

# EQUITY & QUALITY OF ACCESS

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## THE HISTORY OF TENNESSEE'S HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY STRUCTURE

### INTRODUCTION

Tennessee is known across the country for its thoughtful and comprehensive higher education policy structure, which has been built on over a decade of student-focused policy changes at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels. However, despite the many strong policies in place, there is still much work to be done by Tennessee leaders in order to help the state reach its higher education goals.

The dynamic facing higher education leaders in Tennessee—an urgent need to continue above-average progress toward ambitious goals—can be seen by looking at the state's postsecondary attainment rate data over the last decade. The number of working-age adults in Tennessee who have attained a certificate or degree has grown at an impressive rate since 2008—only eight states have higher attainment growth rates over that period. However, despite such growth, Tennessee's current overall attainment rate is just 45.2 percent—only five states have lower current attainment levels.<sup>1</sup>

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have made this work even more urgently important for Tennessee's future. We know that after the 2008 economic recession, more than 95 percent of the jobs created during the recovery went to people with some sort of education beyond high school.<sup>2</sup> And when we look back across the last two major recessions, the unemployment gap between degree-earners and those without degrees widened significantly since 2001—and the difference still has not been made up.<sup>3</sup> As Tennessee works to develop an economic recovery strategy in the wake of the pandemic, many Tennesseans who have experienced job loss or income reduction will be seeking to re- or up-skill by attaining a credential, certificate, or degree from the state's institutions of higher education (IHEs). As policymakers at all levels redouble their efforts to make progress toward the state's higher education goals, it is important to understand the major milestones of state education policy developments over the last decade.

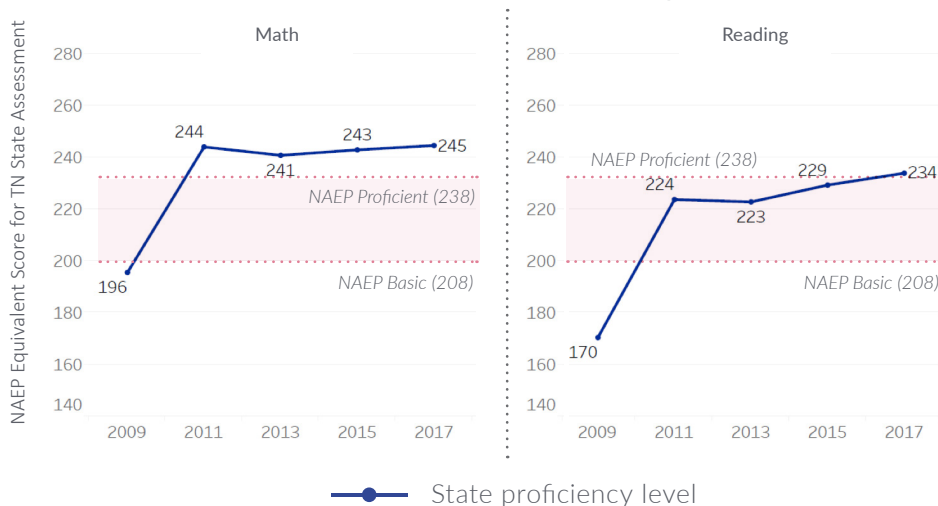
### K-12 CORE REFORMS

In 2010, Tennessee adopted a new set of statewide academic standards that were more closely aligned with nationwide measures of student achievement such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The state standards were further refined in the 2017-18 school year with the adoption of the Tennessee Academic Standards.

In order to measure how state standards have changed over time, NAEP conducts a "mapping" process to determine a NAEP equivalent score for each state proficiency standard. This measure shows what score students would receive on the NAEP assessment if they met the state proficiency standard. As shown in **Figure 1**, Tennessee's proficiency standard in 2009 was lower than the NAEP proficiency standard; by 2011, the state's proficiency standards were significantly higher.

