



OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY

**TENNESSEE RECONNECT GRANT EVALUATION:  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



**FEBRUARY 2022**



**LAUREN SPIRES**  
*Principal Legislative  
Research Analyst*

**ANNA JOHNSON**  
*Legislative Research Analyst*

**JAYMI THIBAUT**  
*Legislative Research Analyst*




**JASON E. MUMPOWER**  
*Comptroller of the Treasury*

# Tennessee Reconnect Grant program overview

In 2017, the General Assembly passed the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, giving adults an opportunity to earn an associate degree or technical certificate free of tuition and mandatory fees. Since fall 2018, Tennessee residents have been enrolling in community colleges and eligible four-year universities using the grant. To be eligible for Tennessee Reconnect, an individual must not have previously earned an associate or bachelor’s degree and must qualify as an independent student on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), fill out a Reconnect application, participate in a success plan, and maintain a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA and continuous part-time enrollment (i.e., at least 6 credit hours). Reconnect students have the option to work with a Navigator, which is a regionally based mentor who assists adult learners with enrolling in college, answers questions, and provides information about on- and off-campus resources.

**The average Reconnect student is a 32-year-old female who plans to work full-time and cares for dependents.**



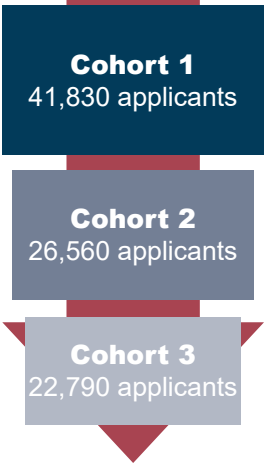
TCA 49-4-944 requires the Comptroller’s Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) to review, study, and determine the effectiveness of the program. This executive summary includes the key conclusions and policy options from OREA’s full report.

## Key conclusions

- 1. The number of Tennesseans applying for the Reconnect Grant, participating in the program, and remaining enrolled and on track to graduate has decreased since the program began in 2018.**

***The number of Tennesseans applying to participate in Reconnect has declined by 46 percent over the past three years***

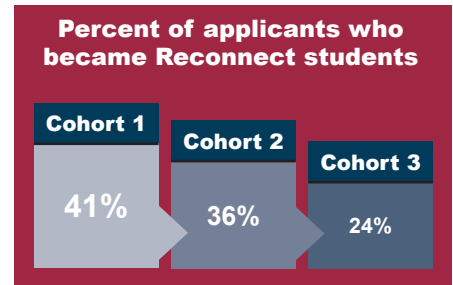
As of fall 2020, 4.9 percent of eligible Tennesseans have applied for the Reconnect Grant. The first Reconnect cohort (fall 2018 to summer 2019) included 41,830 applicants, while the second cohort (fall 2019 to summer 2020) included 26,560 applicants. As of fall 2020, the third cohort included 22,790 applicants. This represents a 46 percent decrease from 2018 to 2020. The first cohort was larger (at least in part) because it captured most of the eligible students who were already enrolled at a community college. Additionally, the application rate for cohort 3 (which began fall 2020) was likely impacted by COVID-19.



The reduction in cohort size may also be due to a decline in statewide marketing. The state funded a one-time marketing campaign beginning in 2018 before the Reconnect program began. According to an interview with OREA, the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) does not allocate money in its budget for state-level marketing specifically focused on Reconnect. In November 2020, OREA surveyed community college administrators and asked what they would change to enroll more students into the Reconnect program. The most common response was an increase in efforts to promote the program. Community colleges have their own marketing campaigns, but resources vary.

**Since fall 2018, almost two-thirds of individuals who filled out a Reconnect application did not complete other initial requirements and thus did not become part of the program. The proportion of applicants who became Reconnect students declined over the first three years of the program. While some applicants purposely opt out of the Reconnect program, others do not complete the program's application requirements.**

Of the 91,180 people who filled out a Reconnect application in the first three years of the program (through fall 2020), 58,944 (65 percent) did not complete all of the requirements to become Reconnect students. Each year, a smaller proportion of applicants become Reconnect students. In the first application cycle for cohort 1 (fall 2018 to summer 2019), 41 percent of applicants enrolled. In cohort 2 (fall 2019 to summer 2020), 36 percent of applicants enrolled in the program. In fall 2020, 24 percent of applicants enrolled in the program. This decline may be at least partially due to COVID-19.




Some applicants still enroll in college despite not becoming a Reconnect student. Of all applicants who did not become Reconnect students from fall 2018 to fall 2020, 15 percent still enrolled in college, but not as part of the Reconnect program. This may be partly because some applicants purposely opt out of Reconnect. Students who qualify for enough gift aid to cover their tuition and fees may fill out a declination form to delay the start of their five-year Reconnect clock.<sup>1</sup> Other applicants do not complete the program's application requirements. To become a Reconnect student, an applicant must file the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), fill out a Reconnect application as well as a college application, and obtain transcripts from previously attended colleges. Those who choose to work with a Navigator (a regional staff member who helps adults explore college options, answers questions about financial aid and enrollment, and provides additional supports to students) must also complete an intake form. Based on OREA's 2020 survey of community college administrators, the top three requirements that sometimes or often prevent a Reconnect applicant from enrolling in the program are obtaining prior college transcripts, completing the FAFSA, and obtaining proof of high school graduation or equivalency (i.e., GED or HiSET exam).

