



Tennessee Community College Reconnect Grant Program: Conclusions and Policy Considerations

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Executive Summary

The Tennessee General Assembly created the Community College Reconnect Grant program to increase the number of adults with an associate degree,¹ and help meet the Drive to 55 goal of having 55 percent of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential by the year 2025. The program is funded with a nonrecurring \$1.5 million appropriation of net lottery proceeds, which is enough to cover roughly 800 adult students during the life of the program. The Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC) promulgates program rules, including those regarding student eligibility and distribution of grant funds.

Public Chapter 363 (2015) requires the Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) to report on the effectiveness of the program in encouraging independent students to complete their associate degree. This report's analysis, conclusions, and policy considerations are based on the grant's requirements and performance in the 2016-17 academic year. Some of the grant's eligibility requirements have been amended for the 2017-18 academic year to reflect that of the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, which will go into effect in the fall 2018 semester. The following analysis pertains only to the Community College Reconnect Grant over the 2016-17 academic year.

The Community College Reconnect Grant was awarded to 98 individual students in the 2016-17 academic year. Of those 98 individual students, 24 earned an associate degree in the 2016-17 academic year, or approximately 25 percent of all individual students receiving the grant. The remaining students (roughly 75 percent) either are still participating in the Community College Reconnect Grant program beyond the 2016-17 academic year, are enrolled in postsecondary education but no longer participating in the grant program, or are no longer enrolled in postsecondary education.

Other observations:

- The total grant expenditure for the 2016-17 academic year was \$188,554, or approximately 12.57 percent of the allocated \$1.5 million program funding.
- The graduation rate for the 2016-17 academic year was 24.49 percent, or 24 of the 98 students receiving the grant.
- The average grant amount per award was \$1,439.34.

¹ When the Community College Reconnect Grant program was first passed by the General Assembly in 2015, it was available only for adult students enrolled in an associate of applied science degree program. In 2016, the General Assembly expanded the program to include all associate degree programs.

- The total average cost per degree was \$7,856.42.
- The average cost per credit hour was \$148.58.
- The average number of credit hours taken per student per semester was 9.70.
- 57.89 percent of grant recipients in fall 2016 who did not graduate returned with the grant award in spring 2017, or 33 total students.
- Dyersburg State, Pellissippi State, and Walters State accounted for over 70 percent of all grant awards and over 70 percent of the total grant expenditures.
- When surveyed, community college administrators indicated the grant program's eligibility criteria made it difficult to find students who could qualify for the grant.
- During the 2016-17 academic year, four community colleges offered similar scholarships for adult students with broader eligibility criteria. These scholarships were awarded to more adult students than the grant.

Conclusions

Based on analysis of institutional and student-level data provided by TSAC and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) along with data collected from survey research conducted by OREA, the report presents the following conclusions pertaining to the Community College Reconnect Grant:

- **Removal of the 30 credit hour threshold for the 2017-18 academic year may increase the number of participants in the program.** The number of Grant awardees was restricted by several eligibility criteria in place for the 2016-17 academic year, according to community college administrators, most notably the 30 semester hours required of a student prior to applying for the Grant.
- **Reducing the number of required credit hours students must take per semester from nine to six for the 2017-18 academic year may increase the number of participants and decrease drop-out rates.** The nine credit hour workload per semester in place for the 2016-17 academic year was identified by community college administrators as a barrier to enrollment and persistence for the adult-student population. The students receiving the grant are a population that typically has a full-time job, family duties, and other responsibilities outside of attending college courses. Thus, the reduced credit-hour workload per semester may lead to higher participation and a lower drop-out rate.

Policy Consideration

Based on analysis of data provided by TSAC and THEC, along with data collected from survey research conducted by OREA, the report presents the following policy consideration:

- **The Tennessee Higher Education Commission and the state's community colleges should continue to improve the collection, reporting, and dissemination of data on adult students.** Numerous community colleges cited problems identifying and contacting eligible adult students because of invalid or inaccurate data within the institutions' own internal tracking systems as well as from information provided to them by THEC and TSAC.

Introduction

Public Chapter 363 (2015) created the Community College Reconnect Grant, which gives adult students who have completed some college credit, but have not yet attained a degree, a last-dollar scholarship to attend a Tennessee community college to complete their associate's degree. The program was subsequently amended by Public Chapter 1081 (2016), which altered program requirements before any students enrolled using the Grant. The program is funded with net lottery proceeds and total expenditures are not to exceed \$1.5 million for the life of the program.