**FIGURE 1**

#### STATE PROFICIENCY STANDARDS COMPARED TO NAEP | GRADE 4, 2009-2017





These K-12 policy reforms have produced significant results—the Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University used longitudinal assessment data to show that districts in Tennessee strongly outperform their regional counterparts on providing educational opportunity, as measured by average test scores, learning rates, and trends in test scores.<sup>4</sup>

## HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM LEGISLATION

In 2010, the Tennessee General Assembly passed the Complete College Tennessee Act (CCTA), which established the state's **outcomes-based funding formula (OBF)** for IHEs. Two particular features of the formula established by CCTA remain notable among state IHE funding formulas:

- While many states only allocate a modest percentage of IHE funding based on OBFs, the Tennessee model allocates the majority of state IHE funding based on student outcome measures.
- The Tennessee OBF model is also distinguished by its flexibility—there are different sets of outcomes used for two-year IHEs and four-year IHEs, and the weights used for those outcomes are tailored to each IHE's mission.

### OBF

A policy that bases a portion of an institution of higher education's funding on certain information about its graduates, such as the numbers of associate and bachelor's degrees earned.

### ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS

Policies that govern the number of course credits that IHEs will accept for incoming transfer students.

The CCTA also laid the groundwork for the development of the state's Tennessee Transfer Pathways, which established a transferable block of courses that are accepted as transfer credits by public IHEs across the state.

## STATEWIDE POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT GOAL

Tennessee became one of the first states in the country to adopt a **postsecondary attainment goal** in 2013 by establishing the Drive to 55 initiative, which states that:

- By **2025, at least 55 percent** of Tennesseans aged **25-64-years-old** will have a **postsecondary credential**.



### POSTSECONDARY ATTAINMENT GOAL

A policy goal stating that by a certain year, a certain percentage of state residents will have some form of education beyond high school.

## TUITION-FREE TECHNICAL OR COMMUNITY COLLEGE PROGRAMS

In 2014, the state enacted the Tennessee Promise program—a **tuition-free community and technical college program** that provides scholarship funding and mentorship for students to attend a community or technical college. One hallmark of the Tennessee Promise program is the one-on-one support that participating students receive from mentors through partnership organizations, including The Ayers Foundation and tnAchieves. In 2017, the state enacted the Tennessee Reconnect program, providing tuition-free community and technical college for adult students who do not already have an associate degree or higher and qualify as an independent student on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

### TUITION-FREE COMMUNITY & TECHNICAL COLLEGE PROGRAM

A policy that allows students to attend a community or technical college without paying tuition.

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## LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW OF TENNESSEE'S KEY HIGHER EDUCATION PLAYERS & PROGRAMS

These developments led to the creation of a higher education policy structure in Tennessee that involves many key players who share responsibility for different programs:

### KEY PLAYERS

#### Coordinating Board

Responsible for providing guidance to the Tennessee Board of Regents, University of Tennessee Board of Trustees, and locally governed state universities.

THEC

Tennessee Higher Education Commission /

TSAC

Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation

#### System Boards

Responsible for setting policy and governance for member IHEs. Each University of Tennessee campus has its own Advisory Board in addition to the System Board.

TBR

Tennessee Board of Regents

UT

University of Tennessee Board of Trustees

#### Locally Governed Institutions

Responsible for governance of six individual IHE campuses.

LGI

Locally Governed Institutions

#### Government Agencies

Responsible for administering and executing specific duties, e.g. financial aid, curriculum development, etc.

TDOE

TN Department of Education

TNECD

TN Department of Economic & Community Development

TLWD

TN Department of Labor & Workforce Development

#### Nonprofit Partners

Responsible for providing support across multiple programs.

TICUA

TN Independent Colleges & Universities Association

SCORE

State Collaborative on Reforming Education

DRIVETO55

Drive to 55 Alliance

TNACHIEVES

Tennessee Achieves

AYERS

Ayers Foundation

ET-TN

The Education Trust in TN

THEI

TN Higher Education Initiative

TCASN

TN College Access & Success Network

TNCHAMBER

TN Chamber of Commerce & Industry

### KEY PROGRAMS

#### Advise TN

College-advising for high school students

THEC

#### Apprenticeships and Work-Based Learning

Real-world experience for students

THEC

TLWD

#### Early College Opportunities

Advanced Placement, dual enrollment, etc.

