

AFFORDABILITY, ACCESS, AND STUDENT SUCCESS  
IN STATEWIDE COLLEGE PROMISE PROGRAMS

# *The Case of Tennessee Promise: A Uniquely Comprehensive Promise Program*

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**RESEARCH**  
*for* **ACTION**



## *About this Research*

Research for Action has studied statewide Promise programs since 2017, with in-depth analysis in four states—Delaware, Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee. Our research in these states includes an extensive review of legislative and policy documents; 146 interviews with policymakers, institutional leaders, and high school staff; site visits to 8 postsecondary institutions; site visits to 12 high schools; 12 high school student focus groups; and 16 college student focus groups. We also conducted quantitative analysis on student-level data from three of the four states involved in the study. This work is part of a larger study led by RFA that also includes a policy scan of 21 current statewide programs and case studies by Penn AHEAD of local Promise programs in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Wisconsin. We summarize additional results of our analysis of state-level Promise programs at [www.researchforaction.org/collegepromise](http://www.researchforaction.org/collegepromise). To explore Penn AHEAD's past and forthcoming research on College Promise, visit <https://ahead-penn.org/creating-knowledge/college-promise/publications-media>.

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*Tennessee Promise at a Glance:*

**Launched in  
2015**

after multiple years of local Promise programs across Tennessee

Last-dollar program funded by a

**\$361.1 million-dollar endowment**

One of four statewide Promise programs to include a

**student support component**

Covers tuition and mandatory fees

**up to five semesters**

at any public community college

**or**  
**up to eight semesters**

at any college of applied technology (TCAT)

**Students must attend mandatory meetings**

**must enroll the fall semester**

following high school graduation/GED completion

Part of a suite of programs under the

**Drive to 55**

initiative that also includes

**TN Reconnect,** a last-dollar program for adults

Promoted through a **comprehensive, statewide communications campaign**

## Tennessee Promise: Overview and Context

Founded in 2015 as part of Tennessee’s Drive to 55 initiative, Tennessee Promise was created to promote workforce development for the state. Lauded nationally as an example of bipartisan support for higher education, Tennessee’s statewide college Promise program provides a last-dollar award covering the remainder of tuition and fees at public technical and community colleges after other federal and state financial aid has been expended. Tennessee Promise requires students to meet with a mentor and complete community service or job shadowing. Tennessee Promise is funded by a \$361.1 million endowment, paid for by excess lottery reserve funds.

The stated goals of Tennessee Promise are to remove the barriers to higher education to support the state’s college completion goal and promote workforce development.

Statewide Promise programs do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, they are situated within a state’s overall postsecondary landscape and demographic composition. Table 1 below summarizes important elements of Tennessee’s postsecondary context.

**Table 1. Tennessee’s Postsecondary Landscape and Demographic Composition**

| STATE CONTEXT   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| Graduation Rate (2013) <sup>1</sup>   | Demographics (2018) <sup>2</sup>  | Credential Attainment (2017) <sup>3</sup>   |
| 13.5% public 2-year colleges<br>47.9% public 4-year colleges  | 17.1% Black or African American<br>0.5% American Indian and Alaskan Native<br>1.9% Asian<br>0.1% Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander<br>2.0% Two or More Races<br>5.6% Hispanic or Latino<br>73.7% White, not Hispanic or Latino | 42.7% Overall<br>28.4% African-American<br>61.9% Asian and Pacific Islander<br>34.9% American Indian<br>18.8% Hispanic<br>36.7% White |
| Higher Education Affordability  |   |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to one analysis from 2016, attending a public 2-year college full-time in Tennessee would take 17% of an average family’s income, ranking Tennessee as the 19<sup>th</sup> most affordable state in the country for attending a 2-year public institution.<sup>4</sup></li> <li>• The state offers a variety of other aid for postsecondary education in addition to Tennessee Promise, including Tennessee HOPE scholarship and Tennessee Reconnect.</li> </ul> |   |   |

<sup>1</sup> The Chronicle of Higher Education. “College Completion.” <https://collegecompletion.chronicle.com/>

