



Complete Tennessee Leadership Institute

A PROJECT OF SCORE & THE HUNT INSTITUTE

SUPPORTING POSTSECONDARY STUDENT SUCCESS

MEETING 3 | ISSUE BRIEF

SUPPORTING POSTSECONDARY STUDENT SUCCESS

Introduction

Over the last decade, the vast majority of states established [postsecondary attainment goals](#) to meet evolving workforce needs. Tennessee was no exception, launching the [Drive to 55](#) initiative that calls for 55 percent of the working-age population to hold a postsecondary certificate or degree by 2025. To support progress on the Drive to 55, the state prioritized higher education access by launching [Tennessee Promise](#), expanding [postsecondary opportunities in high school](#), and incentivizing early preparation with a [Ready Graduate](#) accountability measure – among other strategies. However, access is just a first step when, on average, only [68 percent](#) of Tennessee first-time, full-time first-year students are still enrolled after one year and only [48 percent](#) graduate within six years. Students not only face a variety of barriers to get in the door of higher education, but also many do not receive the supports they need once there.

A Snapshot of Postsecondary Retention in Tennessee

Most postsecondary students who [stop out](#) do so in their first academic year – making the first year of higher education pivotal for student success.

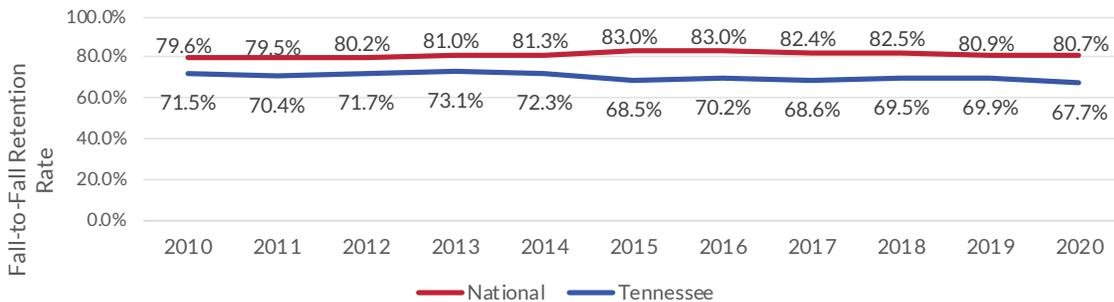
States and institutions of higher education (IHEs) use several important [indicators](#) to monitor student progress toward a degree, including:

- Retention: the percentage of students who return to the same institution for the following year or semester
- Persistence: the percentage of students who return to any institution for the following year or semester

It is important to note that when [Tennessee](#) reports retention, it measures a student’s continued enrollment at *any* Tennessee institution. The state also reports the percentage of students returning to the *same* institution in which they initially enrolled in some figures, but both terms are referred to as “retention”. For the purpose of this brief, we use retention to refer to the percentage of students who stay enrolled at *any* institution of higher education – in line with Tennessee reporting language.

Tennessee retention rates are consistently below the national average. Both national and Tennessee rates are relatively flat, with only small fluctuations year-to-year, though the gap between the two widened slightly in 2015. In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic impacting every aspect of the state’s education system, Tennessee’s retention rate was the lowest it’s been in the last decade. However, overall retention rates do not capture important differences across sector, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. In Tennessee, community college retention rates are dramatically