The Community College Reconnect Grant served as the pilot program for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, established in 2017 by Public Chapter 448. Tennessee Reconnect features broader eligibility criteria and will fully replace the Community College Reconnect Grant in Fall 2018. Starting in Fall 2017, however, community colleges with remaining grant funds may enroll students into the Community College Reconnect Grant using broader eligibility criteria compared to the initial grant requirements in 2016. In other words, eligibility criteria in place for the grant in 2016-17 are different from the eligibility criteria in place in 2017-18. At the end of the 2017-18 academic year, any unspent funds allocated for the Community College Reconnect Grant will revert to the lottery for education account.

Public Chapter 363 (2015) requires the Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) to report on the effectiveness of the program for encouraging nontraditional college students – adults over the age of 25 – to complete their associate degree in accordance with the guidelines specified in the Community College Reconnect Grant.² This report includes analysis from the 2016-17 academic year.

Overview: Community College Reconnect Grant

The Community College Reconnect Grant provides a last-dollar scholarship to Tennessee adults who have some college credit, but no degree, and who want to attend a Tennessee community college to complete their associate degree. The program is part of the statewide Drive to 55 initiative to increase the number of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential to 55 percent by 2025. The program is funded with net lottery proceeds at a maximum of \$1.5 million for the life of the program, which includes the 2016-17 and 2017-18 academic years.

Students eligible for the program in the 2016-17 academic year had to meet the following requirements:³

- be a resident of Tennessee for at least one year preceding the date of application for the grant,
- not have enrolled in or attended any postsecondary institution for at least 12 months immediately preceding the date of enrollment in the grant program,
- have earned at least 30 hours toward an associate degree that are applicable to the associate degree the student intends to pursue with the grant,⁴

² This report covers the Community College Reconnect Grant in the 2016-17 academic year. Public Chapter 448 (2017) requires the Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) to review and study the Tennessee Reconnect Grant in the third year of the program and every four years thereafter. Public Chapter 448 states the Tennessee Reconnect Grant Program shall take effect August 1, 2018, with OREA's first review of the program due by December 31, 2021.

³ Public Chapter 1081 (2016) changed the Community College Reconnect Grant program requirements initially set out in Public Chapter 363 (2015) by reducing the amount of time a student must have spent not enrolled in a postsecondary institution before enrolling in the grant to 12 months from 24; removing the \$36,000 adjusted gross income requirement for students; and removing the requirement that eligible students must pursue an Associate of Applied Science by opening the grant to all associate degree programs.

⁴ Grant recipients were required to have at least 30 semester hours toward an associate degree at the time of enrollment and were also required to enroll in at least nine semester hours during any fall or spring semester. Most associate degrees require approximately 60 semester hours.

- file the federal student aid form, or FAFSA, prior to the beginning of each academic term,
- meet the FAFSA definition of an independent student,
- be admitted to and enroll in a Tennessee public two-year postsecondary institution, and
- be mathematically able, at the time of enrollment, to earn the grade point average (GPA) required for the degree sought.

Under the program requirements for the 2016-17 academic year, a student who received the grant must have met the following requirements to remain eligible in future academic terms:

- enroll in classes that lead to the completion of an associate's degree,
- maintain satisfactory academic progress and a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA,
- maintain continuous enrollment at an eligible institution,⁵
- reapply for the grant, and
- enroll in at least nine credit hours during any fall or spring semester.⁶

Students may continue to receive the grant through the 2017-18 academic year until the first of the following occurs:

- the student earns an associate degree,
- the student has attempted the total number of semester hours required to complete the degree, or
- two years have passed, excluding approved leaves of absence, since the initial enrollment in the grant.

After the 2017-18 academic year, a student who remains enrolled in and eligible for the grant shall be eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant program beginning with the fall 2018 semester so long as the student meets all eligibility requirements relative to the program. The maximum grant amount awarded to a student is the average cost of tuition and mandatory fees at the community college where the student attends. The grant is a last-dollar scholarship and is applied after all other gift aid, including Pell grants and other Tennessee education lottery programs. For this reason, the grant amount varies based on each student's remaining financial need after other gift aid is applied.