**2. One in four students lost Reconnect Grant eligibility because they did not maintain one or more program requirements. The majority of these students lost the grant because they did not meet the minimum required number of credit hours.**

To maintain grant eligibility while enrolled in college, Reconnect students are required to refile the FAFSA and complete the Reconnect application annually, maintain a minimum 2.0 Reconnect GPA (which includes only grades from courses taken as part of the Reconnect program) and remain enrolled at least part-time in continuous semesters (i.e., enroll in at least 6 credit hours in the fall and spring semesters; summer is optional). Reconnect students may remain in the program until they complete a credential or until five years have passed, so long as they continue to meet the eligibility criteria.

**1 in 4 students lost Reconnect eligibility because they did not maintain one or more program requirements.**

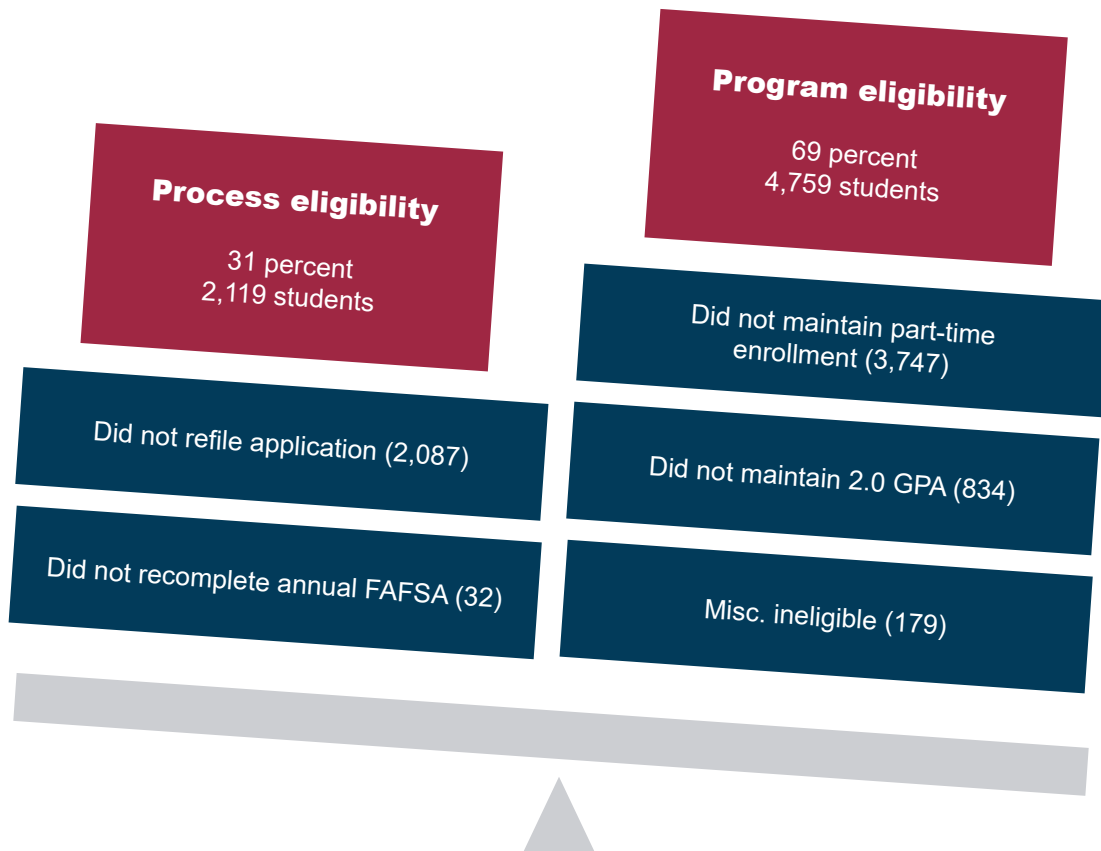


Most students lost the grant because they did not maintain part-time enrollment. Community college administrators suggest this is **due to work and family responsibilities.**

<sup>1</sup> Beginning in fall 2022, the declination process will be automated for students who qualify for enough gift aid to cover their tuition and fees.

From fall 2018 to summer 2020, 26 percent of Reconnect students (6,878 students) did not maintain the program requirements and lost eligibility. Most of these students (54 percent, 3,747 students) lost the grant because they did not maintain enrollment in the minimum required 6 credit hours, while 30 percent of students lost the grant because they failed to refile the annual application. Fewer students lost grant eligibility because they did not maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA (834 students, 12 percent) or refile the FAFSA (32 students, 0.5 percent).

