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Tennessee Promise Program Gives More Tennesseans College Opportunities

New research shows program works but changes could improve results

The Tennessee Comptroller's Office has completed an extensive evaluation of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship Program, which was created by the General Assembly in 2014 to give more high school graduates an opportunity to earn an associate degree or technical diploma.

Research by the Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) shows that a larger percentage of recent high school graduates are attending college as a result of the program. Tennessee's college-going rate increased from 58.4 percent to 64.3 percent in the first year of the program.

Additionally, Tennessee Promise students are accumulating more college credits, staying enrolled longer, and earning post-secondary credentials at higher rates than their peers. In fact, Promise recipients at community colleges are more than twice as likely to earn a credential when compared to other recent high school graduates.

Tennessee Promise provided college opportunities to 24 percent of all public high school graduates from 2015 to 2017. Although 49,500 became Promise students in those years, OREA's research found that graduates with low ACT scores, minority applicants, and those from low-income households were less likely to become Promise students.

Not all Promise students receive funding because Tennessee Promise is a last-dollar scholarship. About 60 percent of Promise funds went to students from households with annual incomes over \$80,000. Students from lower income households were more likely to qualify for the Pell grant or other need-based scholarships.

OREA also examined challenges that make it difficult to receive or maintain a Promise scholarship.

70 percent of Promise applicants did not become eligible for the program because they failed to meet requirements. The majority of those students missed either the mandatory mentor meeting or failed to complete the required eight hours of community service. Evidence suggests some students would have gone to college as Promise students if missing these requirements had not made them ineligible.

Promise requirements can also become barriers to success once students enroll in college. Community college administrators say mandatory community service and full-time enrollment requirements cause students to lose eligibility. These same requirements are not imposed on Tennessee Reconnect or HOPE scholarship students.

Tennessee Promise does not cover the costs of books, supplies, tools, or non-mandatory fees. It is estimated that community college Promise students pay an average of \$1,150 each year for these items. 75 percent of community college administrators indicate these costs impeded academic success or persistence of Promise students.

While Tennessee Promise has increased the number of college attendees, meeting Tennessee's Drive to 55 goal will likely not be possible without increasing the number of students who enter and remain in the program.

The Comptroller's Office has included several policy options for the General Assembly in its report. These include changes that could be made to increase the number of students who apply for scholarships, become Promise students, remain in the program, and earn a credential.

To read the report, please visit the Comptroller's OREA website at: tncot.cc/orea

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