An independent student is someone who:

1. Was born before January 1, 1994;
2. Is married or separated;
3. Is enrolled in a master's or doctorate program;
4. Is a veteran or active duty in the U.S. armed forces;
5. Has children or dependents who receive more than half of their support from the student;
6. Has dependents who live in the same household;
7. At any time since turning age 13, was in foster care, a ward of the court, or both parents were deceased;
8. Is an emancipated minor or someone other than a parent or stepparent has legal guardianship; or
9. Was determined to be homeless or self-supporting and at risk of being homeless at any time on or after July 1, 2016.

Source: Federal Student Aid, U.S. Department of Education, Dependency Status, <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/fafsa/filling-out/dependency#dependency-questions>

However, those students who were less than nine semester hours from earning an associate degree could enroll in less than nine semester hours, provided they enrolled for the total number of hours remaining to earn the degree.

⁵ Students who receive the grant may transfer from one community college to another and continue to receive the grant if the institution to which the student is transferring has sufficient grant funding for the student and the student is able to complete the degree program before a terminating event occurs.

⁶ A student may enroll in fewer than nine semester hours during a summer semester.

The Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC) distributed grant funds as a lump sum directly to community colleges based on each institution's percentage of the total independent, or nontraditional, students enrolled at all public two-year postsecondary institutions across the state.^{7,8} Those institutions with a higher percentage of Tennessee's nontraditional students received more grant funding. The individual institutions then distribute grants to eligible students on a first-come, first-served basis. It is possible that eligible students will not receive the grant if the funds run out at their institution.

Appendix A clarifies the grant requirements OREA is evaluating, as well as how the grant requirements have changed since its implementation in 2016-17.

Program Allocation and Expenditures

The total program allocations from TSAC to each community college for the 2016-17 academic year are shown in Exhibit 1. Based on the proportion of nontraditional students at each institution, \$1.5 million in one-time lottery fund proceeds were allocated to community colleges in Tennessee. The total \$1.5 million in grant funds were allocated to all of Tennessee's 13 community colleges, with each community college receiving a percentage of the grant.

The amount of total allocations awarded to each community college was based on each institution's percentage of the total number of nontraditional students statewide. The resulting percentage is then multiplied by \$1,500,000 to calculate the percentage of grant funding awarded to each community college.

Exhibit 1: Grant Allotments to Tennessee's Community Colleges

	Enrollment	Number of Nontraditional Students	Percentage of Nontraditional Students	Percentage of Total Nontraditional Population	Grant Amount
Chattanooga State	9,332	3,733	40%	12.5%	\$187,500
Cleveland State	3,522	1,127	32%	3.8%	\$57,000
Columbia State	5,117	1,484	29%	5.0%	\$75,000
Dyersburg State	2,847	883	31%	3.0%	\$45,000
Jackson State	4,924	1,329	27%	4.5%	\$67,500
Motlow State	4,758	1,142	24%	4.0%	\$60,000
Nashville State	10,044	5,122	51%	17.0%	\$255,000
Northeast State	5,865	2,229	38%	7.5%	\$112,500
Pellissippi State	10,099	3,131	31%	10.5%	\$157,500
Roane State	5,832	1,750	30%	5.9%	\$88,500
Southwest TN	10,227	4,091	40%	13.6%	\$204,000
Volunteer State	7,664	2,299	30%	7.7%	\$115,500
Walters State	6,005	1,501	25%	5.0%	\$75,000
TOTALS	86,236	29,820		100%	\$1,500,000

Note: The grant allotments were based on the percentage of nontraditional age students enrolled as of fall 2014. Fall 2014 data is from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), National Center of Education Statistics (NCES)

Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

⁷ A nontraditional student is a student age 25 or older who either enrolls at a postsecondary institution as an entering freshman or enrolls at least two years after last attending a postsecondary institution.

⁸ For simplicity, the report has adopted TSAC/THEC's language regarding the grant and uses the term "nontraditional students."

The total expenditures by community colleges distributing grant funds as awards to adult students in the 2016-17 academic year was \$188,554. The institutions were instructed by TSAC to award funds or allot them for future use to students who met the eligibility criteria. If an institution is in possession of unused funds, those funds are to be returned to TSAC at the conclusion of the 2017-18 academic year. Grant funds should not be used or allotted toward marketing tools or campaign ads. All expenditures came from a one-time allocation of net lottery proceeds in fiscal year 2015-16.