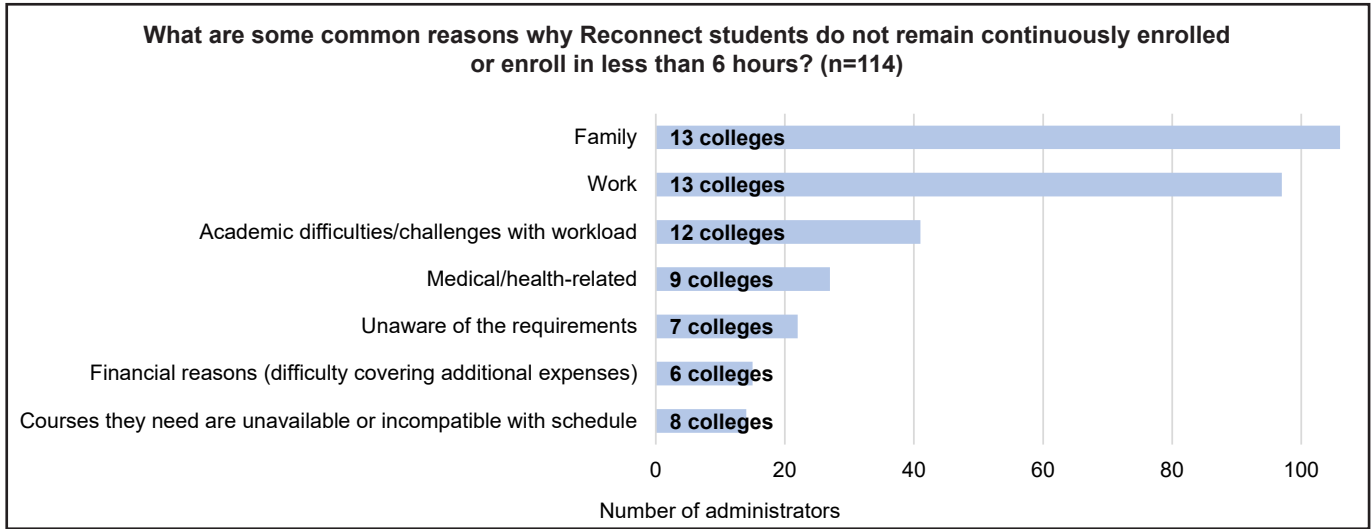
**Exhibit 1: Most Reconnect students lost grant eligibility because they did not remain enrolled in the minimum required 6 credit hours or did not refile the annual application**



Notes: (1) When added together, the number of students categorized by program eligibility reasons overstates the total number of students who lost program eligibility since some students were double-coded. (2) The category “miscellaneous ineligible” represents students who are ineligible for reasons not covered by other indicators, according to THEC. (3) Adding percentages together will not equal 100 due to rounding.  
 Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) data provided by community colleges.

When surveyed about the reasons Reconnect students are unable to remain continuously enrolled part-time, the top two responses from community college administrators related to family and work responsibilities. (Each of these were indicated by about 100 respondents representing all 13 community colleges.) See Exhibit 2.

**Exhibit 2: Work and family responsibilities impact Reconnect students' ability to remain enrolled part-time, according to community college administrators**



Note: Open comment box responses were analyzed. Some respondents listed multiple reasons, and others listed reasons that did not fall into a prominent category; therefore, adding up the number of respondents per response category will equal a different number than the total n count.  
 Source: OREA survey of community college administrators, November 2020.

OREA also asked community college administrators why some Reconnect students miss the requirement to refile the annual application, which was the second most common reason Reconnect students lost grant eligibility. Most administrators (76 percent of respondents representing all 13 community colleges) said that many Reconnect students are unaware of the requirement, explaining that students do not realize they have to fill out the application on a recurring basis.

Reconnect students have about 18 months to fill out the annual application for any academic year in which they participate in the program. For example, the application for the 2021-22 academic year opened in October 2020 and is due by June 2022. The Reconnect application asks a series of questions that generate a personalized Reconnect Success Plan, which connects the student to college and community resources intended to help them overcome barriers to college success. Although it is referred to as an application, currently enrolled Reconnect students are still required to fill out the document annually so that their Reconnect Success Plan is updated, according to THEC.

**New reapplication process effective spring 2022**

THEC has announced that beginning in the spring 2022 semester, the renewal application process for all current Reconnect students will be automated.

Students will be given the option to update their Reconnect Success Plan.

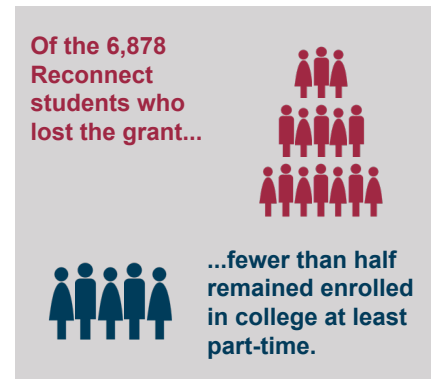
Community colleges can also use the information collected on the annual Reconnect application to support their Reconnect students' specific needs. For example, if the majority of Reconnect students attending an institution indicate they prefer night or weekend classes, the institution could tailor course offerings to those preferences.

However, few community college administrators know they have access to Reconnect application information. According to OREA's 2020 survey, 10 percent of administrators (16 out of 153) at 10 community colleges said they know they have access to the information collected from their students' Reconnect applications. Of the 16 administrators who are aware their institution has access to this information, almost all of them (15

out of 16 administrators) indicated the information is somewhat or very useful. Accessing and reviewing this information could help community colleges identify barriers specific to their Reconnect students and provide targeted resources.

### ***Fewer than half of Reconnect students who lost grant eligibility remained enrolled in college***

Of the 6,878 Reconnect students who lost the grant, fewer than half (2,649 students, 39 percent) remained enrolled at least part-time the semester after they lost eligibility. These students decided to continue pursuing their credential even though they were no longer participating in the Reconnect program.



It is possible that some Reconnect students chose to stop maintaining the program requirements because they were not receiving grant funds. About two-fifths of the Reconnect students who lost grant eligibility due to program requirements (e.g., not maintaining part-time enrollment status or a 2.0 GPA) but remained enrolled at least part-time (308 students, 41 percent) were not receiving Reconnect Grant funds. These students received enough gift aid from other sources to cover their tuition and mandatory fees and were not receiving financial support from the Reconnect program, though they may have benefited from other non-monetary program aspects (e.g., the personalized Reconnect Success Plan, targeted reminders to refile the FAFSA).

However, over half of the students who lost grant eligibility but remained enrolled in college for at least one semester (451 students, 59 percent) were receiving funds from the Reconnect Grant. Upon becoming ineligible for the grant, these 451 students had to find other sources of financial aid or use personal funds to pay for their tuition and mandatory fees.