<sup>2</sup> United States Census Bureau. “QuickFacts: Oregon; United States.” 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/TN>

<sup>3</sup> Lumina Foundation. Tennessee’s progress toward the goal.” A Stronger Nation Report. 2019. <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2019/#state/TN>

<sup>4</sup> Institute for Research on Higher Education. (2016). *College Affordability Diagnosis: Oregon*. Philadelphia, PA: Institute for Research on Higher Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. <http://www2.gse.upenn.edu/irhe/affordability-diagnosis>



Though generally perceived as a tool to ensure affordability, statewide college Promise programs vary significantly and reflect complex tradeoffs among three important elements of the college pipeline: affordability, access, and student success. For a more detailed review of the tradeoffs across these elements, see [Statewide College Promise Programs: Balancing Affordability, Access and Student Success](#).

In this case study we outline the program design, successes, and challenges of Tennessee Promise as it balances higher education affordability, access, and success.

## Affordability

Financial Resources

By design, statewide Promise programs aim to decrease the cost of higher education. Generally, these programs offer **financial resources** for eligible students to cover at least the cost of tuition for a two-year college degree. Yet the degree to which statewide Promise programs cover the full cost of college varies considerably and is an important measure of their effectiveness.

### *The Tennessee Promise Approach to Affordability*

- **Last-dollar award**
- **Provides mandatory tuition and fees**
- **Covers up to five semesters**

Tennessee Promise is a **last-dollar** award covering the cost of tuition and mandatory fees after federal grant aid, the Tennessee HOPE scholarship, and other awards have been applied. Students can apply Tennessee Promise funding at any of Tennessee’s 13 community colleges and 27 colleges of applied technology overseen by the Tennessee Board of Regents, as well as at two public four-year universities that offer associate degrees and 19 private colleges with eligible two-year programs.<sup>5,6</sup>

## *Effects of Tennessee Promise on Affordability*

**High school and college students reported that Tennessee Promise encouraged them to attend college and reconsider their college pathway.** Overall, both high school and college students believe that Tennessee Promise makes college more affordable. Students credited Tennessee Promise for impacting their postsecondary decision-making in two ways. Some students reported that Tennessee Promise made college an option by making it affordable. While they realized that Promise didn’t cover the full cost of college, it covered enough to put college within reach. Other students reported that Tennessee Promise provided a more affordable pathway to a four-year degree by attending tuition-free community college before transferring to a university.

**Tennessee Promise broadly expands affordability by requiring students to first apply for all available federal and state aid.** Over academic year 2017-2018, Tennessee Promise paid out over 28.1 million dollars in state resources to Promise students.<sup>7</sup> As last-dollar awards, these funds are largely allocated to students from middle- and high-income households, rather than Tennessee’s lowest income households

<sup>5</sup> Krause, M. (2019). *Tennessee Promise: Overview*. TN Higher Education Commission & Student Assistance Corporation. Retrieved from: <https://www.tn.gov/tnpromise/about.html>  
<sup>6</sup> At eligible universities, Tennessee Promise provides an award equivalent to the average cost of community college in Tennessee. For university students, Tennessee Promise is not a last-dollar award.  
<sup>7</sup> Krause, M. (2019). 2019 Tennessee Promise Annual Report. TN Higher Education Commission & Student Assistance Corporation. Retrieved from: <https://www.tn.gov/thec/research/redirect-research/tn-promise-annual-report/tn-promise-annual-report.html>

whose tuition and fees are covered by federal grant aid and need-based state aid. However, in requiring participants to apply for federal grant aid and other forms of financial aid first, Tennessee has substantially increased rates of FAFSA completion, ensuring that more students are accessing available aid.<sup>8</sup> When taken together, these sources of aid have reduced out-of-pocket expenses for over 50,000 degree-seeking students statewide.<sup>9</sup>

**Still, costs not covered by Tennessee Promise remain a high concern for students.** Many students we talked to expected Tennessee Promise funds to cover the cost of books and transportation, room and board, and other non-tuition expenses. Students, particularly those from lower income households, frequently expressed concern about how to fund these expenses.