Tennessee’s First-Time Full-Time Student Retention Rate Trails National Average



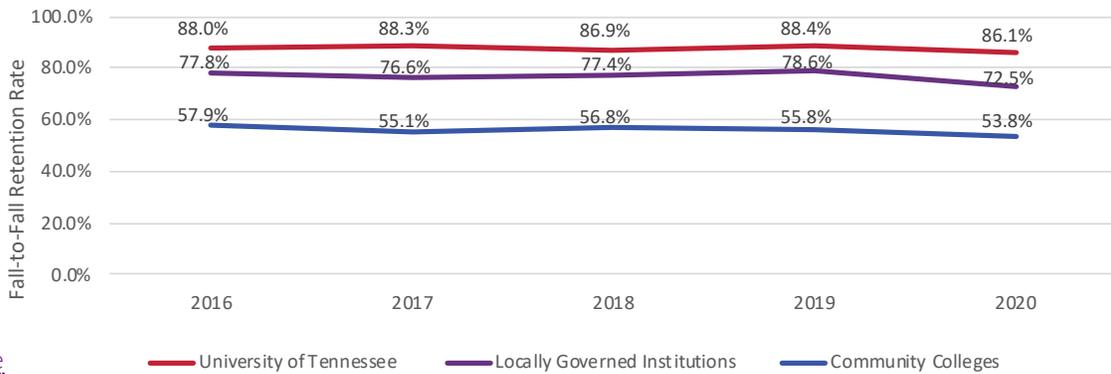
[National Source](#) [Tennessee Source](#)

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- How should enrollment and retention data be interpreted alongside one another?
- What are the implications if one measure increases while the other decreases?

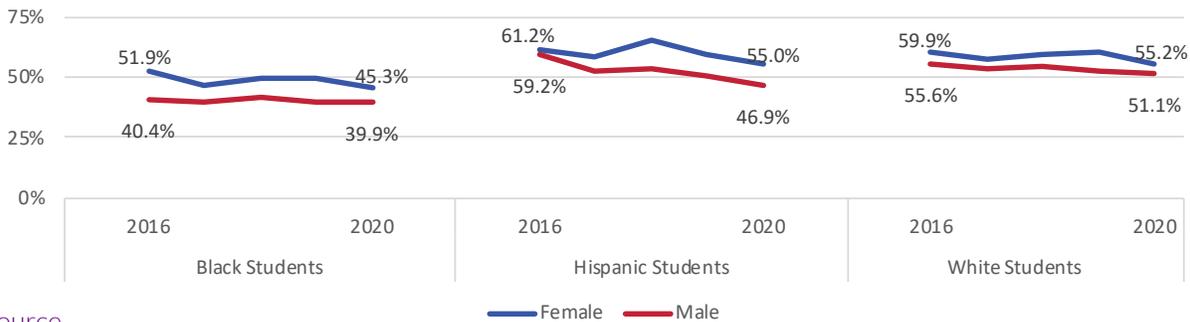
lower than those at University of Tennessee institutions and locally governed institutions. A closer breakdown of the community college sector’s data reveals that Black students persist at a significantly lower rate than White and Hispanic students, and male students persist at a significantly lower rate than female students. This trend is most pronounced for Black males. In the 2020 fall cohort, more than three out of every five black male students who enrolled in community colleges stopped out within a year of enrolling. Two-year institutions are not adequately supporting students toward completion, with thousands dropping out before reaching their second year.

Tennessee Community Colleges Lose A Larger Proportion Of Their Students In First Year Than Other Public In-State Institutions



Source

Community Colleges Consistently Retain Black Students and Male Students at the Lowest Rates



Source

Addressing Student Need

There are a variety of 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 supports they need to succeed. Some challenges include:

| CHALLENGE | DATA | PROMISING PRACTICES |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Academic Readiness | The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) factbook shows the percentage of first-time first-year students requiring learning supports at Tennessee's community colleges has declined by over 10 percentage points since 2014. Still, over half of first-time first-year students at Tennessee community colleges require learning support. | 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 study of a coaching program found students assigned a coach were more likely to persist. Many summer bridge programs are designed to assist with academic integration and are positively associated with postsecondary attainment. 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. |
| Financial Support | The leading reason students stop out of higher education is the stress of having to work and go to school at the same time – with work being a necessity for financial reasons. In Tennessee the average net price for in-state students is \$6,063 at two-year colleges and \$14,509 at four-year colleges <i>after</i> all aid is applied. | 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 within two semesters. 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. |
| Food Insecurity | 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 39 percent and 29 percent of students were impacted by food insecurity at two- and four-year institutions, respectively. | Six states have passed versions of the Hunger Free Campus Bill , which focuses on creating food pantries, a swipe out hunger program, and opportunities for SNAP enrollment. 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. |
| Housing Insecurity | A national HOPE Center survey of postsecondary students found that 48 percent of students were affected by housing insecurity and 14 percent were affected by homelessness. | Identifying a single point of contact on campus for students can simplify students' experiences navigating on campus resources to deal with housing insecurity. As of 2009, every public college in Colorado appointed a staff member as the single contact for students experiencing homelessness. 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 demand for campus housing continues to rise, some community colleges, including in Mississippi , are offering on-campus housing as a key component of their strategic plans to support students. |

