TENNESSEE COMPTROLLER OF THE TREASURY

OFFICE OF RESEARCH AND EDUCATION ACCOUNTABILITY

TENNESSEE RECONNECT GRANT EVALUATION

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Introduction

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.[1] 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),[2] 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).[3] 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.

State law requires the Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) to review, study, and determine the effectiveness of the program.[4] This report includes an analysis of Reconnect students who applied for and enrolled in the program from fall 2018 through fall 2020.

Tennessee Reconnect supports the Drive to 55

Tennessee Reconnect is part of the larger statewide Drive to 55 initiative that aims to equip 55 percent of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential by 2025. The initiative was first introduced in 2013 by former Governor Bill Haslam as a "strategic initiative to have the best trained workforce in America."[5]

During his 2014 state of the state address, the governor noted that 55 percent of the state's population would need a postsecondary diploma or degree in 2025 to get a job. At that time, 32 percent of Tennessee adults had earned a credential past a high school diploma.[6]

> This isn't just about higher education – it's about better jobs for more Tennesseans. It's about building a stronger economy. We don't have a choice if we want to be the number one state in the Southeast for high quality jobs.

The Drive to 55 includes a suite of programs and initiatives focused on workforce readiness. Key areas of attention are college readiness, access, and completion; helping adults complete a credential; and connecting education to workforce demands.

In 2017, former Governor Haslam proposed the Tennessee Reconnect Grant program as part of the Drive to 55 initiative.[7] Other Drive to 55 programs include Tennessee Promise, which is geared toward recent high school graduates, and TCAT[8] Reconnect, which, similar to Tennessee Reconnect, is available to eligible adult students.

The **Drive to 55** is a statewide effort to equip **55 percent of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential by 2025** to keep up with workforce demands.

"**In the year 2025, 55 percent of Tennesseans will need a certificate or degree beyond high school to get a job.** Today, only 32 percent of Tennesseans qualify. To truly be America at its best, that's not good enough."

Governor Bill Haslam
2014 State of the State Address

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[1] *TCA* 49-4-944.

[2] To qualify as an independent student, an applicant must be at least 24 years old, married, have a child or other dependent(s), serve actively in the military or be a veteran, be orphaned or have lived in foster care, be an emancipated minor, or be an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or self-supporting.

[3] To remain continuously enrolled, a student must remain enrolled in each fall and spring semester.

[4] *TCA* 49-4-944(k) required OREA to study the Tennessee Reconnect Grant in the third year of the program and every four years thereafter.

[5] State of the State Address of Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam, Jan. 28, 2013.

[6] This figure was referenced in the former Gov. Haslam's 2014 State of the State Address. It is estimated that 39.3 percent of Tennesseans between the ages 25 to 64 had a postsecondary credential, including short-term certificates (i.e., technical certificates and diplomas), in 2014, based on the Lumina Foundation's *Stronger Nation* report.

[7] Tennessee Reconnect replaced the Community College Reconnect Grant (CCRG), which began fall 2016. See OREA's December 2017 report, *Tennessee Community College Reconnect Grant Program*, at https://tncot.cc/orea for more information.

[8] TCAT is the abbreviation for Tennessee College of Applied Technology.

Tennessee Reconnect promotes college access and postsecondary credential attainment for adults without a degree

Tennessee Reconnect supports three of the five focus areas for Drive to 55: (1) college access and (2) completion (3) for adults without a degree.

Exhibit i: Tennessee Reconnect supports college access and completion within the Drive to 55
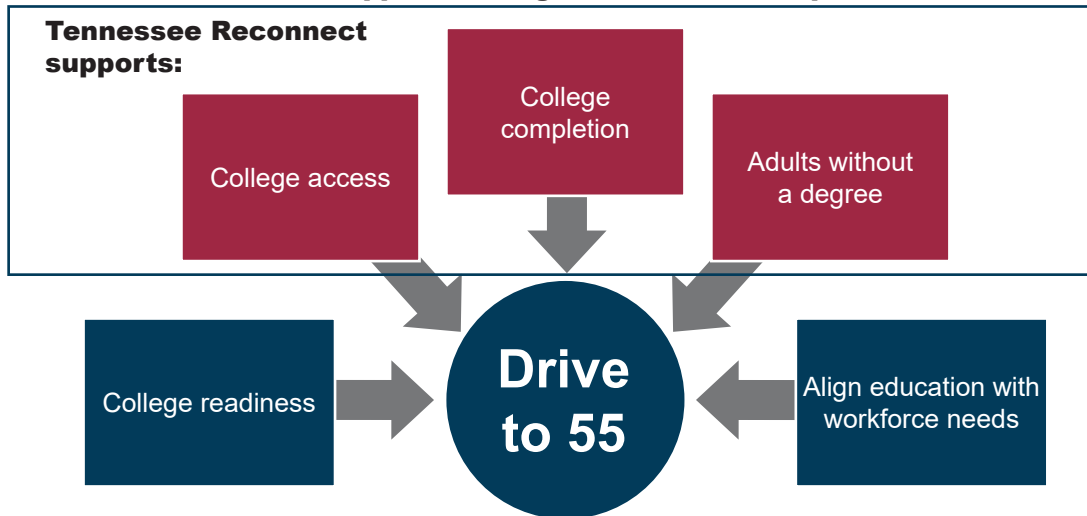
Source: OREA.

In 2018, approximately 2.4 million Tennesseans aged 25 or older (53.2 percent) had a high school diploma but no college degree, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.[9] Under program eligibility criteria, these 2.4 million Tennesseans are eligible for the Reconnect Grant.

Exhibit ii: Approximately 2.4 million Tennesseans are eligible for Tennessee Reconnect
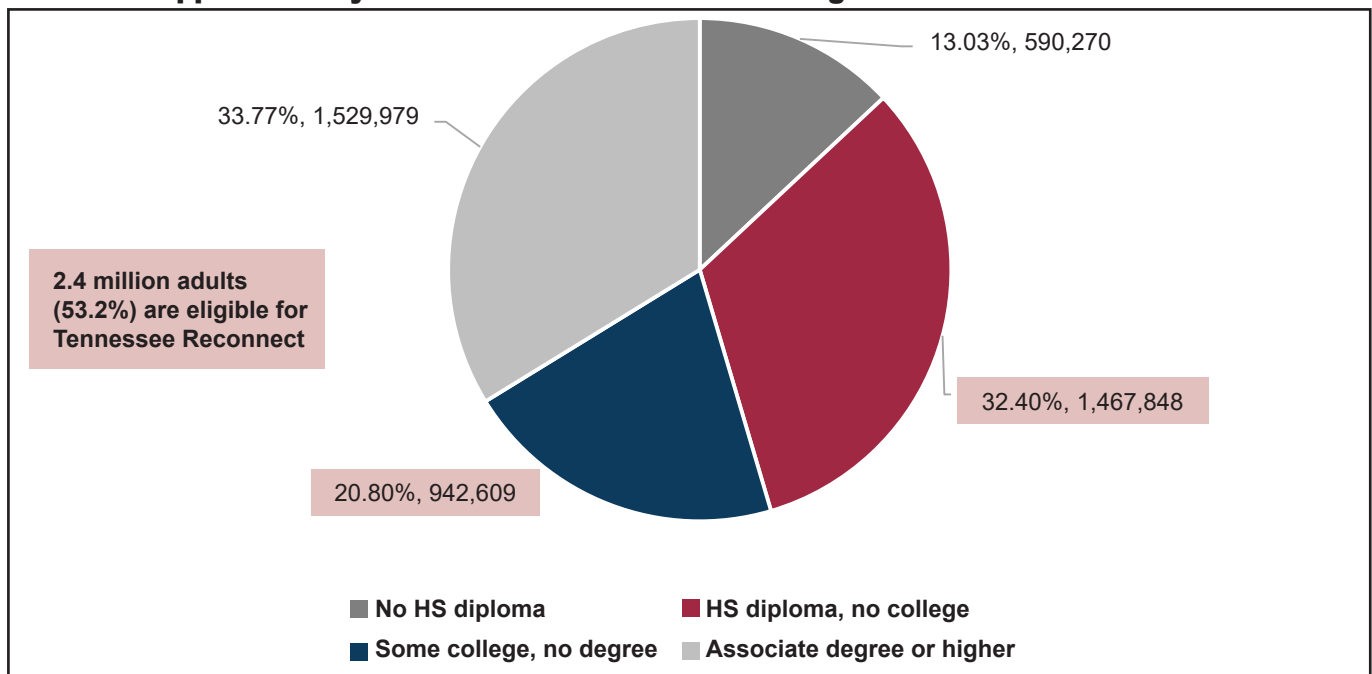
Notes: (1) The data used in this exhibit includes adults who are age 25 or older. Tennessee Reconnect does not have an age-based requirement and students under the age of 25 are eligible for the grant if they meet the eligibility criteria, which includes qualifying as independent on the FAFSA. (2) Reconnect students must have a high school diploma or equivalent and may not already have an associate degree or higher, so those without a high school diploma or equivalent and those with an associate degree are not eligible for the program.
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, five-year average.

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[9] The data used to calculate this figure includes adults who are age 25 or older. Tennessee Reconnect does not have an age-based requirement and individuals under the age of 25 are eligible for the grant if they meet the eligibility criteria. (See page 9 for more information about program eligibility requirements.)