## Access

### Eligibility & Messaging

Statewide college Promise programs can affect college access through two mechanisms.

**Program Eligibility** determines who is eligible to participate. All statewide Promise programs include some eligibility criteria, but the types and stringency of these criteria vary widely.

**Messaging** strategies determine the degree to which students and families are aware of the program. States may mount comprehensive communications strategies or leave it to high school and college counselors to make students and their families aware.

When taken together, decisions about program eligibility and messaging strategies can substantially affect access to college overall, and for different populations.

## The Tennessee Promise Approach to Access

- **FAFSA Completion**
- **Tennessee residency**
- **Direct from high school**
- **Mandatory meetings**
- **Comprehensive, multi-stakeholder messaging campaign**

Program eligibility requirements. To be eligible for Tennessee Promise, students must satisfy the following criteria:

1. FAFSA completion: Students interested in the Tennessee Promise must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).
2. Residency: Students must be Tennessee residents prior to college attendance.
3. Timeframe: Students must enroll in college in the fall term immediately following high school graduation, GED or HS diploma completion. They must not have an associate degree already.
4. Pre-enrollment meetings: Students must attend two Tennessee Promise sessions in their community before enrollment.

For more information on common types of eligibility criteria included by statewide promise programs and how criteria vary across programs, visit [RFA's Statewide College Promise Framework](#).

Messaging. With the launch of Tennessee Promise in 2015, multiple Tennessee stakeholders contributed to a comprehensive, statewide communications campaign. The Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC)

<sup>8</sup> Tennessee Higher Education Commission and Student Assistance Corporation (2019). *Over 56,000 Tennessee Promise Applicants Submit FAFSA*. <https://www.tn.gov/thec/news/2019/2/7/thec.html>

<sup>9</sup> Inside Higher Ed (2019). *Tennessee Promise FAQ*. Retrieved from: [https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server\\_files/files/TN%20Promise%20FAQ.pdf](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/TN%20Promise%20FAQ.pdf)

sent promotional materials to high schools across the state. Radio ads, [social media platforms](#), highway billboards and [other media](#) were used by The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), and the Governor's office to spread the word. Partnering organizations such as tnAchieves used [social media](#) and community meetings to recruit students, [mentors](#), and communicate deadlines and expectations.

Colleges supplemented state-level efforts by [advertising the program](#) to prospective students. Many colleges integrated Promise materials into their [marketing collateral](#), building awareness of Tennessee Promise and using the program as a recruitment tool. Further, extensive state and national press coverage branded Tennessee Promise as a model for “free college,” broadly messaging the program's success.

## *Effects of Tennessee Promise on Access*

**Tennessee Promise expanded access to college for students across the state.** Students, high school counselors, and college advisors reported that Tennessee Promise increased college-going expectations. This translated into increased enrollments in community colleges following Promise implementation. During the first year of Tennessee Promise (2015), the rate of students enrolling in a postsecondary institution after high school graduation grew by 5.9 percentage points, from 58.4% to 64.3%.<sup>10</sup> The increase in college-going after the first year of implementation has steadied for each consecutive year (e.g., 63.1% in 2016 and 63.2% in 2017).<sup>11</sup>

**Support for meeting eligibility requirements drove access.** Tennessee Promise only includes four eligibility requirements—relatively few compared to other statewide Promise programs. Still, these eligibility requirements can create barriers to participation for students. Students and high school and college counselors noted that FAFSA completion can be cumbersome and confusing and attendance at pre-enrollment meetings can be challenging for students and families, particularly those in rural areas who lack transportation to attend these meetings. To address these concerns, Tennessee Promise leveraged statewide events like FAFSA Frenzy Day and issued challenges to school districts to increase the rate of FAFSA submissions. Similarly, high schools held pre-enrollment meetings on high school campuses, typically during the school day or immediately after. While each eligibility requirement imposes barriers for students, Tennessee has tried to mitigate those barriers to some degree.