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 in postsecondary, 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 nonprofit'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 \(ASAP\)](#) comprehensive program (designed to address financial burdens, inadequate support, and a lack of academic preparation) found significant impacts on retention leading to an 18 percentage point impact on degree attainment – doubling the number of students graduating.

Transfer Pathways

Supports from both institutions and policymakers are also required to ensure students can successfully transfer from one institution of higher education to another. States use a number of different approaches to enhance the transferability of credits, with the most common strategies being common course numbering, articulation agreements, and guaranteed admissions. Tennessee became a leader in transfer when the 2010 [Complete College Tennessee Act](#) created [Tennessee Transfer Pathways \(TTP\)](#) – guaranteeing a 60-hour

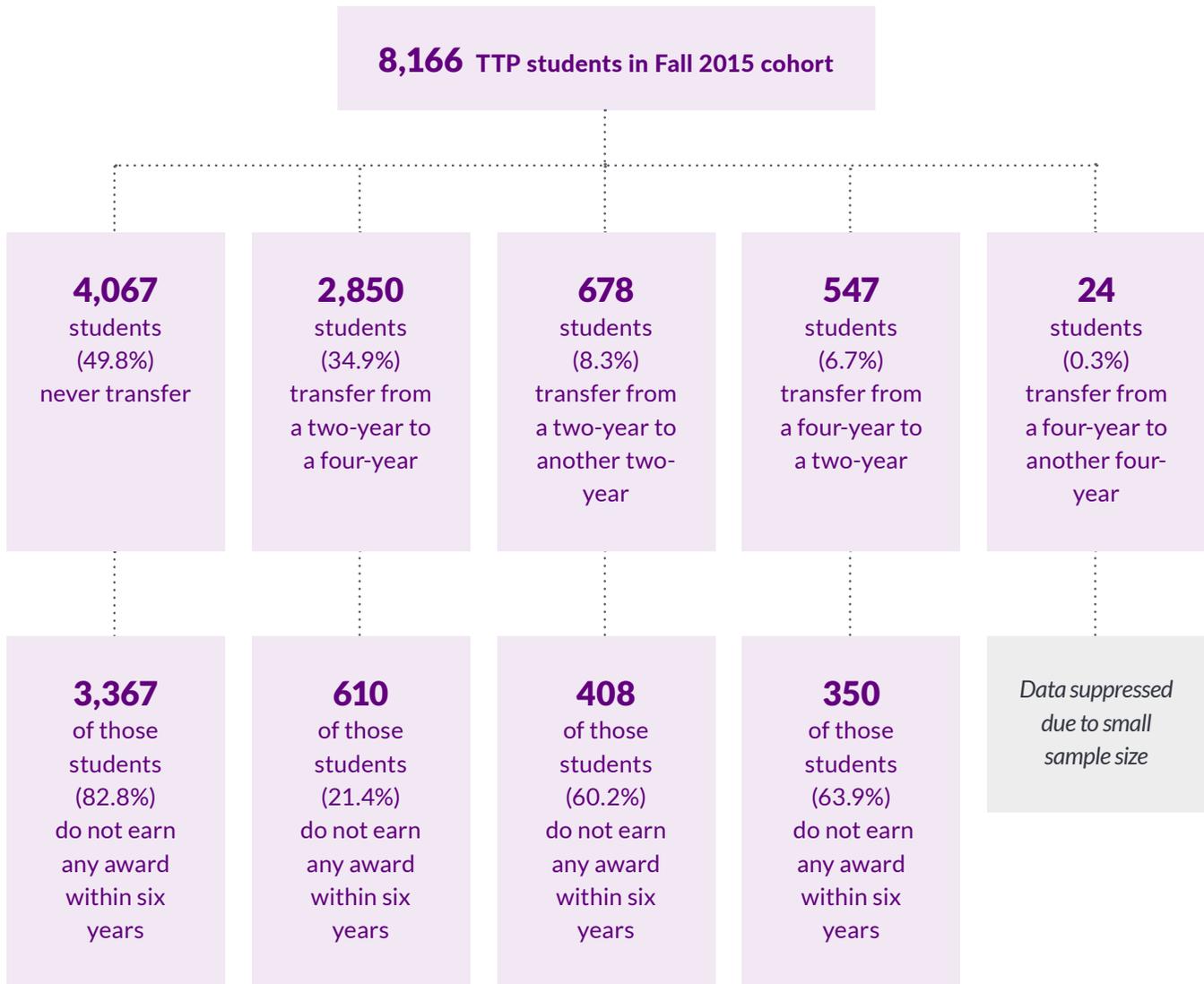


block of courses for transfer between community colleges and universities within approved transfer pathways.

The TTP framework was a landmark policy to clarify paths between two- and four-year colleges for Tennessee students. Still, transfer remains a challenge. [THEC reports](#) that only half of the fall 2015 TTP cohort ever successfully transferred. Even more concerning is that nearly 58 percent of that cohort, around 4,735 students, never earned any postsecondary award (certificates, associate's, or bachelor's) within six years of enrolling.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- What action can the state take to incentivize institutions to support successful transfer?
- Does the responsibility of transfer support fall on a student's current IHE, their IHE of intended transfer, or both?