LGI

TBR

TDOE

THEC

TICUA

UT

#### Gear Up TN

College-going culture development

THEC

#### Governor's Investment in Vocational Education

Industry-relevant technical training and grants

THEC

#### Mentorship

Support for TN Promise recipients

AYERS

TNACHIEVES

#### Outcomes-Based Funding Formula

Allocation of funding based on student outcome metrics

THEC

#### Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support (SAILS)

Early remediation program

TBR

TDOE

THEC

#### TN Education Lottery Scholarships (TELS)

Scholarship program for entering freshmen

TSAC

#### TN Promise

Scholarship program for HS graduates

TBR

TSAC

#### TN Reconnect

Scholarship program for adult learners

TBR

TSAC

#### TN Transfer Pathways

Support for transfer students

TBR

TDOE

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## OVERVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS POLICY ISSUES

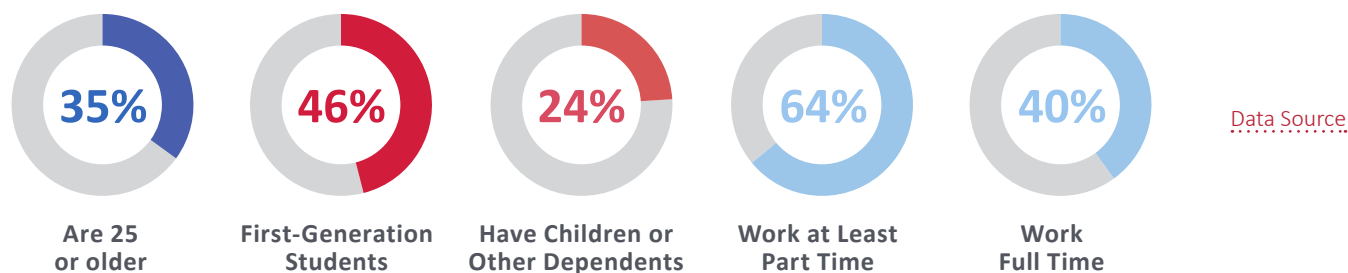
Many of the policy conversations at this first meeting will be framed around the basic question of access: which students are able to pursue a postsecondary education, and how do they get there?

## STUDENT POPULATIONS

A traditional college student is generally considered to be someone who enrolls in college full-time, immediately after graduating from high school, is financially dependent on their parents, and does not work while attending college. However, a nationwide demographic breakdown of the current higher education population shows that many students do not fit that traditional definition.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF TODAY'S HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENT POPULATION

*The average college student is 26 years old.*



In Tennessee, higher education policymakers have focused on four traditionally underserved student populations who have specific needs related to higher education access:

### ADULT LEARNERS

Students who are 25 years old or older.

### LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

Students who qualified for the need-based federal Pell Grant at any time during their college careers.

### ACADEMICALLY UNDERPREPARED

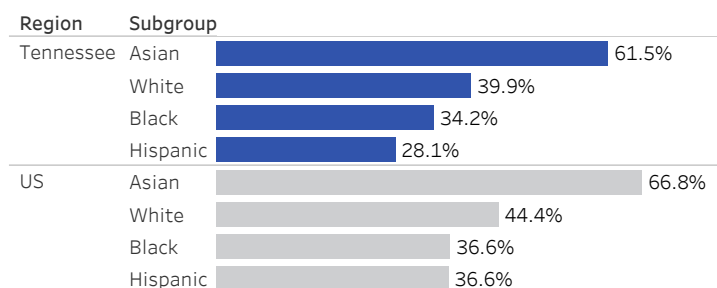
Students who receive an ACT composite score of 18 or lower.

### STUDENTS OF COLOR

African American and Latino students.

When it comes to the percentage of students of color that enroll in higher education, there are gaps between the enrollment rates of different student subgroups. Enrollment percentages of white and Asian students in Tennessee are higher than the percentages for Black and Hispanic students:

**FIGURE 2**  
IHE ENROLLMENT PERCENTAGES FOR STUDENTS AGES 18-24 | 2018



## CITATIONS

- <sup>1</sup> Lumina Foundation, "A Stronger Nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent," <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#nation>.
- <sup>2</sup> Anthony P. Carnevale et al., Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, "America's Divided Recovery: College Haves and Have-Nots," <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/americas-divided-recovery/>.
- <sup>3</sup> State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) and The Boyd Center for Business & Economic Research at The University of Tennessee – Knoxville, "Driving Forward: Ensuring Postsecondary Students Earn Credentials in a Changing Economy," <https://drivingforward.tnscore.org/section-3>.
- <sup>4</sup> Sean F. Reardon et al., The Educational Opportunity Project, Stanford University, <https://edopportunity.org/>.