**Comprehensive, statewide messaging of Tennessee Promise raised awareness about the program.** Tennessee announced its Promise program through a statewide communications campaign, promoting Tennessee Promise in schools and colleges as well as over social media, billboards, and the radio. The campaign created widespread awareness of the program and is broadly credited with increasing college access. One high school counselor noted that the “conversation has changed.... it's palpable when you walk into a high school and you see all the posters, and you see all the murals and all the advertising related to Tennessee Promise. I think that's been huge.”

Through Tennessee's communication strategy, high schools were largely responsible for communicating the program and encouraging students to apply, as such, messaging varied. Some high school guidance counselor reported that Promise added extra work and that they struggled to effectively communicate the program to all students. Others reported that Promise was a “rallying call” that mobilized the entire high school community behind sending their students to college.

**In promoting Tennessee Promise, stakeholders must balance simplicity with accuracy in describing the costs covered by the scholarship.** Tennessee's initial “free college” message, while clear, was not wholly accurate. As with several other statewide Promise programs, Tennessee Promise covers tuition and mandatory fees, but excludes other direct college expenses such as the cost of books or transportation. Some counselors and students reported disappointment upon discovering that these costs are not covered by Tennessee Promise. To address these concerns, Tennessee has revised its description of the program to “tuition-free college” or to covering “tuition and mandatory fees.”

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<sup>10</sup> Tennessee Promise (2018). Tennessee Promise Annual Report. Retrieved from: <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thecc/bureau/research/promise/TN%20Promise%20Report%202018%20Final.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

The popularity of the Tennessee Promise and its message of college for all stimulated the creation of two additional Promise programs. Three years after the launch of Tennessee Promise in fall 2018, the state launched Tennessee Reconnect, which provides last-dollar scholarships for tuition and mandatory fees for adults returning to or entering college either full- or part-time. Like Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect is part of Drive to 55, the state’s initiative to increase the proportion of Tennesseans with a credential by 2025. The University of Tennessee (UT) system also announced a college Promise program which provides tuition and fees to students from households earning less than \$50,000 attending any institution in the UT system. Student recipients of Tennessee’s HOPE scholarship, an award with more restrictive eligibility requirements than Tennessee Promise, are eligible for this program.<sup>12</sup>

## Success

### Program Requirements & Student Support

Two components of statewide Promise programs have direct implications for students’ success in college once they are enrolled.

**Program requirements** place conditions upon continued enrollment and are common in statewide programs. While often designed to bolster retention and graduation via research-based practices, some requirements can also create barriers to persistence for some students.

**Student supports** are less common, yet some Promise programs scaffold students as they navigate social and academic challenges that may threaten their persistence.

## *The Tennessee Promise Approach to Success*

- Full-time status
- 2.0 GPA and SAP
- 8 hours of community service per semester
- Community mentor

Program requirements. Students must meet the following requirements to remain eligible for Tennessee Promise:

1. Be continuously enrolled full time (except for extreme circumstances) until a terminal event (e.g., transfer, credential)
2. Retain a 2.0 GPA while attending college and meet Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP)
3. Complete 8 hours of community service or job shadowing.

For more information on common types of program requirements included by statewide promise programs and how requirements vary across programs, visit [RFA’s Statewide College Promise Framework](#).

Student supports. Unlike most statewide Promise programs, Tennessee Promise includes a student support component designed to increase student persistence and graduation. All Tennessee Promise participants are provided with a community mentor— a local volunteer who helps students navigate the college admissions process and ensures students complete Tennessee Promise requirements. Mentors are coordinated by tnAchieves, a non-profit organization that provide the non-financial components of Tennessee Promise in most counties. Each year, tnAchieves recruits and trains mentors and matches them with students.

Further, partners such as tnAchieves, as well as system agencies like the Tennessee Board of Regents, provide additional supports to Tennessee Promise students. Summer bridge programs and campus completion coaches targeting Promise students supplement the mentoring component in advancing student success.

