

Developing a Statewide College Completion Agenda:

LESSONS FROM TENNESSEE

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The Launch of a Nationwide College Completion Movement

Over the last decade, consensus on the need for the United States to improve its postsecondary attainment rate has grown rapidly. As a range of policy, advocacy, and philanthropic organizations have offered research, technical assistance, and fiscal support to states, they have responded by establishing ambitious goals for increasing college completion and implementing an array of policies to support this goal. As of 2017, 41 states had established concrete college attainment goals.

Among these states, Tennessee has gained national recognition for its comprehensive and multi-pronged strategy to increase college attainment. This document describes the development and expansion of Tennessee's completion agenda through a set of related and interlocking policies that, when implemented together, created a statewide culture of college completion. It also identifies several important challenges that threaten the state's capacity to bridge equity gaps and make college completion a reality for traditionally disadvantaged students and the institutions that serve them. This report is based upon research conducted in Tennessee between 2015 and 2019 examining postsecondary policies.

How Tennessee Created and Maintained a College Completion Culture

STEP ONE: LAYING THE COMPLETION FOUNDATION

Tennessee's completion agenda developed steadily over the course of the last decade. Two initiatives played a foundational role. The first and most significant is the **Complete College Tennessee Act (CCTA) of 2010**. Signed by Governor Phil Bredesen, this legislation mandated comprehensive reforms intended to transform higher education in the state. As part of this legislation, the state developed a new master plan that made public higher education institutions accountable for increasing the educational attainment levels of Tennesseans. In addition, CCTA mandated that the state design and implement an outcomes-based funding model to tie a significant percentage of institutional base funding to a range of

college retention and completion goals (S.B. 7006, TN, 2010). Through these policy components, CCTA established a clear commitment to raising Tennessee’s college attainment levels and laid the foundation for future policies to support this goal.

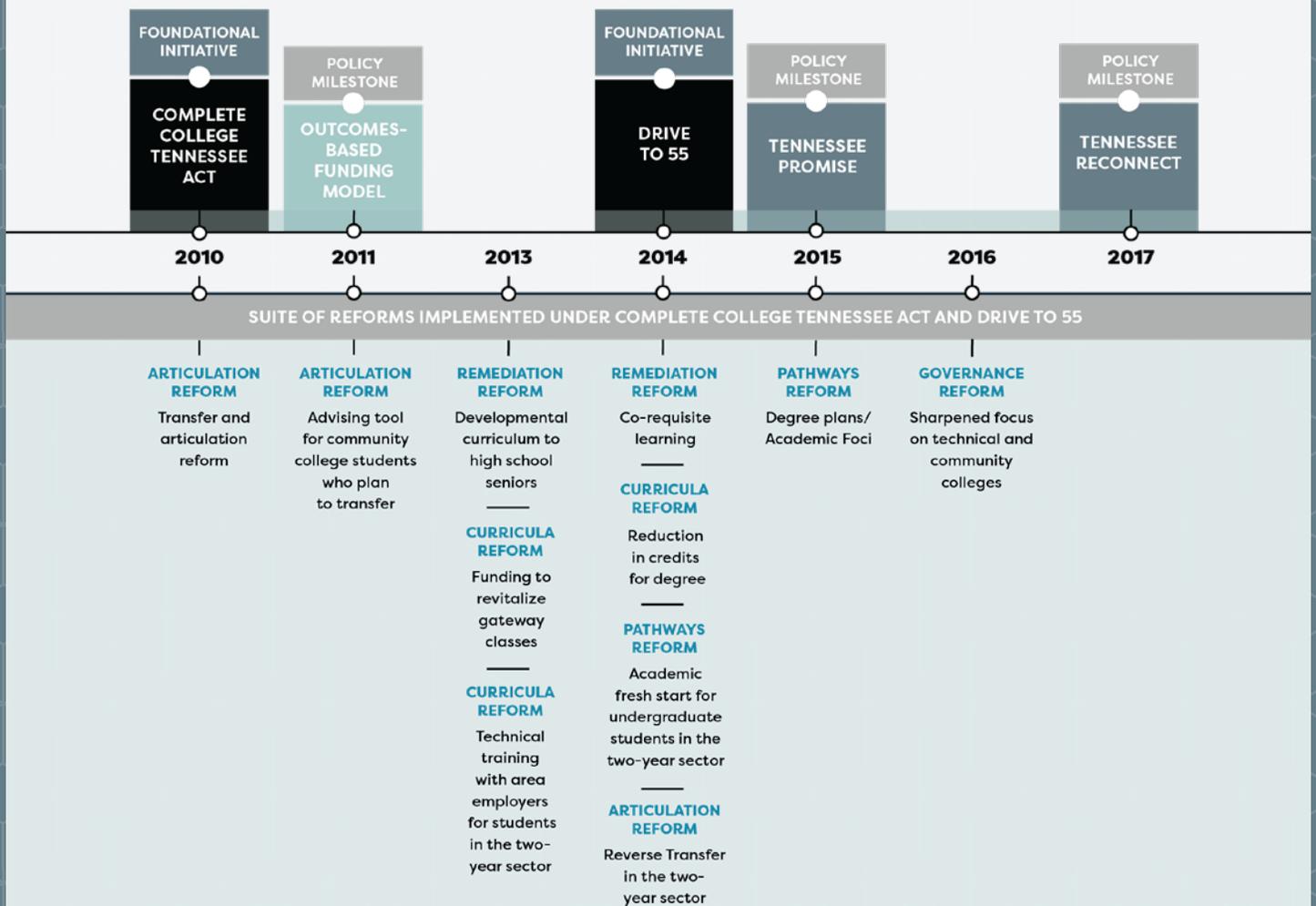
In 2014, Governor Bill Haslam built upon Bredesen’s legislation by enacting **Drive to 55**, which called for a 55% postsecondary attainment rate by 2025. Drive to 55 framed college completion as an economic and workforce imperative for Tennessee and was the impetus for two important policies in the state: Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect, discussed in more detail below (Drive to 55 Alliance, n.d.).

