



Complete Tennessee Leadership Institute

A PROJECT OF SCORE & THE HUNT INSTITUTE

POSTSECONDARY COMPLETION & ATTAINMENT

INTRODUCTION

[Postsecondary attainment goals](#) articulate a statewide vision for encouraging economic mobility and meeting workforce needs. Tennessee’s [Drive to 55](#) goal has served as the state’s north star for higher education attainment efforts since its adoption in 2013. In [January 2023](#), Lumina Foundation released the [Stronger Nation](#) update to highlight national and state progress toward attainment goals. Between 2019 and 2021, Tennessee increased its overall postsecondary attainment rate by 0.5 percentage points to reach 47.3 percent – with the largest increase seen for associate degrees and above. Attainment is moving in a positive direction, but to reach its goal of 55 percent of adults holding a postsecondary credential by 2025, Tennessee needs to increase completion rates. The state and its institutions of higher education (IHEs) must keep a close eye on completion data to prioritize ensuring all students who enter higher education have the support needed to cross the finish line with a credential of value.

A LOOK AT TENNESSEE’S COMPLETION DATA

Tennessee’s IHE completion rates have made modest gains over the last few years. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate

both on-time and 150 percent graduation rates for Tennessee colleges and universities. While reporting the 150 percent rate is national standard, meaning three-year rates for community colleges and six-year rates for universities, many advocates and IHEs are also interested in on-time completion, meaning two-year rates for community colleges and four-year rates for universities. In Tennessee, on-time completion at community colleges is around 11 percentage points lower than 150 percent completion. Tennessee universities also report gaps. On-time university completion averages around 26 percentage points lower than 150 percent completion.

Additionally, the comparison of Tennessee attainment rates to the national average in Figures 1 and 2 highlights some concerning disparities. National data for on-time completion is not reported, leaving the 150 percent rate as the comparison point. Three-year graduation rates at Tennessee community colleges show a similar growth trajectory as the national rate, but would need to grow more rapidly to catch up to the national average. In contrast, the overall six-year graduation rate at Tennessee universities is 63.8 percent, exceeding the national average. However, disaggregated data between locally governed institutions (LGIs) and University of Tennessee (UT)

Figure 1. Tennessee Community College Graduation Rates Are Below National Average

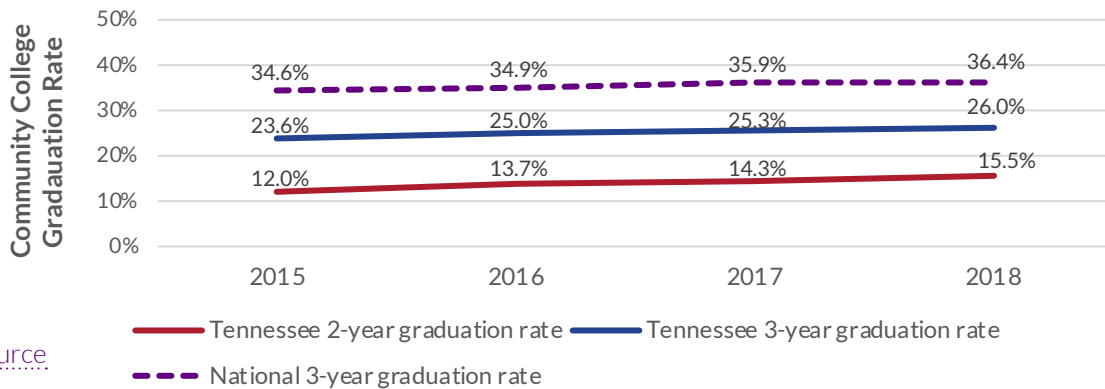
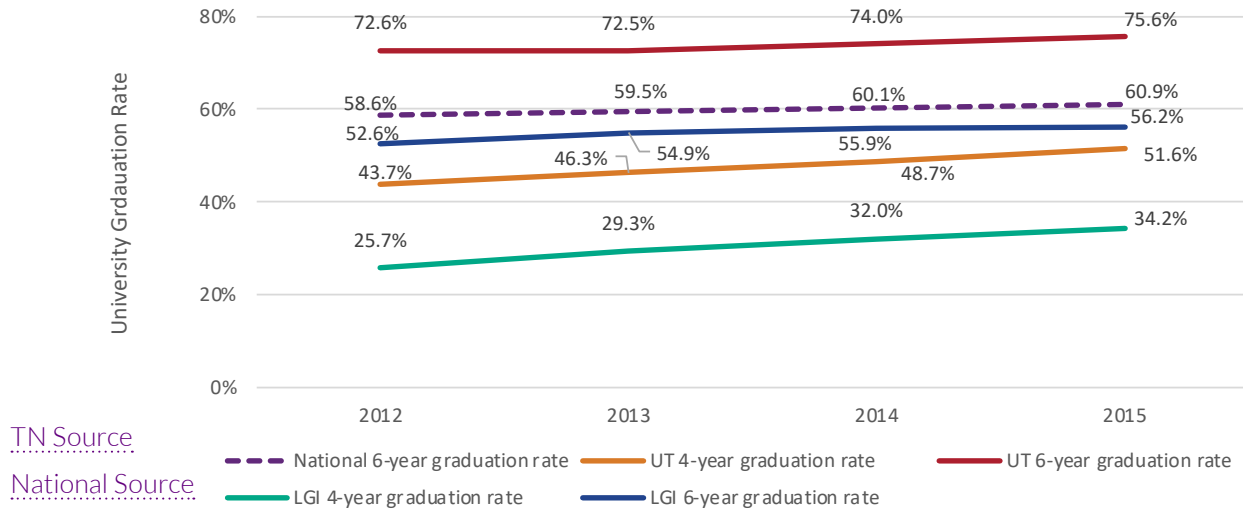