## *Effects of Tennessee Promise on Success*

**Tennessee Promise provides student supports to all Promise-eligible students, even those who do not receive scholarship funds.** Tennessee Promise students are defined as students who successfully apply and meet eligibility requirements. While many eligible students do not receive scholarship dollars because their tuition and fees are covered by federal or state grants, all Promise-eligible students receive a mentor and have access to supports available through the program, if they continue to satisfy program requirements. One designer of the Tennessee Promise noted a commitment to providing support for all students, “we decided very early on that this

<sup>12</sup> The HOPE Scholarship is a merit-based award available for entering freshmen at Tennessee’s public institutions that have a minimum ACT score of 21 or a weighted GPA of 3.0. Students must maintain at 2.75 cumulative GPA to retain the HOPE Scholarship

would be for every student, regardless of GPA, regardless of income... so a Pell-eligible student or whatever the case, will not become ineligible for Promise. This is not financial aid for us. This is a holistic approach to student success.”

**Some Promise students find the program requirements too burdensome.** Across the board, college counselors and faculty reported that they advise all students, including those not receiving Promise scholarships, to meet Promise requirements. By meeting those requirements, all Promise-eligible students retain access to supports associated with the Program. Yet college counselors noted that some students opted not to meet these requirements, particularly those students whose tuition and mandatory fees were covered by federal grant aid. Students reported that the supports provided under Tennessee Promise, such as mentoring, were not worth the effort of maintaining Promise program requirements, such as completing 8 hours of community service. Other students noted that maintaining full-time enrollment was difficult or impossible given other competing responsibilities.

**Tennessee Promise stakeholders described mixed perceptions of the effectiveness of the mentoring component.** The quality and effectiveness of mentoring depends heavily on the skills and efforts of each volunteer mentor as well as the degree of individual student engagement. Students and mentors alike reported both positive and negative perceptions of the effectiveness of mentoring. Many students described their mentor’s contribution to their overall Promise experience as limited.

**Institutions, external partners, and system offices responded to Tennessee Promise by creating or enhancing programs to increase student persistence.** By design, Tennessee Promise includes a success component for all students – a community mentor. In addition, the program has spurred the creation of other opportunities to promote student success. Institutions reported that they emphasize academic planning, hired new or additional success coaches and advisors for Promise students, launched early alert systems, and changed policies and practices to better support the first-year experience of Promise students. System offices such as the Tennessee Board of Regents and partnering organizations like tnAchieves also responded by implementing summer bridge programs and providing completion coaches. Further, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission created a grant program to increase the capacity of institutions to support Promise students. Together, multiple Tennessee stakeholders layered supports for students and institutions in promoting the success of Tennessee Promise students.

**Students continue to face significant barriers to persistence and completion after entering college through Tennessee Promise.** While the higher education ecosystem in Tennessee aims to support Tennessee Promise students, students continued to report barriers to completion. Both urban and rural students noted transportation, particularly a lack of public transportation, as a significant barrier to staying in college. Further, college advisors reported that academic under-preparedness was a barrier to college persistence and completion for many Promise students. As noted above, institutions are reallocating resources to support Promise students. However, most institutional leaders said that their ability to do so was limited by a lack of capacity and resources. As a community college president in Tennessee said, “we’ve done a great job on access, but we’ve got a lot of work to do on success.”

## *Takeaways from a Uniquely Comprehensive Model*

**As a last-dollar model, Tennessee Promise distinguishes itself from other Promise programs by its access and success components.** While the effects of Tennessee Promise are still under study, students, high school counselors, and college administrators noted that Tennessee Promise is perceived as making college more affordable and accessible and is credited with creating a statewide college-going culture through its comprehensive messaging campaign. This shift is correlated with enrollment gains in the community college sector.

**Tennessee Promise is one of four statewide Promise programs that provide supports for Promise students once enrolled.** Through mentoring, as well as through capacity-building grants to institutions and additional supports provided by statewide partners, multiple Tennessee stakeholders are devoting resources to increase the persistence and graduation of Promise students. With the advent of Tennessee Reconnect, a last-dollar award for adults entering or returning to college, and potentially more students entering community colleges, many in the state hope to see a greater focus on student supports and student success moving forward.