### ***TBR's "Nudge to Reconnect" pilot program improved Reconnect student retention***

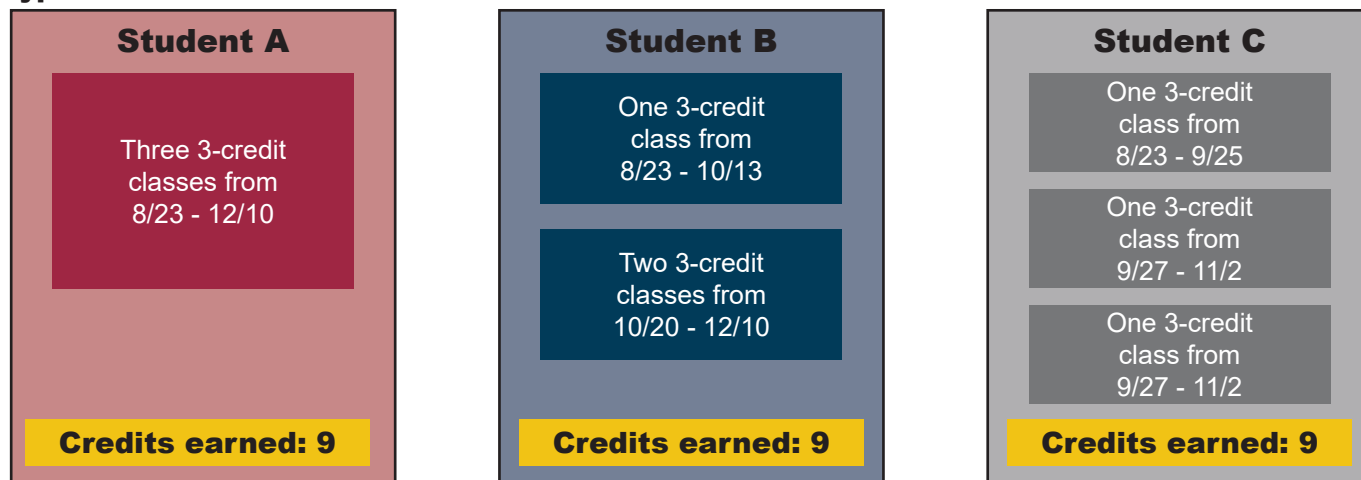
In spring 2020, two community colleges (Nashville State and Pellissippi State) piloted a program, Nudge to Reconnect, to increase retention among Reconnect students. Students at these two colleges received targeted "nudges" that connected them to key resources and reminded them to fulfill Reconnect eligibility requirements. Both colleges experienced increased retention rates of Reconnect students thereafter. At Nashville State, persistence rates for Reconnect students increased from 38 percent in 2019 to 53 percent in 2020, and at Pellissippi State, persistence rates increased from 47 percent in 2019 to 53 percent in 2020. This increase is noteworthy given the impact of the coronavirus pandemic during this time. TBR is piloting other retention initiatives, including using faculty and trained peer mentors to remind Reconnect students to complete program requirements. The outcomes of these initiatives will be published when data is available.

### ***Some community colleges offer mini terms within the semester***

One way that institutions can support Reconnect students is by allowing flexible scheduling and expanding course offerings. According to OREA's survey, 18 community college administrators said that flexible scheduling and expanded course offerings would increase the number of Reconnect students who remain enrolled. Some community colleges offer courses in mini terms, during which courses are offered at an

accelerated pace for a shorter length of time than the typical 15-week semester. With this format, students can take fewer classes at a time while earning the same number of credits in a semester. (See Exhibit 3.) This format also gives students greater schedule flexibility to balance family and work obligations. For example, a student can take courses during the first half of the semester but not enroll in courses during the second half. Additionally, students who struggle academically may benefit from taking one course at a time instead of two or more courses at once.

**Exhibit 3: Sample course load for students enrolled in 14-, seven-, and five-week courses | typical fall semester**

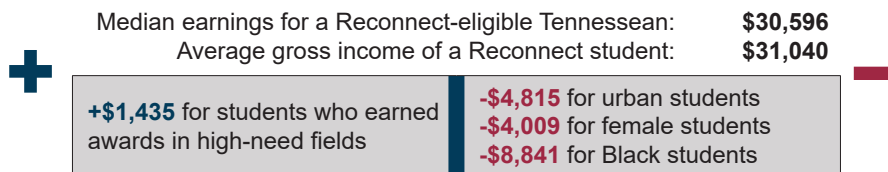


Source: OREA.

**3. The Reconnect Grant ensures students can attend college free of tuition and mandatory fees, but it does not eliminate students’ financial barriers to postsecondary success.**

Although the Reconnect Grant covers tuition and mandatory fees, financial barriers to the postsecondary success of Reconnect students remain. Just over two-thirds (69 percent) of Reconnect students identified finances as a challenge, according to information provided on their Reconnect application.

From fall 2018 through fall 2020, the median adjusted gross income (AGI) of Reconnect students was \$31,040, which is slightly higher than the average of Reconnect-eligible Tennesseans. In 2019, the median earnings for Tennessee’s population 25 years and over with a high school diploma but no associate degree was \$30,596.



The median AGI was \$4,815 lower for urban Reconnect students, \$4,009 lower for female students, and \$8,841 lower for Black students. The median AGI was \$1,435 higher for students who earned awards in high-need fields. The median income of Hispanic students was statistically similar to the median income of non-Hispanic students.