Figure 2. UT Six-Year Graduation Rates Exceed National Average, But LGI Six-Year Rates And All IHE Four-Year Rates Lag Behind



institutions in Figure 2 reveals that UT institutions are the driving force behind the state’s overall above average university graduation rate: while UT completion rates exceed the national average, LGI completion rates are nearly five percentage points below the national average.

At both community colleges and universities in Tennessee, racial gaps in graduation rates persist between Black, Hispanic, and White students. Figure 3 shows that for the last five community college cohorts, Black students are consistently around 16 percentage points less likely to graduate compared to their White counterparts.

Figure 3. Community Colleges Graduate Black And Hispanic Students At A Lower Rate Than White Students

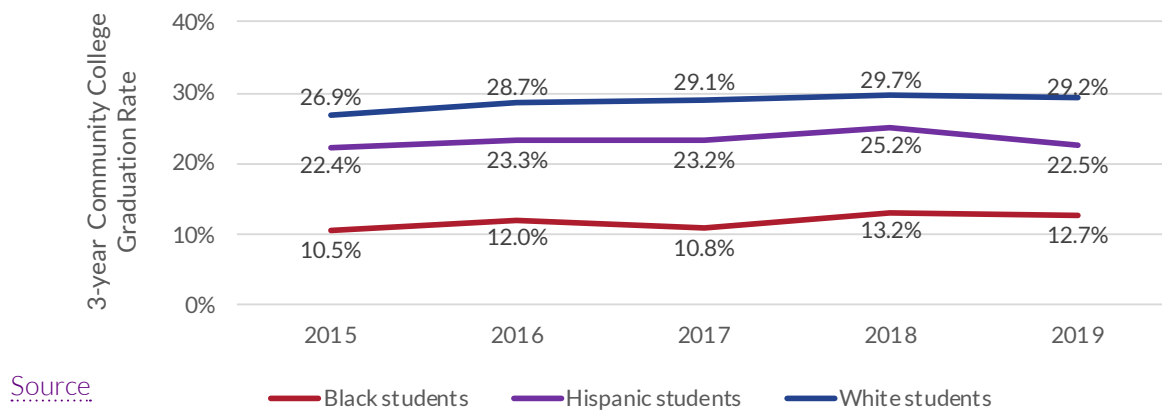
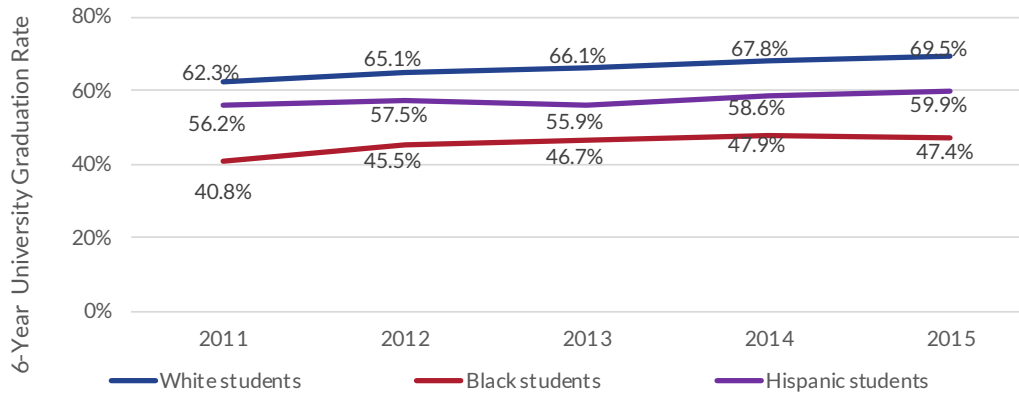