Reconnect and access for adults without a degree

Tennessee Reconnect includes several components to increase college access among adults without a degree. Tennessee Reconnect aims to simplify college access by removing the biggest barrier to higher education: cost. The grant covers tuition and mandatory fees for on-campus courses[10] at eligible institutions regardless of students' academic merit or financial need. The simple state residency requirement allows a high percentage of adults without an associate degree to apply for the grant. Scholarships that are not universally awarded (such as need- or merit-based scholarships) draw from a smaller applicant pool. Students can begin using the Reconnect Grant in any semester, which differs from other scholarships that include enrollment cutoff dates for applicants (e.g., Promise students must enroll in college the fall semester immediately following high school graduation, and HOPE scholarship recipients must enroll within 16 months of high school graduation).

Additionally, Reconnect applicants are given the option to work with a Navigator (i.e., a paid mentor) whose purpose is to assist students with the college enrollment and financial aid process. Some applicants, especially first-generation college students, may find college application and enrollment procedures difficult to navigate. Navigators can also help applicants identify the program and institution that will best meet their needs.

Reconnect and completion for adults without a degree

To increase college completion, Tennessee Reconnect is structured to encourage adult students to complete a postsecondary credential while recognizing that they have obligations (e.g., family, work) that may hinder their progress toward graduation. Reconnect students are required to maintain continuous part-time enrollment (i.e., at least 6 credit hours in each fall and spring semester), which differs from other scholarships that require full-time enrollment. (Promise students, in contrast, must enroll in at least 12 credit hours each semester.) This is meant to help Reconnect students maintain momentum, while allowing some schedule flexibility, and keep them on track to earn a credential before the grant expires at the end of five years.

Some students eligible for the Reconnect Grant enter the program with previously earned credit hours. As a result, the length of time it takes a Reconnect student to complete a credential varies based on the number of credit hours previously completed and the number of hours enrolled each semester (i.e., Reconnect students may choose to enroll in more than 6 credit hours each semester).

Once enrolled, Reconnect students have the option to continue working with a Navigator, who is available to answer questions and connect students with on- and off-campus resources. Through Navigators and other components, Reconnect is designed to provide wraparound support services to students as they transition to and through college.

Measuring the success of Reconnect

This report focuses on measuring the success of Tennessee Reconnect based on its objective of increasing college access and completion for adults without a degree.

OREA measured access by application and enrollment rates and measured completion by credit hour accumulation, year-to-year retention, and degree attainment. OREA also analyzed performance on these measures by region and student subgroup. Because students from certain racial, gender, geographic, and socioeconomic subgroups have historically been less likely to enroll, persist, and earn a postsecondary credential, the degree to which access and completion rates could increase for these subgroups is considerable.

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[10] The Reconnect Grant does not cover the full cost of fees charged for online courses. For certain online courses, such fees are considered mandatory for enrollment.

In addition to measuring college access and completion, this report evaluates the processes students must follow to become and remain Reconnect students. Available data on program steps, such as application filing rates, enrollment in an eligible program, completing the annual success plan, and maintaining a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA and part-time continuous enrollment each semester, was analyzed to identify the requirements most often missed by Reconnect students.

A 2021 report from the Lumina Foundation, a private foundation with the goal to increase the number of Americans with high-quality postsecondary credentials, states that Tennessee must maintain current rates of attainment and significantly increase the number of people who enroll in programs and earn all types of credentials beyond high school for the state to meet its goal of equipping 55 percent of adults with a postsecondary credential by 2025.[11]

Report roadmap

This report is separated into five sections. The first explains in detail how Tennessee Reconnect works, beginning with the program's eligibility and application requirements. Additionally, section 1 details how the program functions as a last-dollar scholarship and how Reconnect Grants are funded. Sections 2 through 4 follow Reconnect student cohorts through the process from application to enrollment in higher education, persistence once enrolled, and attainment of a postsecondary credential. Section 5 evaluates Tennessee's progress toward the Drive to 55. Conclusions and policy options for the Tennessee General Assembly and other stakeholders are included at the end of this report.

Exhibit iii outlines the report sections. This diagram is included at the beginning of each section to indicate which cohorts are included and where they are in the process.

Exhibit iii: Report roadmap and Reconnect cohorts

Section 1			Section 2: Access		Section 3: Progression Credit accumulation		Section 4: Completion Credential attainment and enrollment status		Section 5
	Cohort	Semester that Reconnect student entered program	Application rate	Enrollment rate	End of 1st academic year	End of 2nd academic year	1 year after enrollment	2 years after enrollment	
How Tennessee Reconnect works	1	Fall 18-Summer 19	yes	yes	Summer 19	Summer 20	Fall 19, Spring/Summer 20	Fall 20, Spring/Summer 21	Tennessee and the Drive to 55: Where are we now?
	2	Fall 19-Summer 20	yes	yes	Summer 20	Summer 21	Fall 20, Spring/Summer 21	Fall 21, Spring/Summer 22	
	3	Fall 20-Summer 21	yes	yes	Summer 21	Summer 22	Fall 21, Spring/Summer 22	Fall 22, Spring/Summer 23	
Included in this report					Not included in this report				

[11] Lumina Foundation, *A Stronger Nation*, "How Tennessee compares to the nation," https://luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/2021/#/progress/state/TN.

Data and research methods

During the research phase of this report, completion data was available through summer 2020; persistence, application, and enrollment data was available through fall 2020.[12] Since Reconnect students can enter the program in any semester, OREA measures credit accumulation at the end of each academic year (i.e., summer term) and completion metrics (e.g., credential attainment, enrollment status) annually after a student's initial enrollment. For example, Reconnect students who entered the program in fall 2018 and spring 2019 were evaluated for credit accumulation at the end of the academic year (i.e., summer 2019). These same students were then evaluated one year after initial enrollment, in fall 2019 or spring 2020 for completion. When additional data becomes available, students will be reevaluated annually until their program eligibility expires five years after initial enrollment.

Data sources

Quantitative data was obtained from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) and the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Reconnect students' performance was compared to a similar group of students (i.e., students who qualify as independent on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and enroll in at least 6 credit hours).

Interviews and surveys

To evaluate process steps within Tennessee Reconnect, OREA conducted surveys and interviews with various stakeholders. OREA interviewed administrators from seven community colleges in 2020. In total, 36 community college administrators representing various departments (e.g., admissions, financial aid, student affairs, etc.), including one community college president, participated in interviews with OREA. Subsequently, OREA invited administrators from all 13 community colleges to participate in an online survey in November 2020. In total, 248 community college administrators representing all 13 community colleges responded to the survey.

OREA conducted interviews with individuals from Navigate Reconnect, who provide mentoring and assistance to Reconnect applicants and students. Two regional directors and four Navigators representing all five Reconnect regions (i.e., West, Middle, Nashville, East, and Northeast) were interviewed by OREA. Additionally, OREA interviewed individuals at THEC and the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) throughout the course of research.

OREA reviewed interview comments and survey responses to identify common themes.

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[12] The completion data analyzed in this report was collected more than 1.5 years prior to the date of publication. According to the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), more recent data is not available for external parties, such as OREA, due to data collection and cleaning protocols. THEC receives community college completion data from the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) once a year, generally in October. For example, TBR sent community college completion data for the 2020-21 academic year (fall 2020 through summer 2021) to THEC in October 2021. Once THEC receives the data, staff check the quality and validate until THEC's annual reports are finalized. After these steps, the data is available for transfer to external parties, such as OREA.

Defining different types of Reconnect students

The following provides definitions of some terms that recur throughout the report:

- **Reconnect applicant:** an individual who filled out a Reconnect application.

- **Reconnect student:** an individual who filled out a Reconnect application and enrolled in college as part of the Reconnect program, regardless of whether he or she received Reconnect Grant dollars.[13] There are three types of Reconnect students:

  » **First-time student:** an individual who has not previously earned college credit.

  » **Returning student:** an individual who has previously earned college credit but has not completed an associate degree and was not enrolled in the semester prior to enrolling in the Reconnect program. For example, someone who enrolls in fall 2018 as part of the Reconnect program with previously earned credit is considered a returning student as long as he or she was not enrolled in spring or summer 2018.[14]

  » **Already enrolled:** an individual who has previously earned college credit but has not completed an associate degree and was already enrolled in the semester prior to enrolling in the Reconnect program.

Not included in this report

This evaluation does not include Reconnect students who enrolled in an eligible public four-year university or private institution. In the first year of the program (2018-19), less than 5 percent of Reconnect students enrolled in one of these institutions.

Most of the data analyzed in this report was collected prior to the coronavirus pandemic

Most analyses in this report include data that was collected prior to the coronavirus pandemic. During the research phase of this report, completion data was available through summer 2020; persistence, application, and enrollment data was available through fall 2020. The coronavirus pandemic began impacting Tennessee's postsecondary institutions in March 2020, by which time students would have already enrolled in the spring 2020 semester, though persistence and performance data from that semester was impacted by the pandemic (i.e., some students may have withdrawn from college during the semester). Data from the summer 2020 semester will reflect the impact of COVID-19, though summer term enrollment is not required per Reconnect Grant eligibility criteria and summer term enrollment is typically lower than in the fall or spring terms.

On the November 2020 OREA survey of community college administrators, respondents were instructed to answer the questions based on their institution's experiences *before* COVID-19 and the associated impacts to campus operations. Respondents were given the opportunity to reflect on COVID-19's impact on Reconnect students and the program at the end of the survey. See page 12 for more details.

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[13] The Reconnect Grant is awarded on a last-dollar basis, after other gift aid has been applied to a student's tuition and mandatory fees. As a result, some Reconnect students may not receive funds from the grant. Such students must maintain program eligibility to continue qualifying for the grant, however, and they may go on to receive funds from the grant in later semesters if they begin receiving less from other sources of gift aid.

