

March 2021

The Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) has released a new update in its ongoing evaluation of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship Program, which was created by the General Assembly in 2014 as part of the Drive to 55 initiative. The main goals of the program are increasing access to college for recent high school graduates and increasing the number of students who earn postsecondary credentials (e.g., associate degrees, technical diplomas, and industry certifications).

### Key Points

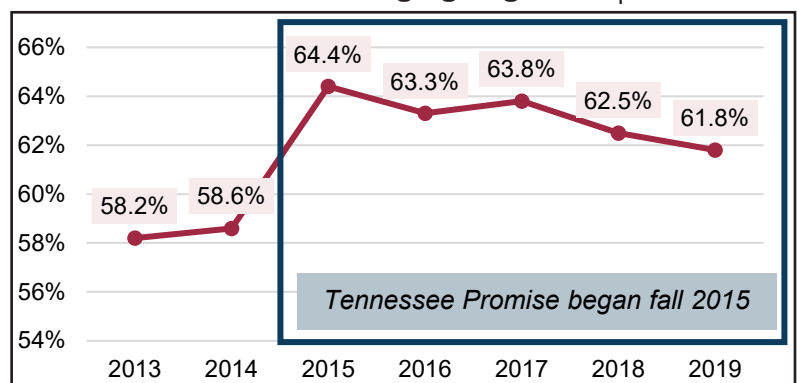
#### Tennessee Promise has increased college access, retention, and completion.

Analysis by OREA showed that a higher percentage of recent high school graduates attended college after the implementation of Tennessee Promise. The state's college-going rate, which measures the percent of high school graduates who attend college, increased from 58.6 percent to 64.4 percent in the first year of the program.

Following the implementation of Tennessee Promise in fall 2015, Tennessee's community colleges (where most Promise students enroll) experienced increased enrollment and retention. In the first year of the program, community colleges had a 38 percent increase in the number of students, whether enrolled in Promise or not, who returned for a second year.

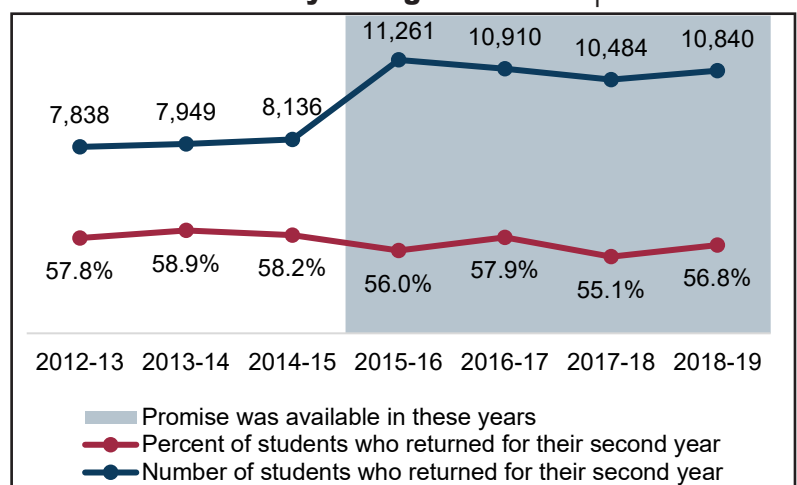
Additionally, once enrolled in college, Tennessee Promise students accumulated more credits, stayed enrolled longer, and earned credentials at higher rates than their peers. OREA completed an analysis of credential attainment that accounted for several factors, including ACT score, family income, first-generation college student status, and inclusion in an underrepresented minority group. Based on this analysis, Promise students at community colleges and Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs) were twice as likely to earn a credential when compared to other recent high school graduates.

**Exhibit 1: Tennessee college-going rates | 2013-2019**



Source: OREA analysis of data from the THEC Fact Books.

**Exhibit 2: Community college retention | 2012-2018**



Note: This exhibit shows all students who began college for the first time as a full-time student – whether enrolled in Promise or not – and returned for a second consecutive year between 2012-13 and 2018-19.