Reconnect students pay, on average, **\$400 per semester** for textbooks, supplies, and special fees that are not covered by the grant.



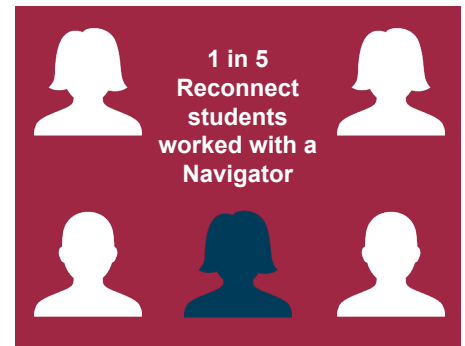
While Reconnect students have a slightly higher median income than the overall Reconnect-eligible population, some lower-income students may be deterred from enrolling due to additional fees that are not covered by the grant. Reconnect students pay, on average, \$400 per semester for textbooks, supplies, and special fees that are not covered by the grant. According to one director of admissions, “Students don’t understand ‘tuition-free.’ All of a sudden their ‘free’ community college experience can cost them \$700-800 if they don’t qualify for Pell.” Some survey respondents noted that students are often surprised to discover that the program does not cover textbooks or fees that are required for

enrollment in certain courses, like online fees, and decide not to enroll because of this.

#### **4. Further research is needed to fully evaluate and compare the effectiveness of Navigators and Success Coaches.**

Navigate Reconnect provides general guidance and assistance to adult learners in Tennessee, including, but not limited to, Reconnect students. Staff called “Reconnect Navigators” (or simply “Navigators”) are based in regions across the state. Navigators help adults explore college options, answer questions about financial aid and the enrollment process, and provide additional supports to adult students once they are in college on through to graduation.

Reconnect students are given the option to work with a Navigator at no cost but are not required to do so under program rules. About 5,600 (21 percent) of Reconnect students from cohorts 1 and 2 worked with a Navigator. THEC has allocated about \$1.2 million annually for Navigator salaries and benefits over a period of eight years.



Due to data limitations, OREA was unable to conduct a robust analysis of Navigator effectiveness, but Navigators appeared to have a positive impact on program enrollment. Applicants who worked with a Navigator were 7 percentage points more likely to enroll in college compared to Reconnect applicants who did not work with a Navigator. Working with a Navigator was also correlated with becoming a Reconnect student. Of all applicants who worked with a Navigator, 48 percent became Reconnect students, compared to 37 percent of applicants who did not work with a Navigator.

Navigator impact on student retention and completion was more difficult to measure, but results indicate that Reconnect students who worked with a Navigator had slightly lower completion rates. Students who worked with a Navigator were 1 percentage point less likely to earn a credential from fall 2018 to summer 2020. However, this relationship may be due to selection bias. Students who worked with a Navigator may have had greater challenges and less previous college experience (as indicated by their fewer credits, on average) than those who did not elect to work with a Navigator.



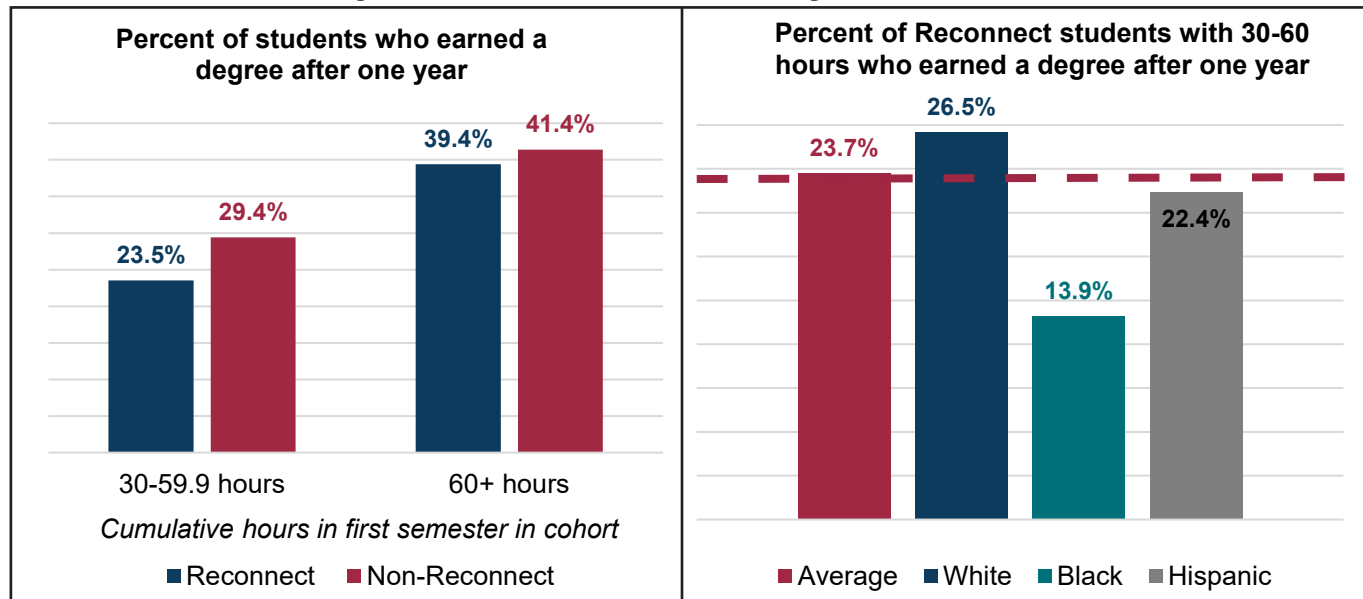
In addition to Navigators, all 13 community colleges have their own designated staff who serve as a “one-stop shop” for Reconnect students. These staff members are assigned different titles at each institution; they are often referred to as Success or Completion Coaches (or advisors). Some colleges assign students a Success Coach after applying or enrolling, and the Success Coach serves as a mentor for enrollment, financial aid, Reconnect program eligibility, and other college-related questions. Based on an analysis of the Tennessee Board of Regents’ salary database, Success Coach salaries account for at least \$1.9 million in funding each year.