Exhibit 2: Community College Reconnect Grant Expenditures

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Academic Year Totals
Total Number of Grant Awards	68	63	131
Total Number of Students	68	30	98
Total Grant Expenditures	\$98,100.50	\$90,453.50	\$188,554.00
Average Grant Amount per Award	\$1,442.65	\$1,435.77	\$1,439.34
Percent Used from Total Program Allocation	6.54%	6.03%	12.57%

Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

The grant was first available for students during the 2016-17 academic year. In the fall 2016 semester, 68 students were awarded the grant across 11 community colleges for an average grant amount of \$1,442.65. In the spring 2017 semester, 63 students were awarded the grant across 11 community colleges; 30 of the 63 were first-time grant recipients. Each recipient in the spring 2017 semester received an average of \$1,435.77. The total expense for the spring 2017 semester was \$90,453.50. The total cumulative expenditure of the grant in the 2016-17 academic year was \$188,554, or about 12.57 percent of the grant's total funds, resulting in an average grant expenditure per award of \$1,439.21 per student.

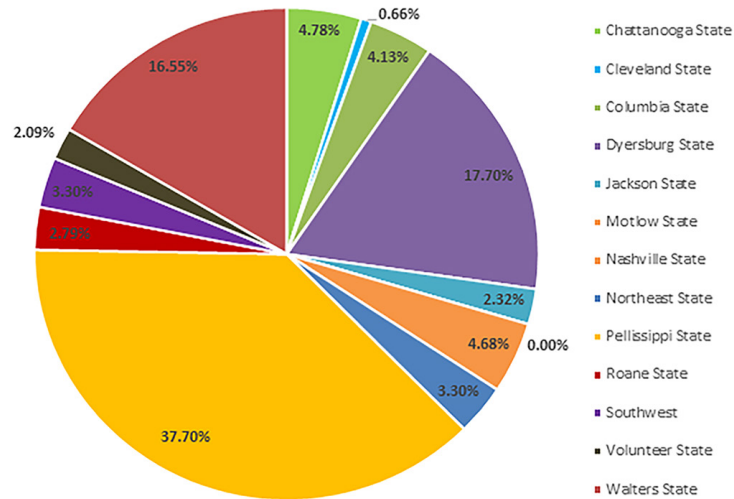
Exhibit 3: Community College Reconnect Participation and Expenditures by Institution

Institution	Fall 2016			Spring 2017		
	Number of Awards	Amount Expended	Average Expenditure Per Award	Number of Awards	Amount Expended	Average Expenditure Per Award
Chattanooga State	0	\$0.00	\$0.00	5	\$9,018.00	\$1,803.60
Cleveland State	1	\$681.50	\$681.50	1	\$562.00	\$562.00
Columbia State	3	\$4,968.00	\$1,656.00	2	\$2,825.00	\$1,412.50
Dyersburg State	11	\$16,025.50	\$1,456.86	11	\$17,341.00	\$1,576.45
Jackson State	3	\$4,383.50	\$1,461.17	0	\$0.00	\$0.00
Motlow State	0	\$0.00	\$0.00	0	\$0.00	\$0.00
Nashville State	3	\$4,648.00	\$1,549.33	3	\$4,173.00	\$1,391.00
Northeast State	3	\$3,970.00	\$1,323.33	2	\$2,258.00	\$1,129.00
Pellissippi State	22	\$36,214.00	\$1,646.09	24	\$34,878.00	\$1,453.25
Roane State	2	\$2,490.50	\$1,245.25	2	\$2,768.50	\$1,384.25
Southwest	3	\$4,312.50	\$1,437.50	1	\$1,903.50	\$1,903.50
Volunteer State	2	\$2,247.50	\$1,123.75	1	\$1,684.00	\$1,684.00
Walters State	15	\$18,159.50	\$1,210.63	11	\$13,042.50	\$1,185.68
Totals	68	\$98,100.50	\$1,442.65	63	\$90,453.50	\$1,435.77

Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

Three community colleges, Dyersburg State, Pellissippi State, and Walters State, enrolled just over 71 percent of all students receiving the grant and spent roughly 72 percent of all grant expenditures for the 2016-17 academic year.

Exhibit 4: Percentage of Total Expenditures by Institution, 2016-17



Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation

Student Demographics

In accordance with Public Chapter 1081 (2016), adult students receiving the grant must have been out of college for at least 12 months and have earned at least 30 credit hours toward an associate degree that are applicable to the associate degree the student is pursuing.