[14] Reconnect students are not required to enroll in the summer term, so students who initially enroll in the Reconnect program in a fall term are considered returning students so long as they were not enrolled in the preceding spring or summer term.

Section 1: How Reconnect works

Section 1	Cohort	Semester that Reconnect student entered program	Section 2: Access		Section 3: Progression Credit accumulation		Section 4: Completion Credential attainment and enrollment status		Section 5
			Application rate	Enrollment rate	End of 1st academic year	End of 2nd academic year	1 year after enrollment	2 years after enrollment	
How Tennessee Reconnect works	1	Fall 18-Summer 19	yes	yes	Summer 19	Summer 20	Fall 19, Spring/ Summer 20	Fall 20, Spring/ Summer 21	Tennessee and the Drive to 55: Where are we now?
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	3	Fall 20-Summer 21	yes	yes	Summer 21	Summer 22	Fall 21, Spring/ Summer 22	Fall 22, Spring/ Summer 23	
			Included in this report			**Not included in this report**			

Who is eligible for the Reconnect Grant?

Tennessee Reconnect is a residency-based grant, meaning that application eligibility is determined primarily by legal residency in Tennessee. This differs from other grants and scholarships that may also require applicants to meet academic or financial need criteria. Because the eligibility criteria are broad, a high percentage of Tennessee adults without a college degree are eligible to apply. Specifically, individuals are eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant if they:

- hold U.S. citizenship,
- live in Tennessee for at least 12 months prior to the date of application,
- have not previously earned an associate degree or higher,
- do not owe an outstanding balance to a postsecondary institution,[15]
- qualify as an independent student on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA),[16] and
- are not in default on a student loan.[17]

Typical Reconnect Student

- White
- Female
- 32 years old
- Annual income of $31,040
- Plans to work full-time during first year of enrollment
- Cares for dependents

Note: Based on students who enrolled between fall 2018 through fall 2020; a typical Reconnect student may change over time. Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

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[15] Clearing a student's outstanding balance at previously attended institutions is not required by state law, rule, or policy, but institutions are required to confirm if a student has previously earned a degree. To do this, a student's prior transcripts must be reviewed. Most institutions will not release transcripts if the student owes an outstanding balance.

[16] To qualify as an independent student, an applicant must be at least 24 years old, married, have a child or other dependent(s), serve actively in the military or be a veteran, be orphaned or have lived in foster care, be an emancipated minor, or be an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or self-supporting.

[17] Additionally, individuals are ineligible for the grant if they owe a refund on a federal or Tennessee financial aid program, are incarcerated, do not meet federal drug-free rules for receiving financial aid, or if they are not in compliance with United States selective service requirements (if applicable).

Tennessee Reconnect Grant requirements

Qualified applicants must complete the following requirements to receive the grant:

- file the FAFSA;
- complete a Reconnect Grant application, which asks a series of questions that generate a personalized Reconnect Success Plan;[18]
- enroll in an eligible program, which includes certificates or associate degrees; and
- enroll in an eligible institution, which includes all 13 community colleges and eligible public universities or private institutions. See Exhibit 1.1.

Reconnect eligible institutions

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant may be used at one of Tennessee's 13 community colleges, all of which offer certificates and associate degrees, or an eligible public university or private institution that offers such credentials. Currently, there are two public universities (Austin Peay State University and Tennessee State University) and 18 private institutions that are eligible for Reconnect. Because few Reconnect students enroll in a public university or private institution, the analyses contained in this report will focus on students who enrolled in a community college using the Reconnect Grant.[19]

Exhibit 1.1: Tennessee Reconnect eligible institutions

Community colleges	
Chattanooga State Community College Cleveland State Community College Columbia State Community College Dyersburg State Community College Jackson State Community College Motlow State Community College Nashville State Community College	Northeast State Community College Pellissippi State Community College Roane State Community College Southwest Tennessee Community College Volunteer State Community College Walters State Community College

Public and private colleges and universities	
Public	Austin Peay State University Tennessee State University
Private	Baptist College of Health Sciences Bethel University Bryan College Carson-Newman University Christian Brothers University Cumberland University John A. Gupton College Johnson University King University Lane College LeMoyne-Owen College Lincoln Memorial University South College Southern Adventist University Trevecca Nazarene University Tusculum College UT Southern (formerly Martin Methodist College) Welch College

Note: Because few Reconnect students (less than 5 percent) enrolled in a public university or private institution in the first year of the program (2018-19), this report will focus on students who enrolled in a community college using the Reconnect Grant.

Sources: Tennessee Higher Education Commission, *Tennessee Reconnect Annual Report 2020*; Tennessee Reconnect, Colleges and Universities, https://tnreconnect.gov/Choose-a-Degree-College-Path/TNReconnect-Colleges-and-Universities (accessed November 2, 2021).

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[18] The Reconnect application and success plan fulfill the requirements of *TCA* 49-4-944(d)(6), which states that in order to maintain grant eligibility, a Reconnect student must participate in a college success program as created by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC). See page 28 for more details about the college success program, including the application and individualized plan that is generated. See Appendix B for a list of application questions and Appendix C for a sample success plan.

[19] In the first year of the program (2018-19), less than 5 percent of Reconnect students enrolled in a public university or private institution.

Exhibit 1.2: Location of Reconnect-eligible institutions

■ **Community college main campus** ■ **Private institution** ■ **Public university**
■ **Community college satellite** ■ **Private institution satellite**
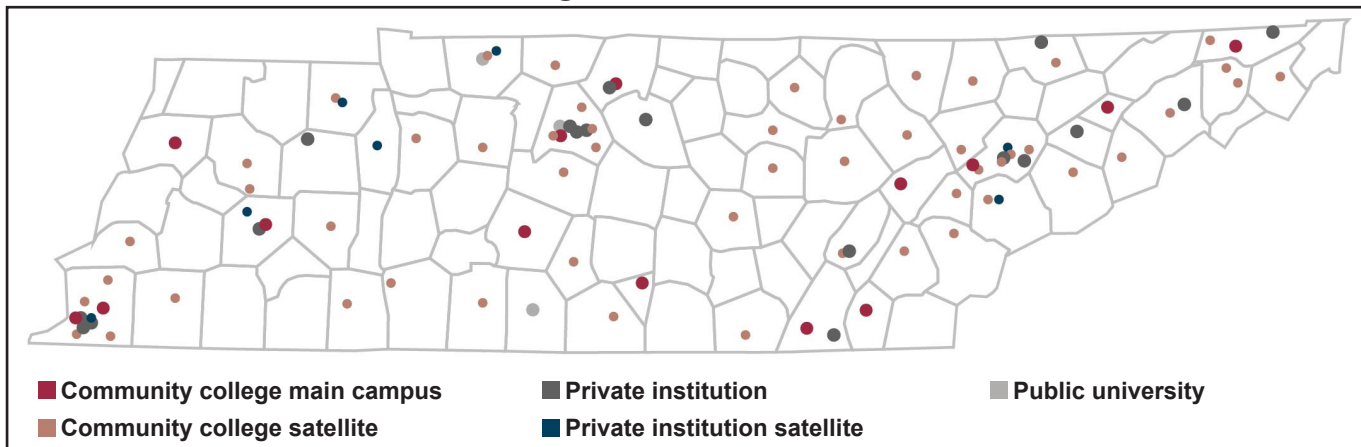
Source: OREA.

Requirements to maintain Reconnect Grant eligibility

Tennessee Reconnect students must do the following to maintain the grant once enrolled in an eligible institution:

- file the FAFSA annually;
- complete the Reconnect Grant application annually, which generates the student's personalized success plan;
- maintain a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA, as determined by the institution (see below for more details); and
- enroll in at least 6 credit hours each fall and spring semester (the summer term is optional).

> **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.

Terminating events

A Reconnect student retains grant eligibility until one of the following occurs:

- the student earns an associate degree or certificate;
- five years have passed since the student's initial enrollment in the Reconnect program, exclusive of approved leaves of absence; or
- the student fails to meet one of the recurring grant requirements, which include:
  - » dropping below a 2.0 cumulative GPA;
  - » not maintaining part-time continuous enrollment (i.e., enrolling in at least 6 credit hours each fall and spring semester), unless the student has an approved leave of absence; or
  - » failing to refile the FAFSA or complete the Reconnect application annually.

According to *TCA* 49-4-944(e), if a student ceases to be eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant at any time, he or she may not regain eligibility.

A student's Reconnect GPA includes only grades from courses taken as part of the Reconnect program

The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) instituted a policy for the 13 community colleges to stipulate that a student's cumulative GPA for the purposes of determining Reconnect eligibility begins when the student initially enrolls as a Reconnect student. This means that a student who was previously enrolled in college before becoming a Reconnect student is given a fresh start concerning his or her GPA. (This differs from how a student's cumulative GPA is calculated to determine eligibility for other sources of financial aid, such as the federal Pell Grant. In most cases, all previously earned credits are included in a student's cumulative

GPA for federal financial aid. See page 21 for more details.) Grades for courses completed prior to becoming a Reconnect student are not included in a student's "Reconnect GPA." During interviews with OREA, community college administrators explained that this approach can be positive, especially for students who previously attended college and earned low grades. On the other hand, at least two administrators noted that the policy can pose a challenge for students who begin the Reconnect program in the spring or summer term since the cumulative GPA is calculated at the end of the academic year (i.e., at the end of the summer term). If Reconnect students perform poorly their first semester, they may struggle to meet the required minimum 2.0 GPA prior to the end of the academic year when the cumulative Reconnect GPA is calculated, and face loss of eligibility as a result. A student may not file an appeal if they lose Reconnect eligibility due to GPA.