OREA was unable to compare Navigators’ impact on students with that of Success Coaches due to data constraints. Future evaluations should incorporate data on both positions in order to compare their efficacy.

**5. Reconnect students who enrolled in fall 2018 earned associate degrees at slightly higher rates than similar independent students after two academic years. However, two specific groups of Reconnect students had lower rates of degree completion after one year: (1) those with 30 or more previously earned credit hours had lower rates of degree completion than similar independent students and (2) Black and Hispanic Reconnect students had lower rates of degree completion than other Reconnect students.**

Reconnect students who enrolled in fall 2018 earned associate degrees at higher rates than similar independent students over two academic years (27 percent compared to 25 percent). When comparing completion rates by cumulative credit hours (i.e., the number of credit hours a student has previously earned that can be applied toward a credential), however, Reconnect students with 30 or more hours of previously earned credit received associate degrees at a lower rate than their peers after one year. See Exhibit 4.

**Exhibit 4: Reconnect students with 30 or more credit hours, Black students, and Hispanic students were less likely to earn credentials after one year**



Note: The chart on the left shows that 23.5 percent of Reconnect students with 30-59.9 credit hours earned a degree after one year. The chart on the right shows a slightly different figure (23.7 percent) because it only includes data from students with racial/ethnic information.  
 Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Black and Hispanic students also earned associate degrees at below-average rates. After one year, 23.7 percent of Reconnect students with racial/ethnic information who had between 30 and 60 hours of previously earned credit hours earned an associate degree. Black students had the lowest associate degree attainment rate, at 9.8 percentage points below the average (13.9 percent), and Hispanic students completed associate degrees 1.3 percentage points below the average (22.4 percent). By comparison, White students had an associate degree attainment rate 2.8 percentage points higher than the average (26.5 percent).

## 6. Reconnect students earned more workforce-ready and high-need credentials than other independent students.

When compared to similar independent students, Reconnect students earned Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degrees at a higher rate. The AAS degree is designed for students planning to enter the job market immediately upon graduation.

As shown in Exhibit 5, there were 4,480 Reconnect students from fall 2018 to summer 2020 who earned a credential at a community college, with 42 percent earning at least one AAS degree. During that same period, there were 3,712 other independent students who earned a credential at a community college and had never previously earned an associate degree or higher. Of those students, 33 percent (9 percentage points less) earned at least one AAS degree. This suggests that Reconnect students graduate with proportionally more workforce-ready degrees than their peers.

**Exhibit 5: Reconnect students earned more workforce-ready degrees**

Degree type	Non-Reconnect independent students	Reconnect students
Earned non-AAS credential	2,479 (66.8%)	2,582 (57.6%)
Earned AAS degree	1,233 (33.2%)	1,898 (42.4%)
	<b>3,712</b>	<b>4,480</b>

Note: Students may have earned multiple degrees during this period, but only the AAS is counted due to its categorization as an entry into the workforce degree.  
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

A student's earned credential may also be designated as high-need or not high-need depending on its application to the state's labor demands. High-need fields include health professions (such as nursing), mathematics and statistics, and computer and information sciences, among others. From fall 2018 to summer 2020, about two out of three credentials earned by all independent students (including Reconnect students) were not in high-need fields. Reconnect students earned a higher proportion of high-need credentials, however (8 percentage points greater). See Exhibit 6.

**Exhibit 6: Reconnect students earned more high-need credentials than their peers**

Credential type	Non-Reconnect independent students	Reconnect students
Not high-need	2,505 (67.8%)	2,684 (60.4%)
High-need	1,189 (32.2%)	1,763 (39.6%)
	<b>3,694</b>	<b>4,447</b>

Note: The total numbers in Exhibit 6 differ from Exhibit 5 by 51 students. These students had multiple CIP codes earned in one term, indicating multiple degrees (certificates and/or associate degrees) earned at a community college during one semester.  
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Degrees in health professions are in especially high demand. Between 2018 and 2028, employment in the health care industry in Tennessee is projected to grow to reach almost half a million jobs. Most students earning degrees in high-need fields earned them in health professions (77 percent). Of the Reconnect students who earned a credential, three out of 10 (31 percent) earned credentials in health professions.

### ***Nursing program costs may prevent low-income Reconnect students from pursuing an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing degree***

On average, the estimated cost for textbooks, fees, and supplies that are required to complete an Associate of Applied Science in Nursing (AASN) degree program at a Tennessee community college is \$4,536.15. Such expenses are not covered by the Reconnect Grant. Within OREA's 2020 survey and during interviews, community college administrators frequently cited the high costs of nursing program textbooks, fees, and supplies. All 13 community colleges offer an AASN degree and most publish an estimate for the cost of textbooks, fees, and supplies on their website. OREA requested estimates from the community colleges that did not have the information posted on their website. These institutions provided a breakdown of nursing program expenses.