Exhibit 5: Community College Reconnect Grant, Years Out of School and Cumulative Credit Hours for First-Time Grant Recipients

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Academic Year Totals
Total Number of First-Time Grant Recipients	68	30	98
Average Years out of School	5.54	6.08	5.70
Minimum Number of Years out of School	0	1	0
Maximum Number of Years out of School	18	16	18
Standard Deviation	4.11	4.66	4.29
Average Cumulative Credit Hours from Last Enrollment	55.54	69.58	59.75
Minimum Number of Cumulative Credit Hours	2	16	2
Maximum Number of Cumulative Credit Hours	124	151.34	151.34
Standard Deviation	24.58	36.06	29.23

Note: The numbers used in this table rely on the unduplicated student headcounts, or first-time students receiving the Grant.
Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

On average, students receiving the grant have been out of school for 5.70 years. The average cumulative credit hours students have accrued from their previous enrollment is 59.75. Both statistics, average years out of school and the average number of cumulative credit hours from the student’s last enrollment, increased from fall 2016 to spring 2017. The standard deviation shows that there is a fair amount of variation within each statistic.

Of the 98 students who received the grant in the 2016-17 academic year, roughly 59 percent were female and 41 percent were male. The race of the students receiving the grant show that approximately 84 percent were white, non-Hispanic and 13 percent were black, non-Hispanic, while roughly 3 percent identify as another race.

Exhibit 6: Community College Reconnect Grant, Recipients by Race, Gender, and Income for First-Time Grant Recipients

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Academic Year Totals
Total Number of First-Time Grant Recipients	68	30	98
Gender			
Female	57% (39)	63% (19)	59% (58)
Male	43% (29)	37% (11)	41% (40)
Total	100% (68)	100% (30)	100% (98)
Race			
White, non-Hispanic	87% (59)	77% (23)	84% (82)
Black, non-Hispanic	10% (7)	20% (6)	13% (13)
Other	3% (2)	3% (1)	3% (3)
Total	100% (68)	100% (30)	100% (98)
Ever Pell Grant Eligible?			
Yes	71% (48)	63% (19)	68% (67)
No	29% (20)	37% (11)	32% (31)
Total	100% (68)	100% (30)	100% (98)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are raw values. Percentages are rounded to nearest whole number. The numbers used in this table rely on unduplicated student headcounts, or first-time students receiving the grant.

Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

Pell Grant eligibility, typically a proxy measure for income or expected family contribution, shows that, on average, 68 percent of students who received the grant were eligible for the Pell grant at some point in their college career, compared to 32 percent of first-time students receiving the grant who were never eligible for Pell in their college career.

Evaluating Performance: The Community College Reconnect Grant

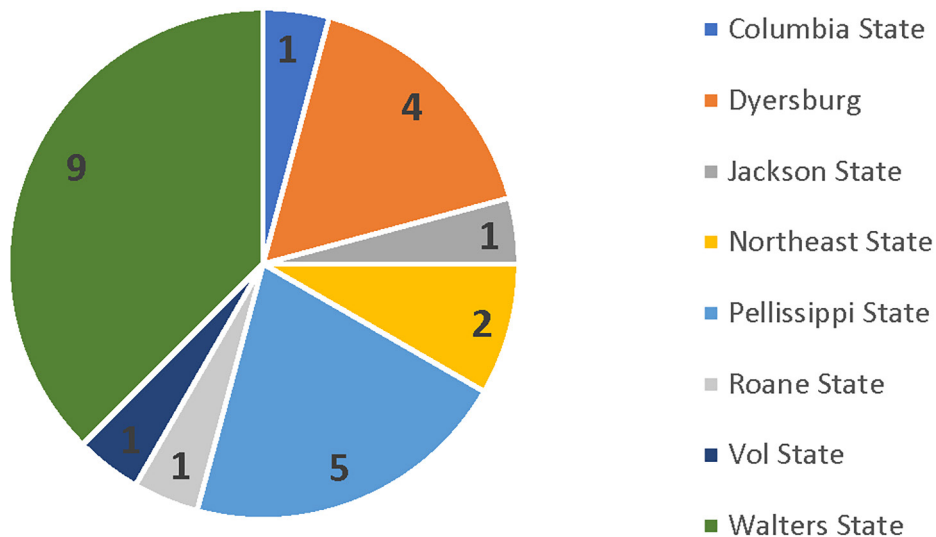
The Community College Reconnect Grant program aimed to increase the number of adults with an associate degree by encouraging adults with some college credit to return to school and

complete their degree.

Completion: Graduation Rates

The primary goal of the grant is to increase the number of adults over the age of 25 with an associate degree. The grant program resulted in a total of 24 degrees awarded in the 2016-17 academic year: 11 degrees awarded at the end of the fall 2016 semester and 13 degrees at the end of the spring 2017 semester.