With two sweeping initiatives focused squarely on increasing the education level of its citizens, Tennessee leaders signaled an unprecedented focus on higher education. State- and system-level agencies and Tennessee’s postsecondary institutions responded by layering additional policies and programs to advance completion, designing a comprehensive roadmap for reaching Tennessee’s attainment goal.



Figure 1 illustrates Tennessee’s completion roadmap, which began with the Complete College Tennessee Act and Drive to 55 and was operationalized by three major policies milestones and a suite of completion-focused reforms. Appendix A lists specific policies that are related to these two foundational policies and the completion agenda in more detail.

Figure 1. Tennessee’s College Completion Roadmap



STEP 2: SUPPORTING AND DEEPENING THE COMPLETION AGENDA

The CCTA and Drive to 55 were foundational to Tennessee’s comprehensive college completion agenda. In addition, several other factors further cemented the state’s completion culture.

1

Over the course of 8 years, two successive Governors—one from each political party—advanced a statewide commitment to increasing postsecondary attainment. Democratic Governor Phil

Bredesen signed CCTA into law in 2010. CCTA served as agenda-setting legislation and was the major impetus for reform in Tennessee’s higher education policy over the last decade. Four years later, Republican Governor Bill Haslam amplified this commitment by explicitly connecting college completion with Tennessee’s economic and workforce future through Drive to 55. This long-standing, bi-partisan commitment to college completion provided a sustained focus that allowed a range of additional, more targeted completion policies and initiatives to be put in place.

2

Tennessee linked institutional funding for public colleges and universities to student outcomes. As mandated by the Complete

College Tennessee Act, in 2010 Tennessee developed a comprehensive outcomes-based funding model allocating 85% of base funding to public colleges and universities based on a range of student outcomes, including degree and high-quality certificate completions, credit milestones, student transfers, and other measures of success. Implementation of this policy began in 2011, and periodic refinements have further sharpened the policy’s focus on reducing equity gaps. Institutional leaders across the state consistently point to outcomes-based funding as an effective element of the state’s completion agenda (Ness, Deupree, & Gándara, 2015; Callagan et al., 2017b).

“The funding formula has certainly made the conversation at all levels all about the same thing. All about completion.”

– AN INSTITUTIONAL LEADER IN TENNESSEE

3

The implementation of two statewide, last-dollar scholarship programs expanded college-going for Tennessee citizens.

Seen as critical to achieving the Drive to 55 goal, Tennessee launched Tennessee Promise in 2015, followed by Tennessee Reconnect in 2017. These programs allow recent high school graduates and adult learners to attend Tennessee’s community colleges and technical colleges tuition-free. To supplement both programs, the state also invested in a statewide messaging campaign designed to broadcast the promise of “free college” and increase college-going culture across the state. During the first year of Tennessee Promise implementation, college-going in Tennessee increased by 5.9 percentage points, from 58.9% to 64.0% (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2019).

