



S N A P S H O T

Tennessee Community College Reconnect Grant Program: Conclusions and Policy Considerations

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The Tennessee General Assembly created the Community College Reconnect Grant program to increase the number of adults with an associate degree, and help meet the Drive to 55 goal of having 55 percent of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential by the year 2025. The program gives nontraditional college students – adults over the age of 25 – 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 degree. 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 two-year program (2016-17 and 2017-18).

State law requires the Comptroller’s Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) to report on the program’s effectiveness in encouraging recipients to complete their associate degree. OREA evaluated the program’s first year (2016-17), as required by state law; an evaluation of the program’s second, and final, year (2017-18) is not a statutory requirement.

Conclusions and a policy consideration are as follows:

KEY POINTS

The Community College Reconnect Grant was awarded to 98 individual adult students in the 2016-17 academic year: 68 in the fall 2016 semester and 30 in the spring 2017 semester. Of the 98 grant recipients in the 2016-17 academic year, 24 students earned an associate degree, or approximately 25 percent of recipients. The other 75 percent of recipients are either still participating in the program for the 2017-18 school year, remain enrolled in postsecondary education but are no longer enrolled in the program, or are no longer enrolled in postsecondary education.

Of the allocated \$1.5 million program funding, 12.57 percent was spent in the 2016-17 academic year, a total expenditure of \$188,554. The \$188,554 expenditure leaves roughly \$1.3 million leftover for use in the 2017-18 school year. At the end of the 2017-18 school year, any unspent funds will revert to the lottery for education account.

Dyersburg State, Pellissippi State, and Walters State accounted for over 70 percent of all students receiving the grant, and over 70 percent of the total grant expenditures.

Community college administrators indicated the grant program’s eligibility criteria made

it difficult to find students who could qualify. Eligibility criteria in 2016-17 were more restrictive than the criteria adopted for 2017-18. As a result, administrators cited the eligibility criteria as a barrier in 2016-17 for enrolling students. As of 2017-18, the eligibility requirements adopted are less restrictive, creating the possibility for more grant recipients in 2017-18 compared to 2016-17. Administrators also mentioned old and inaccurate contact information as a roadblock for identifying potentially eligible students.

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 from within their own internal tracking systems, as well as from information provided to them by THEC/TSAC.

Note: The Community College Reconnect Grant served as the pilot program for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, which will fully replace the pilot program in fall 2018.