Exceptions to Reconnect requirements

There are some exceptions to the grant requirements.

Earning a sequential certificate does not terminate grant eligibility

Students enrolled in some associate degree programs may earn one or more certificates as part of their course of study. These are called sequential certificates and they are awarded after the completion of certain courses that are part of the degree requirements.[20] Under program guidelines, a student may remain eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant after receiving a sequential certificate that is part of their chosen degree program. By contrast, a student who completes a certificate that represents the highest possible credential within a program of study, also known as a terminal certificate, is no longer eligible for the Reconnect Grant.[21]

Students may be granted a leave of absence for extenuating circumstances

Provided that all other requirements have been met, students can be exempt from the program's part-time and/or continuous enrollment requirements if granted a medical or personal leave of absence for reasons including, but not limited to, illness of the student, illness or death of an immediate family member, extreme financial hardship, fulfillment of a religious commitment, or fulfillment of required military service. Each postsecondary institution's Institutional Review Panel (IRP) considers requests for personal and medical leaves of absence. If an institutional IRP denies a student's request, he or she may submit an appeal to the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC).

Some Reconnect Grant eligibility requirements were adjusted due to the COVID-19 pandemic

In March 2020, Tennessee's public colleges and universities, including all 13 community colleges where most Reconnect students enroll, transitioned to online learning. Many institutions offered a substantial number of courses online through the 2020-21 academic year. Additionally, Tennessee's K-12 school systems transitioned to virtual learning in spring 2020 and many continued to offer virtual options through spring 2021. The transition to online learning for K-12 and college students alike presented an unprecedented challenge for Reconnect students, many of whom reported having dependents at home and working full-time.[22]

In 2020, TSAC issued a series of advisory memos, providing guidance to institutions on how to utilize existing rules to provide flexibility to students facing extraordinary challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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[20] For example, a student pursuing an Associate of Applied Science in General Business Administration at Volunteer State Community College has the option to earn a technical certificate in Logistics and Supply Chain Management as part of the associate degree program.

[21] For example, Columbia State offers a technical certificate in Film Crew Technology, which requires 33 hours for completion.

[22] According to self-reported data on the annual Reconnect application from the first three years of the program, 18,512 Reconnect students (57.6 percent) reported having a dependent and 10,512 (32.7 percent) reported having a dependent *and* working full-time.

Institutions had flexibility in determining spring and summer 2020 GPAs

Under program requirements, Reconnect students are required to maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA. In April 2020, TSAC issued an advisory memo reminding institutions of their authority under rule to modify the calculation of GPA in the spring and summer 2020 terms. TSAC advised institutions that they had the flexibility to modify student GPAs, such as reporting a GPA from the prior semester of enrollment.

Students could request a leave of absence due to COVID-19

Additionally, Reconnect students are required to maintain continuous part-time enrollment (i.e., enrolling in at least 6 credit hours each fall and spring semester) unless granted a leave of absence. TSAC considered the COVID-19 pandemic to constitute extraordinary circumstances beyond a student's control, thus providing sufficient grounds to grant students a personal or medical leave of absence from part-time or continuous enrollment. According to TSAC's April 2020 memo, students who dropped below part-time or withdrew from courses in the spring 2020 semester and requested a leave of absence after an institution transitioned to online instruction should be approved without having to provide additional documentation or justification.[23]

The guidance was later extended to include the 2020-21 academic year (through summer 2021). In contrast to TSAC's earlier guidance, in the 2020-21 academic year, students were required to include information about their extraordinary circumstances in appealing a break in continuous enrollment or dropping below part-time enrollment.

Reconnect students could enroll less than part-time and maintain eligibility

In the 2020-21 academic year, TSAC advised institutions that Reconnect students could enroll less than part-time and maintain eligibility without having to request a leave of absence. However, this exception did not apply to students who dropped below part-time enrollment during a semester in the 2020-21 academic year. Such students were required to request a leave of absence.

The shift to online learning was the biggest COVID-19 related impact to Reconnect students, according to community college administrators

On the November 2020 OREA survey of community college administrators, respondents were given the opportunity to reflect on COVID-19's impact on Reconnect students and the program at their campus. Most respondents (75 administrators at 12 community colleges) said that adult students dislike online classes and struggled to adapt when instruction was shifted to a virtual format. The other top comments were regarding difficulties faced by Reconnect students due to

- dependents: having children at home while K-12 schools were teaching virtually or lack of childcare (39 administrators at 12 colleges),
- technology: limited access and/or proficiency (30 administrators at 10 colleges), and
- employment: increased hours, job loss, or change to income (28 administrators representing all 13 community colleges).

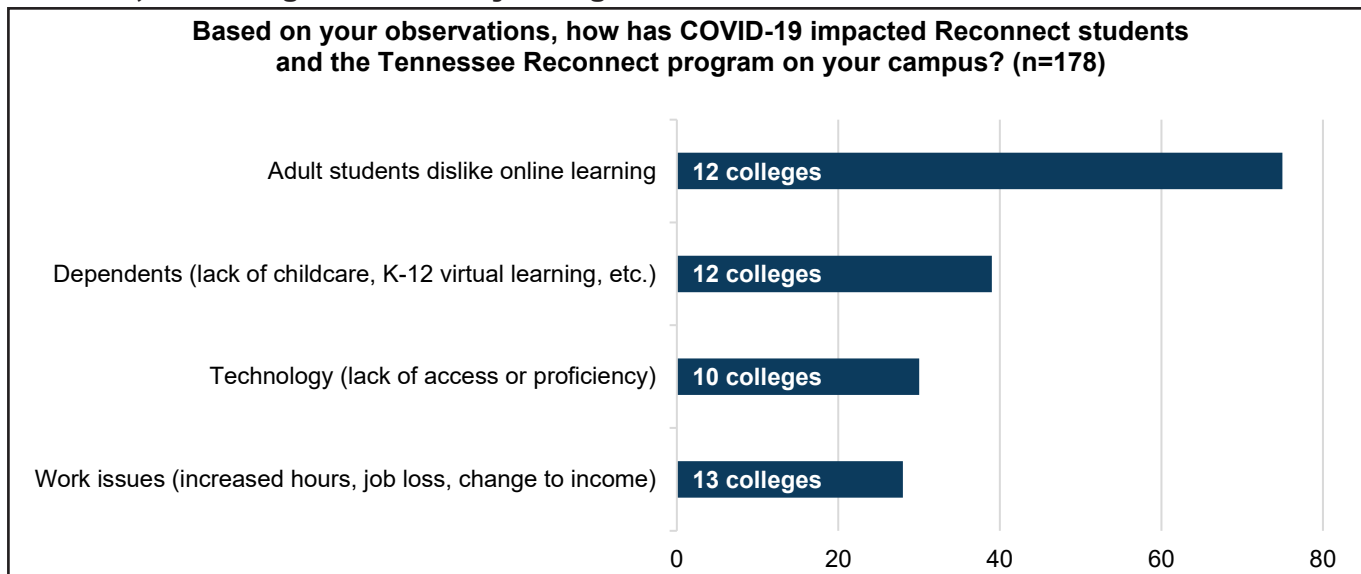---

[23] This guidance also applied in the summer 2020 term.

Exhibit 1.3: The shift to online learning has been COVID-19's biggest impact to Reconnect students, according to community college administrators

Based on your observations, how has COVID-19 impacted Reconnect students and the Tennessee Reconnect program on your campus? (n=178)

- Adult students dislike online learning — **12 colleges**
- Dependents (lack of childcare, K-12 virtual learning, etc.) — **12 colleges**
- Technology (lack of access or proficiency) — **10 colleges**
- Work issues (increased hours, job loss, change to income) — **13 colleges**

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.

Tennessee Reconnect is a last-dollar scholarship

As a last-dollar scholarship, Tennessee Reconnect is applied after a student is awarded other sources of gift aid. According to state law,[24] gift aid for the purposes of the Tennessee Reconnect Grant includes the federal Pell Grant, the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship (TELS), and the Tennessee Student Assistance Award (TSAA). Since the Tennessee Reconnect Grant is applied to a student's bill after these sources of gift aid, a Reconnect student's award amount can range from zero to the full cost of tuition and mandatory fees for on-campus courses at a community college (or a comparable amount at an eligible four-year university).

A student's Reconnect Grant award amount depends on the student's other sources of gift aid and course load

According to state law,[25] the Tennessee Reconnect Grant shall not exceed the cost of tuition and mandatory fees charged to all students for coursework leading to completion of an eligible program of study at an eligible institution less other gift aid, which shall be credited first to a student's bill for tuition and mandatory fees. Tuition and fee amounts vary slightly among Tennessee's 13 community colleges. Exhibit 1.4 shows the average amount charged to students enrolled in 6, 9, or 12 credit hours. These figures represent the maximum Reconnect Grant award amount a student would have received in the first two years of the program if he or she did not receive any other sources of gift aid.

On average, the maximum award amount was about $2,200 for students enrolled in 6 hours, $3,300 for students enrolled in 9 hours, and $4,300 for students enrolled in 12 credit hours.[26] Under program requirements, Reconnect students are obligated to enroll in at least 6 credit hours per semester. Through fall 2020, Reconnect students enrolled in an average of 9 credit hours.