Figure 4. Racial Gaps In University Graduation Rates Persist Between Black, Hispanic, And White Students



Source

Figure 4 shows that an even greater gap between the graduation rates for Black and White students exists in universities - with a difference of around 20 percentage points in the last five cohorts.

Advocates and policymakers hold varying opinions on whether on-time or 150 percent completion measures are more useful data points, and whether the

expectation to complete a community college in two years and university in four years is always reasonable. This debate may inform state and IHE choices around how much to incentivize on-time completion, what measures the state holds IHEs accountable for through outcomes-based funding, and how much flexibility is offered to students.

THE ON-TIME VERSUS 150 PERCENT COMPLETION DEBATE

On-Time Completion	150 Percent Completion
The standard completion measure should be on-time completion.	The standard completion measure should be 150 percent completion.
Even if some students take 150 percent of the time to complete, that should not be the baseline measure.	The 150 percent completion rate acknowledges the realities of students' education experiences. Students' experiences may include requirements for remedial coursework based on their secondary education, including their school's availability of academic, socio-emotional, and extracurricular support structures. Additionally, it acknowledges barriers to full-time enrollment, as a large portion of today's students have a full-time job while in school, are entirely financially independent, and are supporting dependents.
Students who graduate on-time will accumulate less debt and accrue less interest. They also enter the workforce and begin earning wages sooner. As such, promoting on-time completion is critical to ensure students are not left with an unreasonable debt load upon exit of higher education.	The stress of balancing work and school is a leading reason students stop out. Those who stop out not only accrue student debt, but also would not have a credential that would help them pay off that debt. It is important that students are allowed the flexibilities needed to complete school, which may include a need for additional time.

<p>Not all aid awards are available for up to the 150 percent completion mark. In Tennessee, students can only receive the Promise scholarship for up to five consecutive semesters (i.e. 2.5 years) and the HOPE scholarship for up to five years. Though this availability beyond on-time completion recognizes that some students need flexibility, they do not offer funding up to the 150 percent point.</p>	<p>Many student aid awards are available for longer than the on-time completion years, reflecting students' need for flexibility. For example, student may receive a Pell Grant for six years.</p>
<p>Most IHEs recommend taking 15 credit hours per semester, which allows students to complete on time. Further, those 15 credit hours per semester are already included in tuition. Federal and state government should consider updating full-time enrollment as 15 credit hours per semester.</p>	<p>12 credit hours per semester is considered full-time enrollment, meaning students enrolled full-time for each semester would not complete an associate or bachelor's degree on-time. As such, it is not cohesive to use on-time completion as the primary measure. Changing this full-time definition would limit students' flexibilities and disproportionately impact students balancing responsibilities outside of the classroom.</p>
<p>Most students express a desire to graduate on time.</p>	<p>Students can describe full-time enrollment as a challenge to maintaining scholarship eligibility.</p>
<p>Holding IHEs accountable to on-time completion measures through the outcomes-based funding formula will incentivize IHEs to provide student supports that allow them to graduate on-time.</p>	<p>Holding IHEs accountable to on-time completion through the outcomes-based funding formula disregards the needs of certain student populations that many IHEs primarily serve.</p>