Exhibit 7: Total Number of Graduates Awarded the Grant by Institution, 2016-17



Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

The total number of grant recipients that graduated in the 2016-17 academic year varied across community colleges. Of the 24 graduates in the 2016-17 academic year, 18 total students (75 percent) graduated from three colleges: Walters State, Pellissippi State, and Dyersburg State. The remaining six students that graduated in the 2016-17 academic year earned their associate degree from one of five other community colleges.

Exhibit 8: Community College Reconnect Grant, Completion Rates and Costs

	Academic Year Totals
Total Number of First-Time Grant Recipients	98
Total Number of Graduates	24
Percentage of Students Who Graduated	24.49%
Average Program Expenditures Per Degree	\$7,856.42

Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

Overall, 24.49 percent of grant recipients earned an associate degree out of the 98 total students receiving the grant in the 2016-17 academic year, or 24 total students. The total program expenditure per degree for the 2016-17 academic year was \$7,856.42.

Each student in the 2016-17 academic year that earned an associate degree required less than 16 credit hours to complete their degree but more than three credit hours. The average number of credit hours needed to earn an associate degree for the 2016-17 academic year was 7.75.

Exhibit 9: Community College Reconnect Grant, Credit Hour to Completion

	Academic Year Totals
Total Number of Students	98
Total Number of Graduates	24
Total Number of First-Time Grant Recipients that Graduated	18
Of First-Time Grant Recipients that Graduated, Maximum Number of Credit Hours Needed to Graduate	16
Of First-Time Grant Recipients that Graduated, Minimum Number of Credit Hours Needed to Graduate	3
Of First-Time Grant Recipients that Graduated, Avg. Number of Credit Hours Needed to Graduate	7.61

Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

Of the 24 graduates, there is variation in the race of students who earned an associate degree. Over 90 percent of students earning an associate degree with grant funds are white, non-Hispanic (22), while under 10 percent are black, non-Hispanic (2).

Exhibit 10: Community College Reconnect Grant, Graduates by Race

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Academic Year Totals
White, Not Hispanic	91% (10)	92.3% (12)	91.7% (22)
Black, Not Hispanic	9% (1)	7.7% (1)	8.3% (2)
Total Number of Graduates	100% (11)	100% (13)	100% (24)

Note: Raw student counts are in parentheses. These counts are unduplicated student headcounts, or first-time Grant recipients. Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

Twenty-four of the 98 individual students graduated in the 2016-17 academic year. The other 74 students received funding but did not graduate. The other 74 students may either be participating in the grant program, enrolled in postsecondary education but no longer receiving the grant, or no longer enrolled in postsecondary education. The following sections examine how the grant assisted student progression and retention.

Progression: Credit Hour Completion

Student progression is a measure of those students currently in college and their ability to accumulate credit hours toward completion of an associate degree.

Exhibit 11: Community College Reconnect Grant, Credit Hours Enrolled and Credit Hours Completed, 2016-17 Academic Year

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Academic Year Totals
Total Credit Hours Enrolled	672	597	1,269
Total Credit Hours Completed	610	547	1,157
Credit Hour Completion Rate	90.8%	91.6%	91.2%
Avg. Number of Credit Hours Taken	9.88	9.48	9.68
Avg. Cost Per Credit Hour	\$145.98	\$151.51	\$148.58

Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

A total of 1,269 credit hours were taken by grant recipients in the 2016-17 academic year, 672 in fall 2016 semester and 597 in spring 2017 semester. Of the 1,269 total credit hours taken, 1,157 credit hours were completed, resulting in a credit hour completion rate of 91.2 percent by grant recipients. The credit hour completion rate by semester increased from 90.8 percent in fall 2016 to 91.6 percent in spring 2017 while the average number of credit hours taken decreased from 9.88 to 9.48.

The differences between total credit hours when students enrolled and the total credit hours completed are likely caused by two phenomena: Students withdrawing and earning zero credit hours at the end of the semester, or students withdrawing from a given number of credit hours and completing the semester with fewer credits compared to the amount they initially enrolled in.