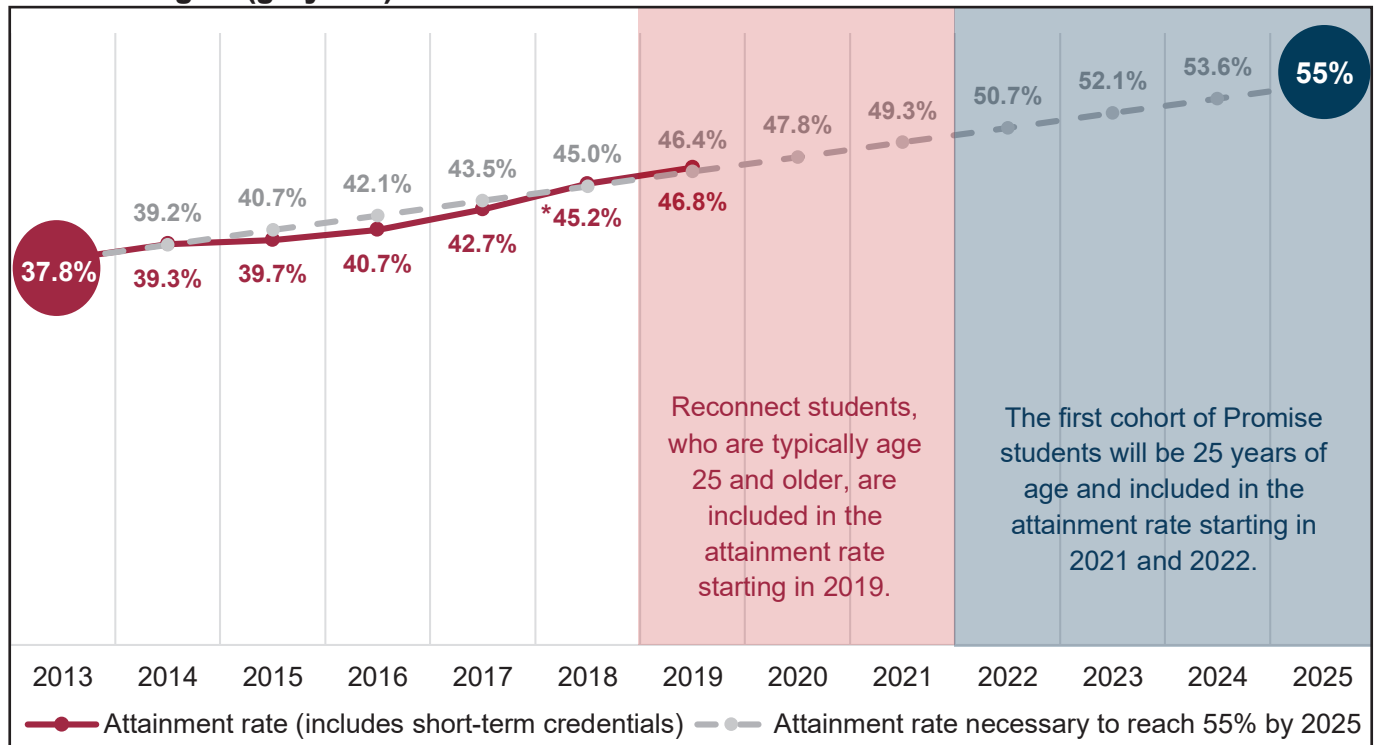
Of the 4,480 Reconnect students who earned a credential by summer 2020, 13 percent (n=578) earned a nursing degree. The median income of those 578 students was \$45,853 at the time of their initial program application, which is 46 percent higher than the overall median income for all Reconnect students. The high median income for nursing students may be due to lower income students not being able to afford the program-specific fees.

## **7. Tennessee is currently on track to meet the Drive to 55 goal, but current efforts may not be enough to keep the state on track to achieve the goal by 2025.**

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant is one program in the state's Drive to 55 initiative to increase the percentage of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential to 55 percent by 2025. Progress toward this goal is measured using the attainment rate. Tennessee's attainment rate measures the percentage of Tennesseans ages 25-64 (also called working-age adults) who have a postsecondary credential (e.g., technical certificate or diploma, associate degree, bachelor's degree, etc.).

Based on the most current data available, Tennessee's attainment rate is 46.8 percent, which is 0.4 percentage points higher than the projected rate necessary to meet the Drive to 55. See Exhibit 7. Since 2013, the most significant increase in Tennessee's attainment rate occurred between 2017 and 2018 (2.5 percentage point increase). This is due in part to a change made to the attainment rate calculation. Tennessee was not on track to meet the Drive to 55 prior to the 2018 calculation change, with annual attainment rates falling below projections from 2015 through 2017.

**Exhibit 7: The percentage of Tennesseans (ages 25-64) with a postsecondary credential (red line) is slightly above the projected rate necessary for the state to stay on track to meet the Drive to 55 goal (gray line)**



Notes: (1) \*The increase in 2018 was due in part to a change made to the attainment rate calculation. In that year, the Lumina Foundation began including industry-recognized certifications. (2) Reconnect students will be included in the attainment rate earlier than Promise students because Reconnect students are often already over the age of 24 and are counted in the same year that they earn a credential. Some students complete a postsecondary credential shortly after enrolling in the Reconnect program. These students already have most of the necessary credits to earn a credential and use Reconnect to complete the remaining courses they need to finish their program of study.

Sources: OREA analysis of data from the Tennessee Higher Education Master Plan 2015-2025 and the Lumina Foundation.