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

- ❓ Which measure do you believe is more informative: on-time or 150 percent completion?
- ❓ Does the debate about completion rate measures differ across specific policy areas? For example – should there be a different decision about measures in the outcomes-based funding formula versus decisions about measures used for financial aid eligibility?
- ❓ Should the state primarily rely on measures of on-time completion or 150 percent completion?
- ❓ How should IHEs incentivize on-time completion? How should the state incentivize on-time completion?

INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT COMPLETION

There are several nation and statewide initiatives and organizations created with a mission to address postsecondary completion challenges. Some examples include:

- [15 to Finish/Stay on Track](#): This Complete College America strategy leverages advertising, advisors, and institutional policy and practice to encourage students who are able to take at least 15 credits a semester and graduate on time. Originating at the University of Hawaii, there are now more than 200 institutions participating in the

strategy. Several Tennessee IHEs participate in 15 to Finish or similar initiatives, including [Tennessee State University](#) and the [University of Tennessee Knoxville](#).

- [Guided Pathways](#): The Guided Pathways movement, originated by the Community College Research Center, offers a model to systematically change IHE practice to clarify educational paths and career goals, help students get on and stay on a path, and ensure students are learning across programs. [Practices](#) include creating standardized program maps across the institution and providing flexible class options.
- [Tennessee Black Male Success Initiative \(BMSI\)](#): This state-led taskforce is dedicated to creating strategies and sharing best practices for increasing postsecondary attainment for Black males in the state. The taskforce produced a report most recently in November 2021 which gave several recommendations including promoting summer bridge programs for Black men and providing dedicated financial support for Black men.
- Policy and advocacy organizations focused specifically on postsecondary completion include: [Complete College America \(CCA\)](#), [Institute for Higher Education Policy \(IHEP\)](#), the [Institute for College Access & Success](#), and the [Tennessee College Access and Success Network \(TCASN\)](#).

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT:

- ❓ Should completion strategies be targeted toward students with the highest need or implemented institution-wide? In which cases should each of those approaches be implemented?
- ❓ What data is critical to inform state and IHE completion efforts?

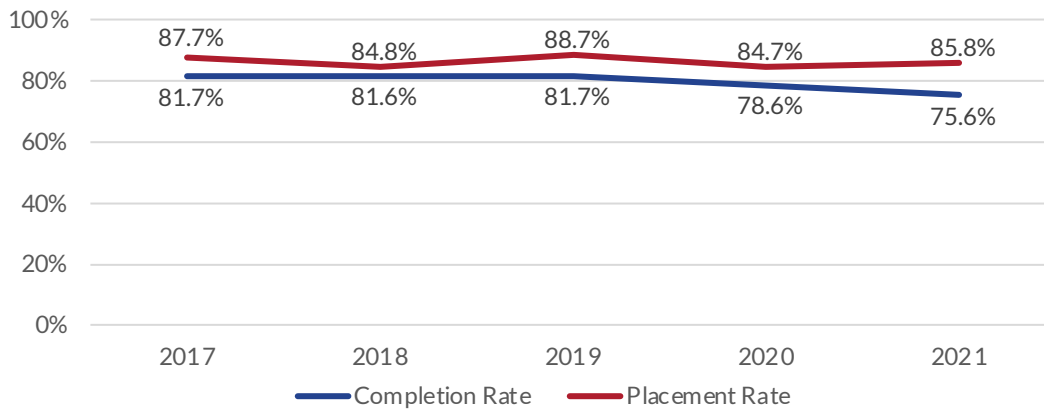
Spotlight: Collaborating for Career Readiness

Many Tennessee IHEs choose to prioritize career readiness through industry partnerships that provide students with workforce-relevant training. 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. Chattanooga State operates a [Volkswagen Academy](#) to give students hands-on experience in a Volkswagen plant.

