online learning, including laptops and internet access.</li> </ul>
<p><b>ETSU’s Summer Bridge PLUS</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ETSU had selected the cohort members for this year’s incoming class and is currently communicating with the students, working with students on the financial aid process, and moving to online programming.</li> <li>• Residential programming has been postponed to August in response to COVID-19. ETSU will host online engagement opportunities and game nights for Summer Bridge Plus participants to help the students form relationships with others in their cohort.</li> <li>• First year Summer Bridge Plus students will now take two classes together in the fall to replace the cohort-based course in June.</li> </ul>

Overall, COVID-19 has disrupted summer bridge programs in Tennessee. Programs are responding to meet student need in several ways:

- Across the state, **residential summer bridge programs have been canceled to ensure student health and wellbeing, with many college student success programs shifting to online formats.**
- Postsecondary leaders understand that students need supports in the time between high school and postsecondary and are **working to ensure that they are delivering quality programs that support students in the transition between K-12 and postsecondary.**
- Leaders recognize that there has been a loss this summer by not being able to offer in-person summer bridge programs, with concern about students experiencing academic, social, and emotional challenges in this transition time.

- To meet this student need, leaders are developing online options to deliver the necessary student services to empower students to be successful in various learning environments.

## The Road Ahead: Opportunities For Consideration

Higher education leaders have quickly adjusted their programs to support students during this time of critical transition, and the work does not end here. Moving forward, postsecondary institutions have innovative opportunities to bridge the gaps students experience in transition from K-12 to postsecondary::

1. **Expanding program capacity.** The move to online delivery for summer bridge programs presents an opportunity to support more students than with a traditional residential program. Colleges should actively recruit a greater number of students into online summer transition programs.
2. **Improving instructional programming.** College success programming should be revised to feature the skills required to be successful in online courses. The skills required to be a good online student are also useful for in-person learning.
3. **Increasing student supports.** Colleges also should be thinking about building program supports into a student's first year of college. It is likely that the upcoming class will need even greater levels of student support to increase persistence rates.
4. **Conducting technology inventories.** Colleges also should assess the technology needs of incoming students, including device access, digital literacy, and adequate internet access that will be required for students to be successful.

## Conclusion

COVID-19 has disrupted the delivery of summer bridge programs, with higher education institutions pivoting to serve student needs online during the end of the spring and entire summer semesters. The situation is rapidly changing, and the format of student enrollment for Fall 2020 remains unclear. It will be imperative that leaders continue to partner to create appropriate support for incoming students, recognizing that students will need additional supports as they transition to a new, changing postsecondary environment.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Wathington, Joshua Pretlow, and Elisabeth Barnett. "A Good Start? The Impact of Texas' Developmental Summer Bridge Program on Student Success." *The Journal of Higher Education* (October 2016). John Wachen, Joshua Pretlow, and Karrie G. Dixon. "Building College Readiness: Exploring the Effectiveness of the UNC Academic Summer Bridge Program." *The Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* (2018, Vol. 20).