Exhibit 12: Community College Reconnect Grant, Students Dropping Credit Hours or Withdrawing

	Academic Year Totals
Total Number of Students	98
Total Number of Students Who Completed the Term but with Less Credits than they Enrolled	8
Total Number of Students Who Withdrew, Ending the Term with Zero Credits	7
Percentage of First-Time Grant Recipients Dropping Credit Hours or Withdrawing	15.31%

Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

The total number of students that completed the 2016-17 academic year with fewer credits than they enrolled in at the beginning of each semester is eight. The total number of students who dropped-out or withdrew and ended either semester with zero credit hours was seven. The resulting 15 students, or roughly 15 percent of the total 98 grant recipients in the 2016-17 academic year, were either set back on their path toward graduation by dropping credits throughout the semester or completely withdrawing from college and ending the semester with zero credits.

Retention: Retaining Students between Semesters

Student retention is a measure of student turnover. Student retention measures how many students were retained from previous semesters or academic years that did not earn their associate’s degree. Thus, student retention is a lag measure because it cannot account for retention for the first year the grant was implemented.

Ideally, there should be high rates of students returning for the spring 2017 semester if they did not graduate in fall 2016.

Exhibit 13: Community College Reconnect Grant, Fall 2016 to Spring 2017 Retention

	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Academic Year Total
Grants Awarded	68	63	131
Total Number of First-Time Grant Recipients	68	30	98
Total Number of Graduates	11	13	24
Students Returning from Fall 2016	n/a	33	33
Students Returning from Fall 2016 who Graduated in Spring 2017	n/a	6	6
First-Time Grant Recipients in Spring 2017	n/a	30	30
First-Time Grant Recipients in Spring 2017 who Graduated in Spring 2017	n/a	7	7

Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation.

Out of the 63 student recipients of the grant in the spring 2017 semester, just over half (52.3 percent, or 33 total students), were enrolled using the grant in the fall 2016 semester. The other 47.6 percent (or 30 students total) were new enrollees with the grant in spring 2017. Of the returning students from fall 2016 with the grant, 18.2 percent (six total students) earned an associate degree at the end of the spring 2017 semester. Roughly 23.3 percent (seven students total) of the newly enrolled students with the grant in the spring 2017 semester graduated that same semester.

Because the total number of students between the two semesters is small (98 first-time students receiving the grant), it is worth examining factors that may have affected students applying for and receiving the grant.

Factors Affecting the Number of Grant Awardees

The \$1.5 million in grant funding was estimated to cover roughly 800 adult students during the life of the program. Over the 2016-17 academic year, \$188,554 in grant funds were awarded to 98 individual students.⁹ To gain a better understanding of why the number of grant awardees constituted approximately 12 percent of the 800 estimated students, OREA surveyed all 13 community colleges.

Community college administrators answered survey questions regarding the identification of eligible students, marketing and outreach efforts, and implementation of the grant. Several patterns have been identified based on their responses. The two main barriers reported by administrators to identifying and enrolling eligible students were:

- the institutions had old and inaccurate contact information for potentially eligible students, and
- the program eligibility requirements in place for the 2016-17 academic year limited the number of students who qualified for the grant.

⁹As identified by THEEC, roughly 900,000 Tennesseans over the age of 25 have some college credits but not a degree.

Prior to fall 2016, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) provided each community college with a list of potentially eligible students. Some institutions also used their own tracking systems to identify potentially eligible students. Many institutions cited inaccurate contact information (e.g., old or disconnected phone numbers, incorrect mailing addresses) and incorrect transcript information. As a result, the institutions reported difficulty in contacting potential grant recipients, and that many of the students successfully reached were already enrolled in another institution or had already earned degrees, thus rendering them ineligible.

Aside from direct outreach to former students (e.g., phone calls, emails, targeted mailers), several community colleges marketed the grant by hosting recruitment events, purchasing newspaper, radio, and online advertisements, and promoting the grant via social media outlets (e.g., Facebook and Twitter).

After community colleges identified and contacted potentially eligible students, they found that few students could meet all the grant’s eligibility criteria. Additionally, nine community colleges cited the following two requirements as barriers that prevented students from qualifying for the Grant:

- the requirement that grant recipients enroll in at least nine credit hours per semester, and
- the requirement that grant recipients must have already earned at least 30 credit hours.

Other Adult Scholarships at Institutions

OREA found that at least four community colleges¹⁰ offer a similar scholarship for adult students. These scholarship programs have varied eligibility criteria and award amounts, but all four of the scholarships require enrollment in six credit hours each semester, as opposed to the nine hours per semester in place for the grant during the 2016-17 academic year, and three of the four programs do not require any previously earned credit hours (at least 30 previously earned credit hours were required for grant participants in the 2016-17 academic year). The institution-based scholarship programs are marketed to eligible students in a similar manner as the grant, and are provided through institutional or foundation funding.