CAREER READINESS

[Career readiness](#) refers to a foundation of competencies that prepare graduates for success in the workforce over a lifelong career. SCORE [polling results](#) reveal that approximately two-thirds of Tennesseans believe the purpose of higher education is to prepare for a career, not just to create a well-rounded citizen. Earnings and employment data indicate that postsecondary education does set students up for success in the workforce. For instance, [recent research](#) investigates the income difference between Tennessee college-educated workers and high school-educated workers over the course of the work life – that difference is described as return on investment. The study finds a 14.5 percent return on investment for Tennesseans earning a bachelor's and a 9.5 percent return to those earning an associate degree. However, the research also highlights that returns vary based on a student's program of study. Not all students experience the same benefit from higher education.

Figure 5. TCATs Report Consistently High Completion And Job Placement Rates



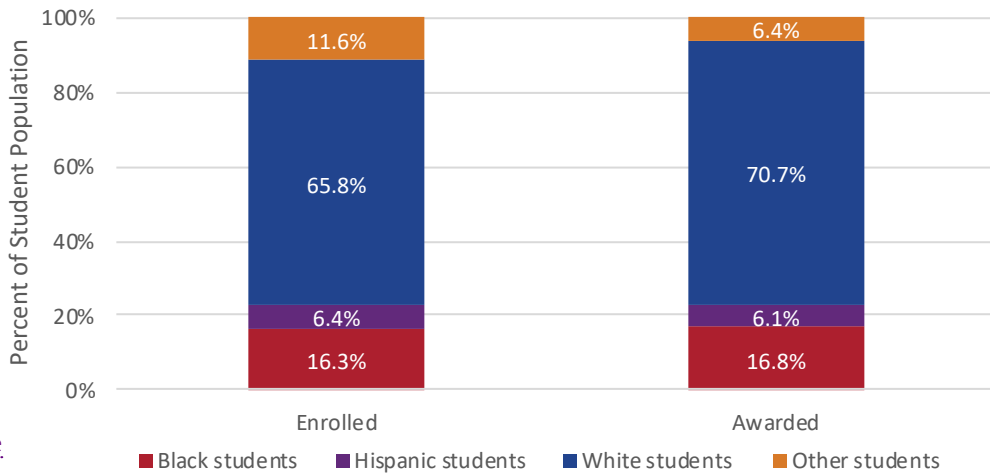
Source: [TCATs](#)

Though researchers are able to request employment and earnings data to gain insight into the overall impact of postsecondary preparation on career readiness, the majority of these data sources are not publicly available. As a result, it is difficult to quantify how well individual IHEs prepare their students for career. However, we do have information about career preparation in Tennessee’s colleges of applied technology (TCATs), which hold [workforce development as their central mission](#). TCATs publicly report both their completion and job placement data. Figure 5 illustrates how completion rates at TCATs are consistently above 75 percent – exceeding the graduation rates at all other Tennessee IHEs. The job placement rates are even higher, with over 8 out of 10 graduates placed in their field of training upon graduation. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 6, TCATs award students of color certificates at a similar rate as the rate in which they enroll – suggesting that equity gaps in completion are less prominent at TCATs than at other IHEs in the state. TCATs may serve as a promising model for closing equity gaps among student groups in higher education.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT:

- ❓ How do IHEs other than TCATs make career readiness central to their culture?
- ❓ What data should be used to measure career readiness?
- ❓ What are the goals beyond career readiness that should play a central role in higher education?

Figure 6. TCAT Award Rates For Black And Hispanic Students Parallel The Enrollment Rates For Those Students



Source

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How can Tennessee cohesively address challenges with postsecondary access, retention, completion, and attainment? With so many competing priorities, what steps are important for aligning on a vision, directing resources, and maximizing impact?
- What are the primary challenges related to postsecondary completion that your organization, community, or institution engages with?
- What are the roles of state, local, and institution policymakers with postsecondary completion efforts?
- What actions should the state, institutions, and advocates take to address equity gaps in postsecondary completion?
- What are some examples of policy or practice initiatives focused on increasing postsecondary completion in your organization, community, or institution?





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.



4000 Centregreen Way | Suite 301 |
Cary, NC 27513 | 984-377-5200



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



1207 18th Ave S Nashville, TN 37212
p: 615.727.1545