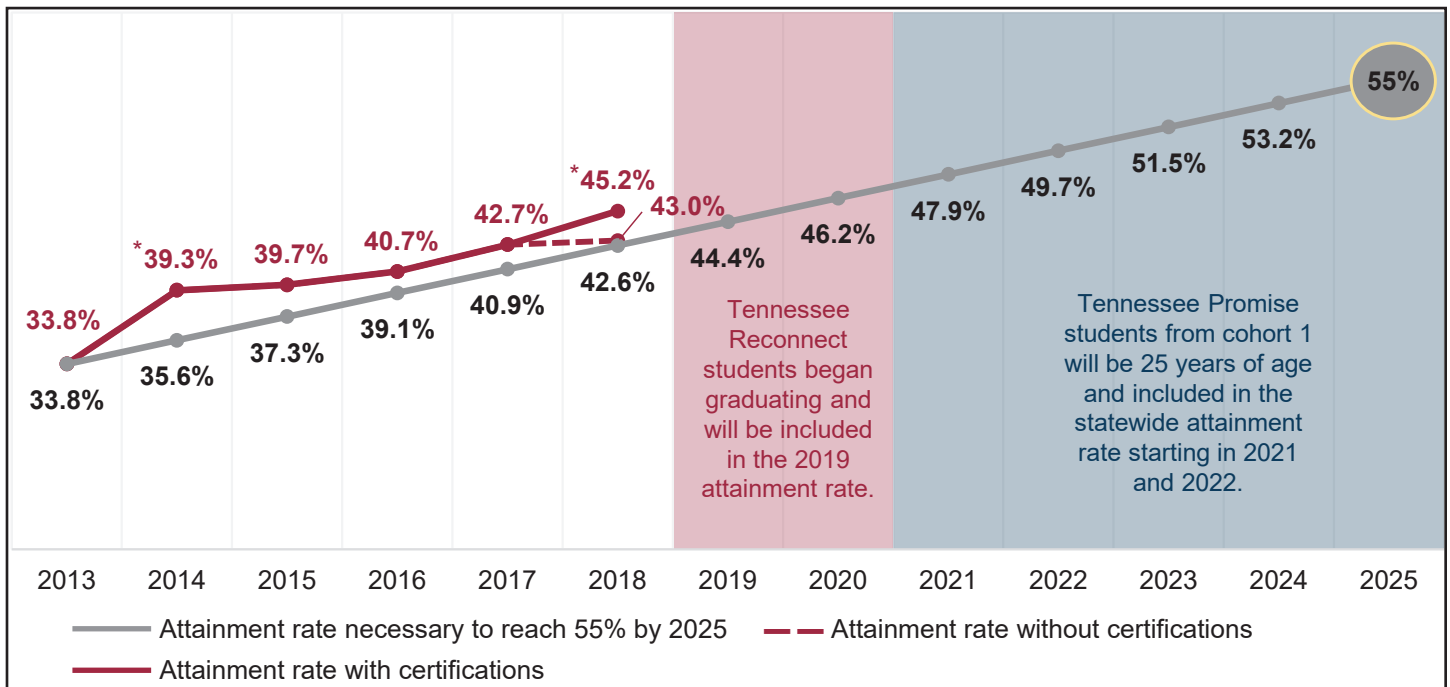
Source: OREA analysis of data from the THEC Fact Books.

## 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.

Progress toward the Drive to 55 goal is measured using the statewide attainment rate. This rate measures the percent of Tennesseans ages 25-65 who have a postsecondary credential (e.g., certificate, associate degree, bachelor’s degree, etc.). OREA’s analysis shows that the inclusion of the first Promise cohort will likely increase the statewide attainment rate, while subsequent cohorts are less likely to increase the rate further.

OREA identified several student subgroups and counties with low rates of college attendance before the implementation of Promise. Increasing Tennessee’s postsecondary attainment rate will likely not be possible without increasing participation among students from these groups.

**Exhibit 3: Percentage of Tennesseans (ages 25-65) with a postsecondary credential (red line) and the projected rate necessary for the state to stay on track to meet the Drive to 55 goal (gray line)**



Notes: (1) \* Increases were due in part to changes made to the attainment rate calculation in 2014 and 2018, when technical certificates (2014) and industry-recognized certifications (2018) were included. (2) Reconnect students will be included in the attainment rate earlier than Promise students because Reconnect students are often already over the age of 25 and are counted in the same year that they earn a credential.

Source: OREA analysis of data from the Lumina Foundation’s 2019 report *A Stronger Nation: Learning beyond high school builds American talent*.

The Comptroller’s Office included several policy options for the General Assembly and other stakeholders in its first evaluation, published July 2020. 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, visit the Comptroller’s OREA website at [tncot.cc/orea](http://tncot.cc/orea).