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[24] *TCA* 49-4-944(b)(4).
[25] *TCA* 49-4-944(h).
[26] According to *TCA* 49-4-944(i), the maximum Reconnect Grant award amount at an eligible public university or private institution is the average cost of tuition and mandatory fees at a community college.

Exhibit 1.4: Annual average tuition and mandatory fees for on-campus courses at community colleges during the first two years of the Reconnect program | 2018-19 and 2019-20

Number of credits	2018-19	2019-20	Average
6 credit hours *(minimum required)*	$2,196.23	$2,247.54	**$2,221.88**
9 credit hours *(average course load for cohorts 1 and 2)*	$3,228.77	$3,308.08	**$3,268.42**
12 credit hours *(full-time course load)*	$4,239.85	$4,342.69	**$4,291.27**

Notes: (1) Annual average is based on enrollment in fall and spring semesters. (2) Under program requirements, Reconnect students are obligated to enroll in at least 6 credit hours per semester, though Reconnect students enrolled in an average of 9 credit hours.
Source: OREA analysis of community college tuition and fee tables.

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant covers tuition and mandatory fees

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant covers tuition and mandatory fees for on-campus courses, defined as tuition and fees that are required for enrollment or attendance and are charged to all students.

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant does not cover special fees, books, or supplies

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant does not cover fees charged for specific courses, online classes, books, or supplies, although these are required for some programs of study. These fees, classified as non-mandatory, include science lab fees, online course fees, and specific program fees. Since the Reconnect Grant does not cover these items, students must pay for them using personal funds, student loans, or other sources of financial aid. For example, Reconnect students who receive the federal Pell Grant or TSAA may receive funding above and beyond the cost of tuition and mandatory fees, in which case they will have additional money to pay for these items.

On average, Reconnect students spend about $400 per semester on books, fees, and supplies that are not covered by the grant[27]

Recent survey data provides an estimate of the cost of textbooks, fees, and supplies for Tennessee community college students.

In 2019, a survey of nearly 2,000 Tennessee community college students was conducted by the Postsecondary Education Research Center at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK). Almost half of respondents (48.6 percent) said they spent more than $300 on course materials (e.g., print or digital textbooks, workbooks, audiovisual materials, online homework platforms, and other supplemental materials) for the fall 2019 semester, with 20 percent spending over $500. Respondents reported that the high cost of course materials had resulted in difficult purchasing decisions that, in some cases, affected their grades or progress toward graduation.

> On average, Reconnect students spend about $400 per semester on books, non-mandatory fees, and supplies that are not covered by the Reconnect Grant.

In November 2020, OREA surveyed community college administrators and asked them to estimate the cost of books, fees, and supplies, based on their experience working with Reconnect students. According to nearly 100 respondents from all 13 community colleges, the average cost of books, fees, and supplies not covered by the Tennessee Reconnect Grant is $400 per semester, with amounts ranging from $125 to $1,000, depending on a student's course load and program of study.

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[27] See OREA's September 2021 report, *College course materials: Affordability initiatives across Tennessee*, at https://tncot.cc/orea for more details on the cost of course materials in Tennessee's public colleges and universities and the efforts many institutions are taking to reduce such costs.

While the UTK survey focused solely on the cost of course materials, OREA's survey asked respondents to include the cost of non-mandatory fees, such as online course or allied health program[28] fees, alongside textbook costs in their estimate of a Reconnect student's expenses.

During interviews with OREA, community college administrators shared anecdotally that the cost of books and fees can be a barrier to enrollment or success for Reconnect students. At times, students may attempt their coursework without the textbook or forgo enrollment all together, according to interview participants. Some community colleges have established book scholarships or no-cost book loan programs (i.e., a student may borrow the textbook at no cost), both of which are available to students on a first-come, first-served basis, and demand sometimes exceeds supply. Multiple administrators specifically mentioned the cost of online course and nursing program fees as a barrier for some students.

The following sections include more detailed information about non-mandatory fees, textbooks, and supplies that are not covered by the Tennessee Reconnect Grant.

Science lab fees

Students enrolled in most associate degree programs are required to complete 41 hours of general education courses, including two science courses (e.g., biology, chemistry) that include lab fees. For example, students enrolled in a science course at Motlow State Community College are required to pay a $15 fee per science course.

Online fees[29]

Students who enroll in online courses are required to pay an additional fee if they are enrolled in a community college that assesses an online course fee. In the 2019-20 academic year, seven of Tennessee's 13 community colleges assessed online course fees, with the amount for a three-hour course ranging from $25 at Chattanooga State to $126 at Columbia State.[30] Approximately 73 percent of Reconnect students from cohorts 1, 2, and 3 enrolled in at least one online course from fall 2018 through fall 2020.

> "It varies quite a bit. On average, students enrolled in 6 credit hours spend $250-300 on books depending on the major, plus [TN eCampus] fees if they choose to take a course (usually $402), and [charges for digital textbooks] ($60-$100 each course). Allied Health fees are also a popular non-mandatory fee that students have to pay for that may include malpractice insurance, HESI - Assessment Exam, Nursing Program Fees."
>
> Community college administrator
> OREA survey, November 2020

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[28] Allied health may include the following programs: nursing, occupational therapy, pharmacy technology, physical therapy, respiratory care, or surgical technology.

[29] See OREA's June 2021 report, *Online Course Fees in Higher Education*, at https://tncot.cc/orea for more information about online course fees assessed at Tennessee's public colleges and universities.

[30] The Tennessee Board of Regents suspended the assessment of online course fees for the 2021-22 academic year. This suspension applies to the seven community colleges that currently assess such fees. The board suspended the assessment of online course fees to remove the financial barrier for students who opt to take online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Exhibit 1.5: Online course fees at community colleges | 2020-21 academic year

Institution	Fee per credit hour	Fee per three-hour course
Chattanooga State	--	$25.00
Cleveland State	$10.00	$30.00
Columbia State	$42.00	$126.00
Dyersburg State	$25.00	$75.00
Jackson State	$10.00	$30.00
Motlow State	No online course fee	
Nashville State	No online course fee	
Northeast State	No online course fee	
Pellissippi State	No online course fee	
Roane State	$18.00	$54.00
Southwest	No online course fee	
Volunteer State	No online course fee	
Walters State	$10.00	$30.00
Average		**$52.86**

Notes: (1) Chattanooga State assesses the fee per course, not per credit-hour. (2) Jackson State waived the online course fee in spring 2021. (3) Average includes only institutions that assess a fee.
Source: OREA review of community college tuition and fee sheets.

TN eCampus

TN eCampus courses are also delivered online, but the fees assessed for such courses differ from the institution-based online courses referenced in Exhibit 1.5. Students may enroll in a combination of traditional on-campus, TN eCampus, and institution-based online courses, and are charged the associated tuition and fee rates for each type of course. The Reconnect Grant will cover up to the amount of tuition and fees that would be charged to a student enrolled in an equal number of credit hours on campus. Any remaining tuition or fees for TN eCampus courses, which can be hundreds of dollars depending on the course load, are the financial responsibility of the Reconnect student.

> See pages 16 and 17 of OREA's June 2021 report, *Online Course Fees in Higher Education*, for more information about TN eCampus. See pages 19 through 26 of OREA's July 2020 report, *Tennessee Promise Evaluation*, for more information about how TN eCampus fees are assessed compared to fees assessed for institution-based online courses. Both reports are available at https://tncot.cc/orea.

Nursing program fees

Students who enroll in certain programs may be required to purchase supplies, uniforms, and more expensive textbooks compared to other programs, as well as pay additional fees. Such expenses are common among health science degree programs, such as the Associate of Applied Science in Nursing (AASN) program. During interviews and surveys with OREA, multiple administrators specifically mentioned the high cost of textbooks and fees associated with their nursing program.

> "On average, a student pays roughly $200 per semester in online fees and books. Our nursing students, however, pay upwards of $500 per semester, on average, in specialized fees and books."
>
> Community college administrator
> OREA survey, November 2020

Tennessee, and much of the U.S., is facing a shortage of nurses. The demand is anticipated to grow with the increased need for health care services from an aging population and the turnover rate of health care workers who retire or leave the profession to pursue other occupations. This trend has been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic's strain on the health care system and the resulting worker fatigue. Data published on the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development website estimates that there are 0.02 candidates per nursing job opening.[31] While some nursing positions may require a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) (i.e., a four-year program that is not an eligible program of study under the Tennessee Reconnect Grant and is not offered at Tennessee's community colleges), individuals may work as a registered nurse with an AASN and may apply their degree toward the completion of a BSN.

> On average, the estimated cost for textbooks, program fees, and supplies that are required to complete an AASN degree program at a Tennessee community college is $4,536.15.

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 obtained estimates from the community colleges that did not have the information posted on their website. On average, the estimated cost for textbooks, program fees, and supplies that are required to complete an AASN degree program at a Tennessee community college is $4,536.15, as shown in Exhibit 1.6. There is variation in the estimated cost of these items among the 13 community colleges; two community colleges estimate that textbooks, program fees, and supplies will cost less than $3,000 and four estimate the cost to be $5,000 or higher.