Overall, there were more students enrolled in the institution-based scholarships than the grant in the 2016-17 academic year. Exhibit 14 shows the enrollment of students in the grant compared to the institution’s other adult scholarship program. In some cases, a student may receive both the grant and the institution’s adult scholarship.

Exhibit 14: Other Adult Scholarship Enrollment Compared to Community College Reconnect Grant Enrollment, 2016-17 Academic Year

	Students using another adult scholarship at the institution		Students using the Community College Reconnect Grant	
	Fall 2016	Spring 2017	Fall 2016	Spring 2017
Cleveland State Community College	36	33	1	1
Nashville State Community College	111	140	3	3
Pellissippi State Community College	15	25	22	24
Walters State Community College	19	31	15	11

Source: OREA survey, August 2017.

¹⁰ Cleveland State Community College (Adult Promise), Nashville State Community College (NSCC Adult Scholarship), Pellissippi State Community College (Pellissippi Adult Learners Scholarship), and Walters State Community College (Senators Adult Learner Completion Award).

Transitioning from Community College Reconnect Grant to Tennessee Reconnect Grant

The Community College Reconnect Grant served as the pilot program for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, established in 2017 by Public Chapter 448. Tennessee Reconnect features broader eligibility criteria and will fully replace Community College Reconnect in the fall 2018 semester. Starting in the fall 2017 semester, community colleges with remaining funds may enroll students into the Community College Reconnect Grant using the expanded eligibility criteria. The most notable changes to the program eligibility requirements beginning in the 2017-18 academic year are:

- students will no longer be required to have any previously earned credit hours (at least 30 hours were required for the 2016-17 academic year),
- the number of required credit hours per semester has been reduced from nine to six,
- and students will no longer be required to have been out of college for 12 months prior to applying for the scholarship.

At the end of the 2017-18 academic year, any unspent funds allocated for the Community College Reconnect Grant will revert to the lottery for education account.

Appendix A: Changes to the Community College Reconnect Grant Eligibility Requirements, and Eligibility Requirements for Tennessee Reconnect, 2016-17 through 2018-19 academic years

	Community College Reconnect Grant: 2016-17 academic year	Community College Reconnect Grant: 2017-18 academic year	Tennessee Reconnect: effective Fall 2018
Public Chapter	Established by PC 363 (2015), amended by PC 1081 (2016)	Amended by PC 448 (2017)	Established by PC 448 (2017)
Target Population	Adult students over 25	Adult students over 25	Adult students over 25
Funding Mechanism	One-time, nonrecurring \$1.5 million from the lottery for education account	Leftover funds from the allocated \$1.5 million; any funds remaining at the end of 2017-18 revert to the lottery for education account	
Eligible Institutions	Community Colleges	Community Colleges	Community colleges, four-year institutions offering an eligible program of study ¹¹
Eligible Program of Study	Associate degree	Associate degree	Associate degree or certificate
Minimum Amount of Time out of College Prior to Receiving the Grant	12 months	None	None
Required Number of Previously- Accumulated Credit Hours to Receive the Grant	30	0	0
Minimum Number of Credit Hours per Semester	9	6	6
Mentorship Program Requirement	No	No	Yes
Terminating Events	The student has earned an associate degree; the student has attempted the total number of semester hours necessary for completion of the degree; or two years have passed since the initial date of enrollment in the grant, exclusive of an approved leave of absence.	Same as 2016-17 academic year	The student has attained a degree or certificate in an eligible program of study; the student has attempted the total number of semester hours necessary for completion of an eligible program of study, inclusive of any postsecondary hours transferred to the eligible program of study which were earned prior to enrollment in Tennessee reconnect grant; five years have passed since the date of initial enrollment as a Tennessee reconnect grant student, exclusive of any approved leaves of absence.

¹¹ As written, students may use the Tennessee Reconnect Grant to attend a TCAT, though there is a specific scholarship for TCATs, the Wilder-Naifeh Reconnect Grant.

Total Number of Awards	131	TBD	TBD
First-time Grant Recipients	98	TBD	TBD
Total Expenditures	\$188,554	TBD (no more than \$1.5 million total for the 2016-17 and 2017-18 academic years)	TBD
OREA Evaluation Required	Yes, by December 31, 2017	No	Yes, by December 31, 2021 and every four years thereafter



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