

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 7: Postsecondary Policy Changes Summer 2020

As public health concerns about COVID-19 increased in March 2020, the Tennessee General Assembly worked on an expedited timeline to pass a reduced budget and emergency legislation. Public and private colleges and universities in the state closed campuses and moved courses online for the rest of the spring 2020 semester. These actions resulted in significant state, system, and institution-level policy changes that affect Tennessee students along the K-12 to career continuum.

COVID-19 Policy Impact

State Policy: State lawmakers passed legislation that provide students with flexibilities for receiving financial aid and maintaining course credit.

- **Public Chapter 632** authorizes the executive director of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) and Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC) to adjust the nonacademic requirements of Tennessee’s financial aid programs, such as Tennessee Promise and the Dual Enrollment Grant. Examples of these changes could include:¹
 - Authority to suspend, modify, or waive the application deadlines for scholarships
 - Changes to non-academic eligibility criteria, such as required meetings or community service hours necessary to maintain scholarship eligibility
- **Public Chapter 652** made significant policy changes in K-12 education, including students transitioning between high school and postsecondary education:²
 - Encouraging collaboration across state education agencies and public institutions of higher education to ensure students could receive course credit toward a credential for dual enrollment and dual credit courses
 - Granting TSAC the authority to create rules to protect financial aid and credit opportunities for students enrolled in dual enrollment or dual credit courses during the spring of 2020

TSAC Rule: After passage of Public Chapter 632, TSAC made modifications to support financial aid opportunities for students during COVID-19. In May 2020, these changes included:³

- Ensuring institutions of higher education have flexibility to **use alternative GPA calculations** to count toward a student’s HOPE scholarship renewal eligibility for the 2020-21 academic year, such as using a student’s cumulative GPA from the fall 2019 semester. Institutions must report a GPA to TSAC for financial aid eligibility but retain authority for

the GPA modification for the 2019-20 spring and summer terms for Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect, Dual Enrollment, and the Middle College Scholarship.

- **Waiving the community service requirements** for the Tennessee Promise Scholarship
- **Suspending the service requirements** for Tennessee’s six loan-scholarship programs.

Additionally, **TSAC released guidance to institutions of higher education** on granting students leaves of absence for the spring 2020 semester:

- Colleges and universities have latitude to help students maintain program eligibility, including the ability to grant students “leaves of absence” under extraordinary circumstances such as COVID-19. Importantly, existing TSAC rule grants students the right to appeal the loss of scholarship on the grounds of personal or medical hardship, where the COVID-19 pandemic could apply.⁴

Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) Policy: TBR, the governing system for Tennessee’s public community and technical colleges, amended system policy in response to COVID-19 as well.

- **Learning Support Policy:**⁵ For the next academic year, TBR amended the system’s learning support policy to allow high school GPA to count as one assessment option for placing students in co-requisite remediation. Another assessment option – the ACT – is limited in access to students during this time.

Institution Policy: Key themes emerge in institution policy changes for Tennessee’s public colleges and universities in response to COVID-19.

- **Grading Options:** With COVID-19 disrupting the regular semester, many colleges and universities shifted course grading policies from the standard A-F scale to pass-fail, complete-incomplete, or credit-no credit options. These policies varied from institution to institution, with some students being offered an “opt-out” option where the A-F scale would still apply to final grades.⁶
- **Student Evaluations:** Coursework shifted to online classes within weeks in March 2020, and many faculty, staff, and students were ill-prepared for teaching and learning in this format. Understanding the unexpected challenge of that transition, some campuses determined student course evaluations to be optional for the spring 2020 semester.
- **Enrollment Requirements:** The pandemic creates uncertainty for students considering postsecondary education after high school, and colleges and universities have made policy changes to accommodate these challenging circumstances. Many universities have moved the deadline for students to accept an offer of admission from May 1 to June 1 to accommodate the uncertainty many students are facing.⁷ Additionally, some universities removed the ACT or SAT assessment as a requirement to apply for admission.⁸

Conclusion

COVID-19 has disrupted education at all levels, creating unique challenges for students pursuing postsecondary certificates and degrees in Tennessee’s postsecondary system. In response to the threat the pandemic has presented, state lawmakers and postsecondary leaders have responded with courage and tenacity to make critical policy changes to support student success. Moving forward, state leaders and advocates must continue to keep students first.



Endnotes

¹ [Tennessee Public Chapter Number 632](#), 2020.

² [Tennessee Public Chapter Number 652](#), 2020.

³ [Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation](#), 2020.

⁴ Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation Rule [1640-01-19-.28](#).

⁵ [Tennessee Board of Regents](#), 2020.

⁶ [Austin Peay State University](#), 2020; [Middle Tennessee State University](#), 2020; [Tennessee Technological University](#), 2020; [University of Memphis](#), 2020; [University of Tennessee at Chattanooga](#), 2020; [University of Tennessee at Knoxville](#), 2020.

⁷ [University of Tennessee at Knoxville](#), 2020.

⁸ [Austin Peay State University](#), 2020; [Tennessee State University](#), 2020.