4

Tennessee placed community colleges squarely at the center of its completion agenda.

Three milestones highlight Tennessee’s focus on community colleges—Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect, and the FOCUS Act of 2016. Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect both offer free tuition at community colleges, encouraging increased enrollment for high school students and adults. These programs launched concurrently with legislation (the FOCUS Act) that restructured Tennessee’s higher education governance. The FOCUS Act sharpened the state’s focus on community and technical colleges by removing six universities from under the Tennessee Board of Regent’s oversight, the governing board overseeing the two-year sector.

State and system-level higher education agencies also enacted a set of targeted reforms that further focused community colleges on completion. Figure 1 highlights reforms across multiple areas (i.e., academics, transfer agreements, partnerships) that changed student experiences at community colleges. For example, following CCTA, the community college system adopted more efficient pathways and advising tools to move students between certificate and associate degrees to bachelor’s degrees. For more information on the suite of initiatives driving the completion agenda in Tennessee, see Appendix A.

5

Tennessee’s suite of completion reforms affected a broad range of stakeholders.

Some reforms such as outcomes-based funding or remediation reform were invisible to the general populace but highly impactful to institutions. Others such as the Tennessee Promise were marketed directly to students and their families. Still other reforms were primarily systems-level, such as the state’s postsecondary governance restructure (i.e., FOCUS Act). As a result, students, institutions and state postsecondary systems were all incentivized to move towards the common goal of college completion.

6

Completion-focused initiatives were bolstered by targeted efforts to provide direct support to students.

To ensure that students qualify for Tennessee Promise and receive available federal aid, efforts like FAFSA Frenzy Day incentivized school districts to compete for the highest rate of FAFSA completions. To provide additional supports to students, many community colleges launched summer bridge programs and partnered with area non-profits, such as tnAchieves, to provide completion coaches for community college students. The state also supported community college efforts to reform remediation through a statewide initiative to provide math remediation during high school. Following implementation of math remediation statewide, some colleges expanded their efforts to provide reading and writing remediation in high school as well.

7

Regular data analysis, policy evaluation, and iterative refinement reinforced Tennessee's culture of college completion.

Over the past nine years, Tennessee policymakers and institutional leaders engaged in joint review and refinement of existing completion policies and practices. Most notably, the outcomes-based funding formula received a formal review in 2015 after five years of implementation. During the review process, state policymakers examined a range of data, considered external research, and sought input from institutional leaders on the successes and challenges of the funding formula. This process contributed to revisions to the model and a second iteration of the funding formula.



Successes and Continuing Challenges

RFA's research over four years and across nine institutions in Tennessee provides compelling evidence that higher education institutions in Tennessee have shifted to a culture focused on completion. Sustained political support for nearly ten years across party lines enabled the completion agenda to launch and persist. The Complete College Tennessee Act and Drive to 55 provided a framework and a goal that served as a foundation for subsequent policies and initiatives that directly affected students, institutions, and state postsecondary systems. The result has been increased engagement in completion-focused efforts across a broad range of stakeholders and strong support of the completion-focused agenda.

One policymaker described how the statewide completion campaign was significant in shifting culture:

There was a focus and attention on completion before. But never has it been to this level that I can remember. I think coupling funding with the completion agenda has really driven institutions to think hard--not just about how we enroll students, but how do we get them out of here and make sure they are successful.

However, Tennessee's shift to a completion-focused culture brings with it a set of considerable challenges that hinder the state's capacity to meet its attainment goals:

1

Institutions face considerable resource and capacity challenges as they respond to completion-focused policies. Public colleges and

universities are expected to implement many of Tennessee's completion-focused initiatives without significant fiscal support. Some institutions have struggled to respond, pointing to limitations in staffing and financial resources. Further, many faculty and administrators report "initiative fatigue." As one institutional leader noted:

We are trying to address them all, which is a primary issue because you know when I got here there was a real atmosphere of initiative fatigue...

They have a lot of great initiatives and policies that come down [from the state]. But, trying to address all of them simultaneously was probably not the best approach.

