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Comptroller Study Finds Tennessee Reconnect Program Increases Degree Attainment in Spite of Declining Participation

The Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) has released a comprehensive evaluation of the Tennessee Reconnect Grant program. The report finds that program participants earned degrees at slightly higher rates than similar students, but that a decreasing amount of Tennesseans are applying for and participating in the program.

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant was initiated by former Governor Bill Haslam and passed into law by the General Assembly in 2017 as part of the Drive to 55 initiative. Adults who have not yet earned an associate or bachelor's degree may use the grant at a community college or other eligible institution to pursue an associate degree or technical certificate free of tuition and mandatory fees. 11,648 adults received grant funding in 2020-21.



Comptroller analysts determined the number of applicants for Tennessee Reconnect has declined by 46% over the past three years (2018-2020). During the same time, almost two-thirds of the Tennesseans who filled out an application did not become part of the program. These reductions were likely impacted by COVID-19, and a decline in statewide marketing.

The evaluation also showed that one in four students who entered the program lost their Reconnect grants because they did not meet program requirements. The majority of these students failed to maintain the required minimum of six credit hours per semester. When surveyed, community college administrators often cited work and family responsibilities as reason why students do not maintain enrollment requirements.

While the Reconnect Grant ensures students can attend college free of tuition and mandatory fees, it does not cover additional expenses such as textbooks, supplies, and special fees. On average, students pay \$400 per semester for these costs. Some survey respondents noted students are often surprised to learn the program does not cover these expenses, and they decide not to enroll because of this.

On a positive note, analysts do believe Tennessee is currently on track to meet the Drive to 55 goal, but more efforts may need to be made to keep the state on track.

The Comptroller's Office includes several policy options for the General Assembly and other stakeholders within its report. These include changes that could be made to increase applicants and the number of successful participants in the program. As of the fall of 2020, an estimated 4.9% of eligible Tennesseans have applied for the Reconnect Grant.

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

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