Exhibit 1.6: The average cost of Associate of Applied Nursing (AASN) degree program textbooks, fees, and supplies at community colleges is $4,536.15

Community college	Estimation of textbooks, program fees, and supplies required for enrollment
Chattanooga State Community College	$2,928.00
Cleveland State Community College	$5,566.80
Columbia State Community College	$4,585.00
Dyersburg State Community College	$5,418.60
Jackson State Community College	$4,722.50
Motlow State Community College	$3,681.50
Nashville State Community College	$4,709.00
Northeast State Community College	$4,795.00
Pellissippi State Community College	$3,532.50
Roane State Community College	$5,000.00
Southwest Tennessee Community College	$2,896.00
Volunteer State Community College	$6,925.00
Walters State Community College	$4,210.00
Average	**$4,536.15**

Source: OREA analysis of nursing program information available on community college websites and provided by community college administrators.

Textbooks are the most expensive anticipated cost, with estimates ranging from $1,000 to $2,400 among the 13 community colleges. Nursing students are typically required to purchase most of their textbooks in the first semester of the program.

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[31] Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, www.jobs4tn.gov (accessed Nov. 4, 2021).

Most community colleges assess a special fee for nursing courses. The fee ranges from $20-25 per credit hour, depending on the community college, and most AASN programs require about 40 hours of nursing courses that are subject to the fee. Nursing course fees range from $740-$1,000 over the entire AASN program.

Additional items listed on most community college AASN program cost estimates are:
- uniforms, including scrubs, nursing shoes, and lab coat;
- supplies, including a wristwatch (with a second hand), stethoscope, and blood pressure cuff;
- a photograph fee for the state board exam ID and class composite photo;
- malpractice/liability insurance; and
- background and drug tests.

Most community colleges charge fees for the proficiency exams that are required prior to program enrollment and at the end of each semester. Upon program completion, nursing students must pay a fee to take the National Council of Licensure Examination – Registered Nurse (NCLEX-RN), as well as to obtain their Tennessee State Board of Nursing license.

Reconnect students who qualify for the federal Pell Grant may receive extra money they can use for books, fees, and supplies

Reconnect students who qualify for the federal Pell Grant may receive funding above and beyond the cost of tuition and mandatory fees that will allow them the extra funds to pay for some of the textbooks, fees, and other expenses, such as transportation, food, and housing.

The federal Pell Grant is awarded to students with exceptional financial need who have not earned a bachelor's degree. Students may remain eligible for the Pell Grant for up to the equivalent of six years of full-time enrollment. (If a student enrolls part-time, the award is prorated.) A student's Pell Grant award amount is based on the cost of attendance at his or her chosen institution (including the cost of tuition, fees, books, supplies, living expenses, and transportation), the number of hours enrolled, and the student's expected family contribution (EFC). A student's EFC is calculated annually based on information provided on the FAFSA using a formula that considers family income (including taxed and untaxed income, assets, and public assistance), family size, and the number of family members attending college.

Based on enrollment in 9 credit hours in the 2021-22 academic year, to be considered eligible for the Pell Grant a student's EFC could range from $0 to $5,600. In 2021-22, the maximum Pell Grant award for a student enrolled in 9 credit hours was $4,871 (or $2,435.50 per semester).[32] The maximum EFC considered for Pell eligibility and the maximum award amount change each year. Refer to Exhibit 1.7. Students who receive the maximum Pell Grant are considered *full* Pell Grant recipients, and students who receive less than the maximum are considered *partial* Pell Grant recipients.

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[32] The referenced maximum EFC and award amounts are based on three-quarter time enrollment (i.e., 9 credit hours) in the fall and spring semesters. (Students may be eligible for additional Pell Grant funding in the summer term.) Since Reconnect students enrolled in an average of 9 credit hours per semester, OREA chose enrollment in 9 credit hours to calculate Pell award amounts. Students receive a larger or smaller Pell award in proportion to their enrolled hours (i.e., students with fewer credit hours receive a smaller award and those with more hours receive a higher award).

Exhibit 1.7: Maximum EFC and award amount for the federal Pell Grant based on enrollment in 9 credit hours | 2018-19 and 2019-20

Included in this evaluation?	Reconnect cohort	Academic year	Maximum EFC for Pell eligibility	Maximum award amount
Yes	1	2018-19	$5,300	$4,571
Yes	2	2019-20	$5,400	$4,646
Fall 2020 only	3	2020-21	$5,500	$4,759
No	4	2021-22	$5,600	$4,871

Note: In this exhibit, the maximum EFC and award amounts are based on three-quarter time enrollment (i.e., 9 credit hours) in the fall and spring semesters; students may be eligible for additional Pell Grant funding in the summer term. Since Reconnect students in cohorts 1 and 2 enrolled in an average of 9 credit hours per semester, OREA chose enrollment in 9 credit hours to calculate Pell award amounts. Students receive a larger or smaller Pell award in proportion to their enrolled hours (i.e., students with fewer credit hours receive a smaller award and those with more hours receive a higher award).
Source: OREA analysis of federal Pell Grant payment schedules.

Exhibit 1.8 shows hypothetical scenarios of Reconnect and Pell Grant awards for three Reconnect students in the 2019-20 academic year. All three students enrolled in 9 credit hours in the fall and spring semesters and their total tuition and mandatory fee charge was $3,308.08.[33] Each student also spent an average of $800 on textbooks, supplies, and non-mandatory fees.[34] Student A does not qualify for the Pell Grant, so his or her tuition and mandatory fees are fully covered by the Reconnect Grant. Student B receives a partial Pell Grant in the amount of $2,000, which is applied to his or her tuition and mandatory fee bill. The Reconnect Grant, as a last-dollar scholarship, covers the student's remaining tuition and mandatory fee balance of $1,308.08. Neither Student A nor B has grant funding left over to pay for books, supplies, or non-mandatory fees, so both must use personal funds or another source of financial aid to cover those expenses.[35] By contrast, Student C receives a full Pell Grant in the amount of $4,646, which is more than enough to cover his or her tuition and mandatory fee charges. After the Pell Grant is applied to the tuition and mandatory fee charges ($3,308.08), Student C has $1,337.92. Student C uses $800 to pay for textbooks, supplies, and non-mandatory fees, and still has $537.46 remaining to pay for other expenses.

Exhibit 1.8: Hypothetical scenarios of Pell and Reconnect Grant award amounts | 9 credit hour enrollment in fall and spring semesters | 2019-20 academic year

	Student A: does not qualify for Pell Grant	Student B: partial Pell Grant recipient	Student C: full Pell Grant recipient
Tuition + mandatory fees	$3,308.08	$3,308.08	$3,308.08
Textbooks, supplies, and non-mandatory fees	$800	$800	$800
Total	$4,108.08	$4,108.08	$4,108.08
Pell Grant amount	$0 (does not qualify)	$2,000 (partial Pell Grant)	$4,646 (full Pell Grant)
Reconnect Grant award	$3,308.08	$1,308.08	$0
Difference	-$800	-$800	$537.92

Notes: (1) The tuition and mandatory fee charges and Pell and Reconnect Grant award amounts are based on enrollment in 9 credit hours in the fall and spring semesters. Reconnect students in cohorts 1 and 2 enrolled in an average of 9 credit hours per semester. (2) There are other sources of financial aid students may qualify for (e.g., TSAA, institutional scholarships) but this table considers only the Reconnect and Pell Grants.
Sources: The amount charged for tuition and mandatory fees was calculated by reviewing community college tuition and fee tables. Pell Grant award amounts were obtained by reviewing the Pell Grant payment schedule. Textbook, supply, and non-mandatory fee expenditures are based on OREA's fall 2020 survey of community college administrators. See pages 15-16 for more details on both surveys.

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[33] Since Reconnect students in cohorts 1 and 2 enrolled in an average of 9 credit hours per semester, OREA chose enrollment in 9 credit hours to calculate tuition and fee charges and Reconnect and Pell Grant award amounts.
[34] Textbook, supply, and non-mandatory fee expenditures are based on OREA's fall 2020 survey of community college administrators. See pages 15-16 for more details.
[35] There are other sources of financial aid students may qualify for (e.g., TSAA, institutional scholarships) but for simplicity, this hypothetical scenario considers only the Reconnect and Pell Grants.

To maintain Pell eligibility, students must meet financial and academic criteria and not have exhausted their lifetime maximum award

Students can lose Pell eligibility if their EFC increases above the maximum qualifying amount, they exhaust their lifetime maximum eligibility (i.e., the equivalent of six years of full-time enrollment), or if they fail to meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP). Students can regain Pell eligibility if their EFC decreases or if they come back into compliance with SAP, but not after lifetime eligibility has been exhausted.

Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) policies are determined by each community college and some variation exists

SAP policies are determined by each institution and include a combination of grades, pace (i.e., percentage of attempted hours that are completed), and maximum hours attempted compared to program length (i.e., if an associate degree requires 60 credit hours, a student with 90 credit hours accumulated is at the maximum).[36]

OREA reviewed the SAP policies of all 13 community colleges and found that most have adopted similar policies, but there is some variation in how transfer credits (i.e., credits earned at another institution) and learning support courses (i.e., developmental reading, writing, and math courses) are included in the calculation.

> **Standardized SAP policy effective fall 2021**
>
> TBR announced that as of the fall 2021 semester, all 13 community colleges follow the same standards for determining a student's SAP.
>
> The variation described on pages 21-22 of this report apply to students enrolled through summer 2021.

Reconnect students who were previously enrolled in college will enter the program with transfer credits and those who struggle academically are likely to enroll in learning support courses. The inclusion or exclusion of transfer credits and learning support courses will impact a student's Pell eligibility, which ultimately impacts a student's Reconnect Grant award amount. For example, if a student is financially eligible for the Pell Grant, but fails to meet SAP, he or she will receive Reconnect Grant funds in lieu of the Pell Grant.