The second highest increase (an increase of 1.6 percentage points) occurred between 2018 and 2019. This was the first year Reconnect students were included in the attainment rate, as shown in the red box in Exhibit 7. By contrast, students who participate in Tennessee Promise will not be reflected in the attainment rate until 2021, as shown in the blue box in Exhibit 7.

The attainment rate will likely continue to increase as new cohorts of Reconnect and Promise students earn credentials. However, trends in program participation and college enrollment indicate that current efforts may not be enough to maintain the projected rate necessary to achieve the Drive to 55. The number of adults applying for the Reconnect Grant, participating in the program, and remaining enrolled and on track to graduate has decreased since the program began in 2018. Additionally, Tennessee’s college-going rate (i.e., the number of high school graduates who enroll in college in the fall following their graduation from high school the previous spring) increased immediately following the implementation of Tennessee Promise in 2015 but has decreased annually since 2017. Future increases to the state’s attainment rate will be impacted by these trends.

## Policy options

The following policy options concern increasing the number of individuals who:

- earn credentials,
- remain enrolled,
- enroll in the program, and
- apply to the program.

Some policy options are cost-neutral while others may increase expenditures. The General Assembly and education officials will have to weigh the cost of any program changes with the potential benefits, such as enhanced workforce development.

Tennessee Reconnect Grants are funded by net lottery proceeds alongside other Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarships (TELS) and Tennessee Promise Scholarships. Making changes that result in more students entering or remaining in the Reconnect program may result in greater expenditures of net lottery proceeds. The extent to which net lottery proceeds are impacted will depend on the program component and the affected students. Not all Reconnect students receive the same amount of Reconnect Grant funds. Low-income students are more likely to qualify for need-based gift aid (e.g., Pell, Tennessee Student Assistance Award or TSAA) and may receive little or no funds from the Reconnect Grant. As a result, the associated cost of some policy options would be lower if the option were targeted for specific students (e.g., those from low-income households).

Excess lottery revenue or general funds appropriated by the General Assembly could support some policy options. In 2020-21, \$74 million in unspent lottery revenue remained after TELS and Tennessee Promise Scholarships were paid. That \$74 million was transferred to the Tennessee Promise Endowment Fund. Increased expenditures for Reconnect Grants would mean fewer remaining unspent lottery revenues would be available to transfer to the Tennessee Promise Endowment, which would extend the timeline for the endowment to become self-sustaining.

## Options to increase the number of Reconnect students who earn credentials

The following policy options are focused on increasing the number of Reconnect students who complete degrees. Directing efforts to students who are near degree completion and helping students more efficiently progress through college would provide the greatest return on investment: that is, supporting the largest increase in credential attainment with the smallest increase in grant expenditures.

- 1. Community colleges could provide targeted supports for students who have earned 30 or more credit hours.**
- 2. THEC should continue efforts and work with TBR to promote the use of Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs).**

## Options to increase the number of Reconnect students who remain enrolled

The following policy options are focused on increasing the number of Reconnect students who remain enrolled and on track to graduate. Reconnect students who enrolled in fall 2018 earned associate degrees at higher rates (27 percent) than similar independent students (25 percent) by summer 2020. Because Reconnect students are more likely to earn credentials than their peers, keeping more students enrolled in the Reconnect program would likely result in increased credential attainment. Currently enrolled Reconnect students have already accumulated college credit with state financial assistance, so focusing efforts on these students would improve the state's return on its investment.

- 1. Community colleges should employ Reconnect success plan information.**
- 2. The Tennessee General Assembly and THEC could consider adjusting the Reconnect program eligibility requirements.**
- 3. Community colleges should follow the best practices of other institutions.**
- 4. TBR should continue to pilot initiatives, such as the Nudge to Reconnect program.**
- 5. THEC should evaluate the effectiveness of Reconnect Navigators.**

THEC has announced that they will be partnering with the Center for Business and Economic Research at the University of Tennessee to conduct a robust analysis of the Navigator program.

## Options to increase the number of applicants who enroll

The following policy options focus on ways to increase the number of Reconnect applicants who enroll in the program. Because Reconnect students are more likely to earn credentials than their peers, enrolling more students in the Reconnect program would likely result in increased credential attainment. However, increasing the number of Reconnect students would likely increase grant expenditures, even though some Reconnect students do not receive grant funds if their tuition and mandatory fees are covered by other sources of gift aid.

- 1. THEC and TBR should work together to determine the most common reasons some Reconnect applicants do not enroll in the program.**
- 2. The General Assembly could expand the Reconnect Grant to cover the cost of textbooks and/or online fees. Eligibility could be limited to low-income students or those enrolled in high-demand programs or could be made available to all Reconnect students.**
- 3. All 13 community colleges should provide more transparent information about program costs and available sources of financial aid.**

## Options to increase the number of applicants

The following policy options focus on ways to increase the number of eligible Tennesseans who apply for the Reconnect Grant. As of fall 2020, 4.9 percent of eligible Tennesseans have applied to participate in the program and application cohorts are getting smaller. Increasing the number of applicants would likely increase the number of Reconnect students, and thus Reconnect Grant expenditures.

- 1. THEC or TBR could direct more resources toward promoting the Reconnect program and recruiting applicants.*
- 2. THEC and TBR should work together to simplify the Reconnect application process.*

See OREA's full evaluation of the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, available at [tncot.cc/orea](https://tncot.cc/orea), for more details about the program, conclusions, and policy options.



**Office of Research and Education Accountability**

**Russell Moore** | *Director*  
425 Fifth Avenue North  
Nashville, Tennessee 37243  
**615.401.7866**  
[www.comptroller.tn.gov/OREA/](http://www.comptroller.tn.gov/OREA/)