

# AIDING ATTAINMENT

## Leveraging State Financial Aid FOR ACCESS AND SUCCESS



## Driving Toward Affordability in Tennessee

In 2013, 33.8 percent of working-age adults in Tennessee had a postsecondary degree or credential.<sup>1</sup> To address the workforce demand for more workers with a postsecondary degree, Tennessee launched its statewide attainment goal: Drive to 55. Drive to 55 aimed to increase the percentage of Tennesseans with a postsecondary degree or credential to 55 percent by 2025. At the time, the state had a number of financial aid programs with a mix of need and merit-based requirements.

One of the flagship programs under the Drive to 55 Initiative was Tennessee Promise. Launched in 2014,

Tennessee Promise offers high school graduates the opportunity to attend two years of community or technical college tuition-free. Advocates were able to leverage the state's Drive to 55 Goal and the fact that the last-dollar scholarship built on existing aid—such as the federal Pell Grant, Hope Scholarship, and Tennessee Student Assistance Award—making the total cost of the program a fraction of what the state spends on financial aid. The total cost of the program has ranged from \$15 million the first year of implementation to a high of \$32 million in the 2019-20 school year.<sup>2</sup> Students are also expected to complete community service each semester they receive the award (a way to



- 1 Tennessee Higher Education Commission & Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation. (2023). Tennessee College Going & The Class of 2022: Continuing Momentum. [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/college-going-reports/CGR%20Report%20Class%20of%202022\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/college-going-reports/CGR%20Report%20Class%20of%202022_FINAL.pdf)
- 2 Tennessee Department of Finance & Administration. Budget Publications Archive. <https://www.tn.gov/finance/fa/fa-budget-information/fa-budget-archive.html>

encourage them to have some “skin in the game”) and have access to pre-college advising support via the [tnAchieves](#) program.

Despite the comparably smaller financial investment, the message of Promise was powerful. While low-income Tennessee students may have already been eligible for a large amount of financial aid, students did not always understand their eligibility or how financial aid awards are packaged. The idea of “free community college” is much simpler to communicate to a student than the complexities of how Pell and other state aid award amounts are determined. In the years following the implementation of Promise, Tennessee saw an increase in FAFSA filing rates and college-going rates of high school graduates. In 2015, the first year of Tennessee Promise implementation, the college-going rate jumped by 5.8 percentage points, an increase larger than the previous seven years combined.<sup>3</sup> From 2016 to 2019, the college-going rate declined slightly, but was still higher than the pre-Promise rate. Filing the FAFSA is a requirement for Promise, and in 2015, the state’s FAFSA filing rate jumped by nine points to 69.5 percent and has continued to increase, consistently making Tennessee one of the top states for FAFSA

filing. In 2020, the FAFSA filing rate for all public high school students was 83 percent, and nearly 90 percent of Promise applicants filed a FAFSA.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these promising gains in college enrollment, the state could not reach its 55 percent attainment goal by relying on recent high school graduates alone; engaging adults and working learners in higher education would be paramount to meeting the goal. To encourage more adults to enroll or re-enroll in higher education, the state created Tennessee Reconnect, a last-dollar free tuition program for adult students in the state.

[Tennessee Reconnect](#) built off the successful model of Tennessee Promise. Reconnect is for adults who plan to enroll at a community or technical college or in an associate degree program offered by a four-year college. To meet the needs of adults and working learners, the Reconnect program is available to students who attend college part-time. Additionally, the state introduced Reconnect Navigators who help adult students enroll in higher education. The Navigators have been a particularly effective part of the program. “Financial aid is a necessity, but financial aid alone is not going to get an adult to come back to college and stay



3 Tennessee Higher Education Commission & Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation. (2023). Tennessee College Going & The Class of 2022: Continuing Momentum. [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/college-going-reports/CGR%20Report%20Class%20of%202022\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/college-going-reports/CGR%20Report%20Class%20of%202022_FINAL.pdf)

4 Tennessee Higher Education Commission & Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation. (2021). *Tennessee Promise Annual Report 2021*. [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/promise/TNPRReport\\_2021\\_Final.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/promise/TNPRReport_2021_Final.pdf)



enrolled and persist,” explains Jessica Gibson, the Senior Director for Adult Learner Initiatives at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. The Navigators help adult students—almost all of whom (95 percent) had prior experience with Tennessee’s community college system—access resources like childcare, transportation, and public benefits to be able to successfully enroll and persist.<sup>5</sup>

Tennessee Reconnect has successfully helped thousands of students re-engage in higher education. The first year of the program saw a success rate of 61 percent with over 2,000 students completing a certificate or degree. Of note is the racial equity promoted by the program—Black students represent a larger portion of recipients (21 percent) compared to the adult population of Tennessee (15 percent).<sup>6</sup>

Today, Tennessee is continuing to think about how it can reach more learners. While the state still has multiple other merit- and need-based programs, the simplicity of the “free college” message has been invaluable at getting more students to complete the FAFSA—a necessary step for them to access other state aid programs. The state also created the [College For TN](#) website, a one-stop shop for students to learn about careers, colleges, and financial aid. The state continues to explore additional supports for students such as piloting Completion Grants which pair additional aid for basic and other needs (like food, books and supplies, and class-specific materials) with college advising support.

By grounding financial aid offerings in the state’s workforce goals, Tennessee was able to innovate and scale a Promise program statewide. A simple message and clear communication, programs targeted to the needs of traditional and adult learners, and embedded advising support in financial aid structures have helped Tennessee make higher education more accessible in the state.



Check out the full suite of *Aiding Attainment* resources, including the state aid benchmarking tool, state spotlights, student aid scenarios, and more at [edstrategy.org/resource/aiding-attainment](https://edstrategy.org/resource/aiding-attainment).

5 Tennessee Higher Education Commission & Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation. (2020). *Tennessee Reconnect Annual Report 2020*. <https://www.tn.gov/thehc/research/tnr-annual-report.html>

6 Ibid.