- **Grades:** At most community colleges, the minimum GPA for SAP depends on the number of attempted credit hours (i.e., as a student accumulates more credit hours, the required GPA increases). However, at five community colleges, the minimum GPA is 2.0 across the board, regardless of attempted hours. Most community colleges have a standard minimum GPA policy for all students, regardless of whether they are pursuing a certificate or an associate degree. However, three community colleges have separate GPA requirements for those pursuing certificates and those pursuing associate degrees.

  Most community colleges include both learning support courses and transfer credits when calculating minimum GPA, but two exclude transfer credits from this calculation. A student's Reconnect GPA is calculated differently than that of SAP. The Reconnect GPA calculation is based only on courses taken from the point at which a student begins participating in the Reconnect program, while the calculation of SAP is based on all courses, including those taken prior to participation in the Reconnect program, at most community colleges. Additionally, a student's Reconnect GPA is calculated annually at the end of the academic year (i.e., in the summer term) while SAP is determined each semester at most community colleges. See pages 11-12 for more details on the Reconnect GPA.

- **Pace:** At all 13 community colleges, 67 percent of a student's cumulative attempted credits must be earned. Most community colleges include both learning support and transfer coursework as part of this calculation. However, one community college excludes learning support from the calculation.

- **Maximum hours attempted:** At all 13 community colleges, a student's number of attempted credit hours cannot exceed 150 percent of program length. This is required by federal regulation.[37] The institution, however, has discretion over whether certain coursework is included in the 150 percent

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[36] Federal regulations (i.e., the Higher Education Act of 1965, 34 CFR 668.34) require that students receiving financial assistance under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which includes the federal Pell Grant, must meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP) to remain eligible for funding.
[37] 34 CFR 668.34.

calculation. All 13 community colleges include transfer coursework in this calculation. Most community colleges (at least 8 of 13) exclude learning support courses from this calculation, while at least two community colleges include learning support courses in the calculation. (This aspect of SAP was not explicitly addressed in three community college policies.)

Some low-income Reconnect students may not receive funds from the Pell Grant

The federal Pell Grant is awarded to students with exceptional financial need who have not earned a bachelor's degree. Students may remain eligible for the Pell Grant for up to six years of full-time enrollment. (If a student enrolls part-time, the award is prorated.) Low-income Reconnect students who would otherwise qualify for the Pell Grant (based on EFC) may not receive funds from the grant if they were enrolled in college prior to participating in the Reconnect program. This can occur if they previously exhausted their lifetime Pell Grant award amount (i.e., the equivalent of six years) or fail to meet SAP. A student who has exhausted lifetime Pell eligibility may not regain eligibility. A student who lost Pell for failing to maintain SAP, however, may regain Pell eligibility.

OREA used available data to estimate the number of students who receive the Reconnect Grant in lieu of the federal Pell Grant. OREA estimated the number of Reconnect students that would be eligible for the maximum Pell Grant award using attempted credit hours and EFC. Students with an EFC of $0 were assigned an estimated cost of tuition and fees, based on their attempted credit hours and the average cost of tuition and mandatory fees. These students were then analyzed to see whether their Reconnect awards equaled or exceeded this estimated cost.

Through fall 2020, there were 4,397 Reconnect students (about 13.6 percent) with an EFC of $0 – meaning their income was low enough to qualify for a full Pell Grant – who received enough Reconnect funds to fully cover tuition and fees.[38] Altogether, this amounted to $11,125,170, or about 15.8 percent of total Reconnect Grant awards during this time. These 4,397 Reconnect students should otherwise qualify for a full Pell Grant, based on their reported income (i.e., EFC of $0), but their tuition and mandatory fees were covered by the Reconnect Grant instead. It is likely that these 4,397 Reconnect students did not receive a full Pell Grant because they failed to meet SAP, or because they exhausted their lifetime Pell eligibility.

More than half of these students (2,860, or 65 percent) had a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or greater, which means they are likely in compliance with the grade requirement of SAP and are receiving the Reconnect Grant in lieu of the federal Pell Grant because they exhausted their lifetime Pell eligibility. In total, these 2,860 students received $7,828,294 from the Reconnect Grant, or about 11.1 percent of total Reconnect Grant awards through fall 2020. The remaining 1,537 students had a cumulative GPA of less than 2.0, which means they were likely not making SAP and were therefore ineligible for federal financial aid.[39] In total, these students received $3,296,876, or about 4.7 percent of total Reconnect Grant expenditures during this time.

The 1,537 students who were not meeting SAP can regain their Pell Grant eligibility if they come back into compliance with SAP requirements, but the 2,861 students who likely exhausted their lifetime Pell award cannot regain Pell eligibility.

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[38] This means a student's Reconnect Grant award amount was greater than or equal to 90 percent of their estimated tuition and fees, based on credit hours attempted.
[39] There are differences in how GPA is calculated to determine eligibility for Reconnect versus federal financial aid. Under program requirements, Reconnect students are required to maintain a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA. A student's "Reconnect GPA" is based only on courses taken from the point at which a student begins participating in the Reconnect program. This differs from a student's GPA, which is used to determine eligibility for federal financial aid and includes all coursework to date. Most community colleges include both learning support courses and transfer credits as part of their GPA calculation for federal financial aid. The Reconnect GPA is calculated at the end of each academic year (i.e., summer term) whereas a student's eligibility for federal financial aid, which partly relies on GPA, is determined at the end of each semester.

Tennessee Reconnect can be used as a backup plan by students whose tuition and mandatory fees are paid by other sources of gift aid (like the Pell Grant)

Reconnect students who receive partial or no funding from the Reconnect Grant may be encouraged by college administrators to maintain their eligibility for Reconnect as a backup plan in case they receive less funding in the future from gift aid, such as the Pell Grant. All Reconnect students, regardless of their Reconnect Grant award amount, are required to meet the Reconnect program requirements, including maintaining continuous part-time enrollment and a cumulative 2.0 GPA.

<u>Students may formally pause their Reconnect clock, which retains their five years of grant eligibility</u>

Students who receive no funds from the Reconnect Grant (because their tuition and mandatory fees are covered by other sources of gift aid) are eligible to decline participating in the Reconnect Grant program, thus pausing their "Reconnect clock." Students have up to five years to complete a credential after they initially enroll in the Reconnect program, even if they do not receive funds from the grant. By pausing the Reconnect clock, students retain their five years of Reconnect Grant eligibility in the event that their gift aid changes in the future (e.g., a student's income increases and renders them ineligible for the Pell Grant). Students may decline participation in the Reconnect program for multiple academic years. However, once a student's Reconnect clock begins, it cannot be paused, unless the student obtains an approved leave of absence.

Currently, students who wish to pause their Reconnect clock must manually submit a declination form, but beginning in fall 2022, the declination process will be automated for any student who has sufficient gift aid to cover the cost of tuition and mandatory fees.[40]

Tennessee Reconnect Grants are funded by net lottery proceeds

Tennessee Reconnect Grants are funded by net lottery proceeds, as shown in Exhibit 1.9. In the 2020-21 fiscal year, net lottery proceeds totaled $482 million. From the net proceeds, $378 million was spent on TELS, including $169 million on HOPE, $82 million on Aspire, $45 million on the General Assembly Merit Scholarship (GAMS), $29 million on Tennessee Reconnect Grants, $24 million on Dual Enrollment grants, $14 million on Wilder-Naifeh Technical Skills Grants, and $15 million for administrative costs and other scholarships. After TELS expenses, there was $104 million in unspent lottery revenue available for the Tennessee Promise Scholarship Program. In 2020-21, a total of $30 million was spent on Tennessee Promise scholarships, and the remaining $74 million in unspent lottery revenue was transferred to the Tennessee Promise Endowment Fund. At the end of the 2020-21 fiscal year, there was $775 million in the endowment, including the $361 million of nonspendable principal, as well as interest revenues and unspent lottery proceeds from previous fiscal years.

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[40] See Appendix D to view the declination form.

Exhibit 1.9: Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarships (TELS) are funded by net lottery proceeds, before excess revenues are transferred to the Promise Endowment

2020-21
Unspent Lottery Revenue
$104M

TELS Expenses
Total $378M

HOPE ($169M)
Aspire ($82M)
GAMS ($45M)
Reconnect ($29M)
Dual Enrollment ($24M)
Wilder-Naifeh ($14M)
All Other/Admin. ($15M)

$10M
additional reserve

$100M
general shortfall
reserve subaccount

2020-21
Net Lottery Proceeds
$482M

2020-21
Tennessee Promise Scholarships
$30M

2020-21
Remaining Unspent Lottery Revenue
$74M

2021-22
Tennessee Promise Scholarship Endowment
Total $775M

Includes $361M nonspendable principal, lottery revenues from previous years, and interest earnings

Notes: (1) GAMS = General Assembly Merit Scholarship. (2) The "All Other/Admin." category includes administrative expenses, the non-traditional HOPE scholarship ($1.2M), TCAT Reconnect ($2.2M), and other TELS programs receiving less than $1M in 2020-21 such as the HOPE Foster Care Grant, Middle College Scholarship, and Helping Heroes Grant.
Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation, August 2021.