To address this concern, Tennessee's state agencies and system offices have recently offered some financial and technical assistance to institutions. For example, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) provided grants to support institutions as they responded to outcomes-based funding (2016-2017), and to assist them as they managed increased enrollment following implementation of Tennessee Promise (2015-2017). The governing body for community and applied colleges, the Tennessee Board of Regents, also provided a host of non-financial supports, such as completion and corequisite academies for institutional leaders to learn from experts and other institutions.

However, some institutions—particularly those with fewer resources—continue to struggle. Institutional leaders note that the staff time and resources required to obtain additional supports can strain their capacity and sometimes act as barriers to assistance.

2

Equity gaps between students persist. Despite Tennessee’s comprehensive efforts to increase college completion, attainment gaps between white students and other student groups, mainly – adult learners, students from lower-income families, students academically underprepared, and students of color – remain. For instance, nearly 14% of adults in Tennessee have less than a high school education; only 30% of students from low-income households in Tennessee enroll in postsecondary education; and only one in ten black students will complete a community college degree (Complete Tennessee, 2018). These equity gaps highlight the challenges in advancing the completion agenda *for all students*.

In addressing attainment gaps for students, Tennessee’s 2015–2025 master plan identifies adults, students from low-income households, and academically underprepared students as populations critical in meeting the goals of Drive to 55 by 2025 and establishes a goal of 50,000 additional degrees for students of color by 2025. To close gaps in attainment for students, Tennessee’s master plan highlights initiatives to advance student access and success, including Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect, co-requisite remediation, and strategies at the state and institution-level that support black and Latinx students in their completion goals.

This report is based upon four years of research examining postsecondary policies in Tennessee from 2015–2019. RFA’s analysis draws from data collected through site visits to nine Tennessee postsecondary institutions (six community colleges and three universities), rounds of interviews with 10 state officials and a thorough review of public documents from state and system-level higher education agencies and postsecondary institutions. This report was funded with generous support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation. RFA is grateful for the many Tennessee stakeholders who contributed to this research.

RESEARCH FOR ACTION

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization. We seek to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally underserved students. Our work is designed to strengthen public schools and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and the public at the local, state, and national levels; and enrich the civic and community dialogue about public education.

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Appendix A: Completion-Focused Policies in Tennessee

Table 1. Title and description of Tennessee’s completion-focused policies following the 2019 Complete College Tennessee Act

COMPLETION INITIATIVES	DESCRIPTION	YEAR ENACTED
Completion Milestones		
Complete College Tennessee Act	Legislation that mandated comprehensive reforms intended to transform higher education in the state	2010
Outcomes-based funding model	Model to allocate state funding to public institutions based on performance	2011
Drive to 55	Attainment goal for 55% of Tennesseans to have a postsecondary credential by 2025	
TN Promise	Tuition-free community college for direct-from-high school students	2015
TN Reconnect	Tuition-free community college for adults	2017
Remediation Reform		
Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support (SAILS)	Introduces college developmental curriculum to high school seniors to improve college readiness and time-to-degree.	2013
Co-requisite model	Places students in supplemental learning support classes concurrently while they are enrolled in credit-bearing English and math courses.	2014
Curricula Reform		
Course Revitalization Initiative	Provides grant funding to teams of faculty members looking to revitalize high-enrollment gateway classes	2013
Reduction in credits for degree	Sets a maximum of 120 semester hours for a bachelor’s degree or 60 semester hours for an associate degree.	2014
Pathways Reform		
Academic Fresh Start	Allows undergraduate students who have experienced academic difficulty to receive academic forgiveness and make a clean start upon returning college after an extended absence to earn a degree	2014
Degree plans/ Academic Foci	System-wide adoption of nine academic foci for community colleges.	2015
Articulation Reforms		
Transfer and articulation policy	Within CCTA, requires a common, transferable general education core across systems of higher education.	2010
Tennessee Transfer Pathways	An advising tool designed to prevent credit loss for community college students who plan to transfer to a university	2011
Reverse Transfer	Provides a framework to award associate degrees to students who transferred to a university from a community college	2014
Private Sector Partnerships		
Tennessee LEAP (Labor Education Alignment Program)	Offers students enrolled in community college or colleges of applied science opportunities to participate in technical training with area employers	2013
Governance Reform		
Focus on College and University Success Act	Provides greater autonomy for universities, while allowing the Board of Regents to sharpen its attention on technical and community colleges.	2016

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