Source

Employer Alignment

One strategy to improve student retention is to make stronger connections between postsecondary education and career preparation. [According to a statewide survey of 800 registered Tennessee voters conducted in December 2022](#), 93 percent of Tennesseans believe it is important to get some type of training or education beyond a high school diploma and the majority of Tennesseans believe the primary purpose of postsecondary education is to prepare students for a career.

A recent [report from the Office of Research and Education Accountability \(OREA\)](#) reviewed the state of workforce alignment for Tennessee's higher education system. The report found only about half of the postsecondary credentials earned by students between 2016 and 2018 were linked to a high-demand credential. This percentage was much higher for credentials earned at Tennessee colleges of applied technology (TCAT), with 85% of TCAT diplomas linked to a high-demand occupation. While TCATs are state leaders in workforce alignment, there is opportunity for the state and its institutions of higher education to prioritize alignment to workforce and provision of career-relevant opportunities for students. Some examples include:

- Industry partnerships:** Institutions and employers can develop partnerships to offer students training and work experiences in line with industry need. These partnerships can result in internships, apprenticeships, or innovative program models. For instance, the [BlueSky Tennessee Institute](#) is a partnership between BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee and East Tennessee State University (ETSU) to allow students to earn an accelerated bachelor's. BlueSky students are paid as interns while receiving on-the-ground mentoring, and many receive a job offer from BlueCross upon completion of the program.

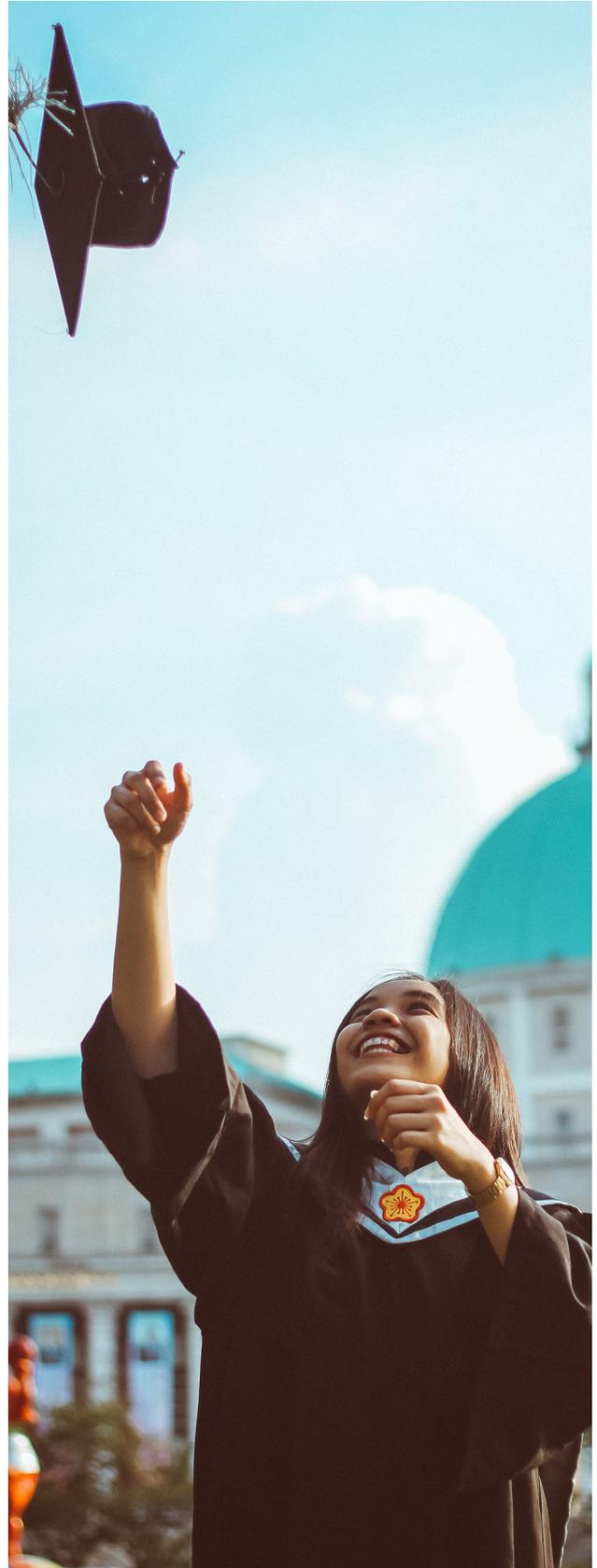
- Stackable credentials:** [Stackable credentials](#) are credentials students can earn on the path toward a certificate or degree, allowing them to gain knowledge and skills incrementally throughout their educational experience with access to clear on- and off-ramps to education. Stacking credentials provides flexibility for students and can allow both institutions and students to more flexibly respond to workforce needs. Each stackable credential should have demonstrable labor market value. In 2022, the Colorado General Assembly passed [SB22-192](#) to fund the identification and development of additional, stackable opportunities for credential attainment.
- Longitudinal data systems:** [State longitudinal data systems](#) linking education and workforce data can provide information on talent pipelines, the earning potential of different careers, and educational outcomes in line with employer needs. This data can be used to understand Tennessee's economy and align its education system to those needs. [Kentucky](#) uses its longitudinal data system to produce a variety of reports and dashboards related to education and the workforce to improve alignment.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- What are some barriers students may face to seeking out career experiences while enrolled in postsecondary education?
- What can be done to ensure students have equitable access to career-ready experiences?

Guiding Questions for Reflection

- ❓ How do issues in postsecondary access and postsecondary retention intersect?
- ❓ How can state, local, and institution policymakers collaborate to address the diverse needs of students enrolled in postsecondary education?
- ❓ What are some examples of policy or practice initiatives focused on increasing postsecondary retention in your organization, community, or institution?
- ❓ What improvements need to be made in postsecondary retention support systems to close racial, socioeconomic, and gender gaps?
- ❓ What training or capacity building is needed for institutions to address important issues such as retention, transfer, and workforce alignment?





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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