State law requires that the lottery education account retain a $110 million reserve: the initial reserve was established when the state lottery was created in 2003, and the remaining $10 million was added when the Tennessee Promise Scholarship Program was adopted in 2014.[41] In the event that there are not enough net lottery proceeds to cover TELS program expenditures, the $10 million reserve would be spent before the $100 million general shortfall reserve. The $10 million reserve does not need to be repaid, but the $100 million general shortfall reserve subaccount must be replenished in the subsequent fiscal year.[42]

Tennessee Reconnect Grants are funded by net lottery proceeds alongside HOPE and other TELS. This differs from Tennessee Promise scholarships, which are funded by the Tennessee Promise Endowment. Since its inception, the Tennessee Promise Endowment Fund has received revenue annually from excess lottery funds and interest accrued from the endowment's investments. The endowment was established in 2014 with excess lottery reserves with the intention that it becomes self-sustaining (i.e., its annual investment earnings would be enough to cover the cost of scholarships each year), at which point Promise scholarships would no longer be funded by net lottery proceeds. Increased expenditures for Reconnect Grants, other TELS programs, and Tennessee Promise scholarships mean less remaining unspent lottery revenues to transfer to the Promise Endowment. Ultimately, this impacts the amount of time it will take for the Tennessee Promise Endowment Fund to become self-sustaining.[43]

Exhibit 1.10 compares the 2020-21 scholarship expenditures and the number of students receiving Tennessee Reconnect Grants in comparison to other TELS programs. In the 2020-21 academic year, the largest expenditure was about $298 million on HOPE Scholarships (including traditional, non-traditional, GAMS, and others).[44] Expenditures for other lottery-funded scholarships were much less by comparison, with a combined total expenditure of about $100 million on Tennessee Promise ($30 million), Tennessee Reconnect

[41] *TCA* 4-51-111(b)(3); *TCA* 49-4-708(d)(7).
[42] According to TSAC, Tennessee had excess lottery funds available when the Promise Endowment was established in 2014, so $10 million was added to the existing $100 million general shortfall reserve subaccount as a safeguard.
[43] The State Treasurer manages the Tennessee Promise Endowment Fund and was not able to provide an estimate for when the Promise Endowment will be self-sustaining. According to a Treasury official, the Promise Endowment relies heavily on three factors: (1) scholarship payments, (2) investment return, and (3) excess lottery funds. All indications are that the Promise Endowment still needs the lottery transfers in the near term, according to the same Treasury official.
[44] The following scholarships were combined: Traditional HOPE, Non-traditional HOPE, General Assembly Merit, Aspire, and the Access and HOPE Foster Care Grants.

($29 million), Dual Enrollment Grants ($24 million), Wilder-Naifeh Technical Skills Grants ($14 million), and TCAT Reconnect ($2 million). The HOPE scholarships served the most students (76,544) followed by Dual Enrollment Grants (31,210), while a total of 11,648 students received Tennessee Reconnect Grants.

Exhibit 1.10: The majority of TELS expenditures are for HOPE scholarships | 2020-21 academic year

31,210 students
$24,427,561

11,648 students
$29,069,338

16,633 students
$30,449,206

2,058 students
$2,215,621

11,033 students
$13,725,144

76,544 students
$297,894,400

Legend:
- HOPE*
- Wilder-Naifeh
- TCAT Reconnect
- TN Promise
- TN Reconnect^
- Dual Enrollment
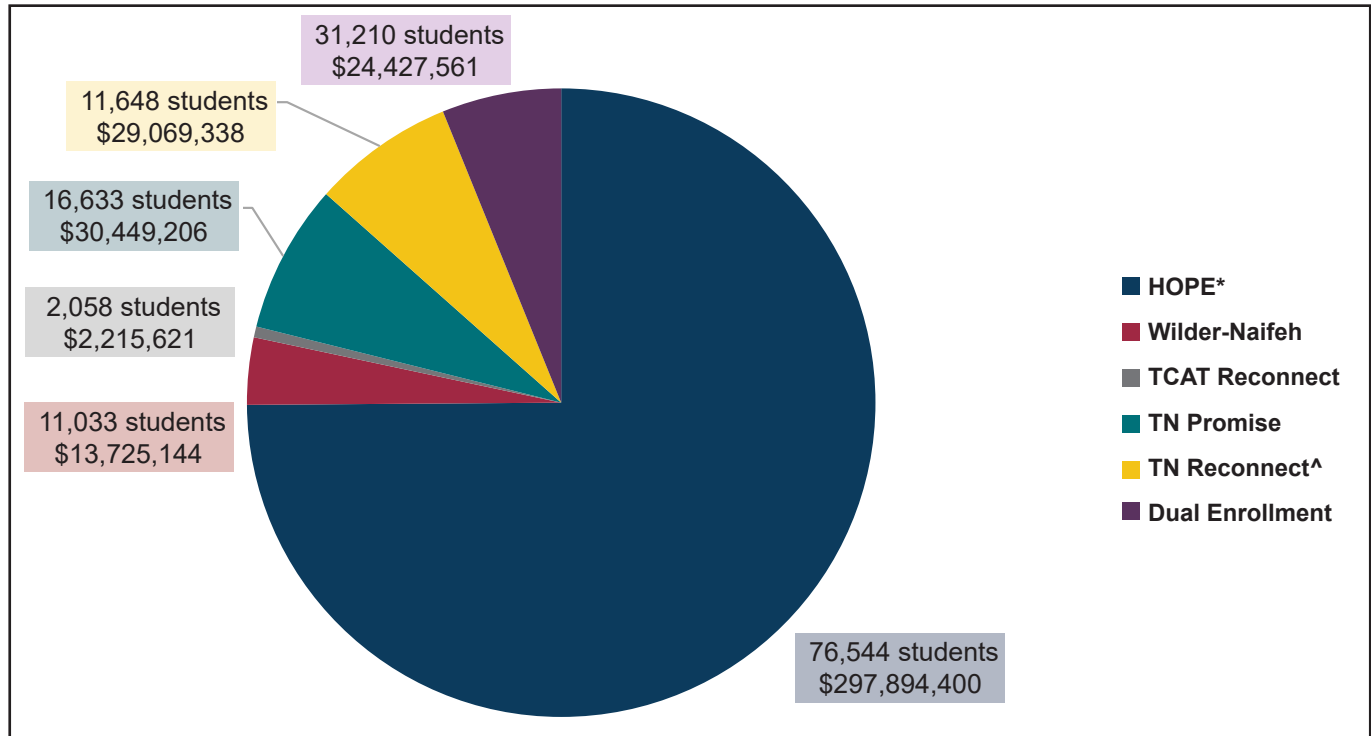
2020-21	Students	Total expenditure	Expenditure-per-student
HOPE*	76,544	$297,894,400	$3,891.81
TN Reconnect^	11,648	$29,069,338	$2,495.65
TN Promise	16,633	$30,449,206	$1,830.65
Wilder-Naifeh	11,033	$13,725,144	$1,244.01
TCAT Reconnect	2,058	$2,215,621	$1,076.59
Dual Enrollment	31,210	$24,427,561	$782.68

Notes: (1) *In this exhibit, the following scholarships are combined in the HOPE category: Traditional HOPE, Non-traditional HOPE, General Assembly Merit, Aspire, and the Access and HOPE Foster Care Grants. (2) There are additional lottery-funded scholarships that are not represented in this exhibit, such as the Helping Heroes Grant and Middle College Scholarship. (3) ^This exhibit includes students who received Reconnect Grant funds in 2020-21 and excludes students who participate in the program but do not receive Reconnect funds because their tuition and mandatory fees are covered by other sources of gift aid. As a result, the number of Reconnect students represented in this exhibit may differ from figures reported elsewhere in this evaluation.
Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation, TELS Summary Report.

When considering expenditures per student in 2020-21, HOPE scholarships were awarded at the highest amount per student ($3,891) followed by Tennessee Reconnect ($2,495) and Promise ($1,830). HOPE scholarships are awarded most often to students attending public and private four-year colleges and universities, which charge higher tuition rates than community colleges, where most Reconnect and Promise students enroll. The remaining scholarship expenditures featured in the exhibit were less than $1,500 per student.

Program expenditures and cost per student are a function of the number of students who receive the scholarship and the scholarship award amount. In 2020-21, HOPE scholarships represented the largest portion of TELS expenditures and the highest expenditure per student. This is because they were awarded to the most students that year (76,544) and are awarded at higher amounts compared to other scholarships (i.e., awards range from $2,625 to $9,000 per year based on need, merit, and institution). By comparison, Tennessee Reconnect is awarded as a last-dollar scholarship and will cover a student's remaining tuition and

mandatory fees after other gift aid has been applied. A Reconnect student's award amount could range from $0 to the full cost of tuition and mandatory fees at a community college, which was between $2,200 and $4,300 annually in the first two years of the program (2018-19 and 2019-20), depending on the student's course load.

Exhibit 1.11 compares the annual expenditures for Tennessee Reconnect and Promise, the number of students served, and expenditure per student for the first three years of the Reconnect program (2018-19, 2019-20, and 2020-21). Overall, Reconnect serves fewer students compared to Promise and the annual expenditures reflect that trend.[45] Even though an average of 3,700 fewer Reconnect students were served by the program annually compared to Promise, more money is spent per Reconnect student than Promise student. In the first three years of the program, Reconnect students were awarded an average of about $500 more per year compared to Promise students. This is noteworthy because Reconnect students enrolled in fewer credit hours than Promise students (i.e., Reconnect students enrolled in an average of 9 credit hours while Promise students are required to enroll in at least 12 credit hours), which means tuition and mandatory fee charges are less for Reconnect students.

Exhibit 1.11: Annual expenditures and the number of students receiving awards are greater for Promise, but Reconnect awards more money per student
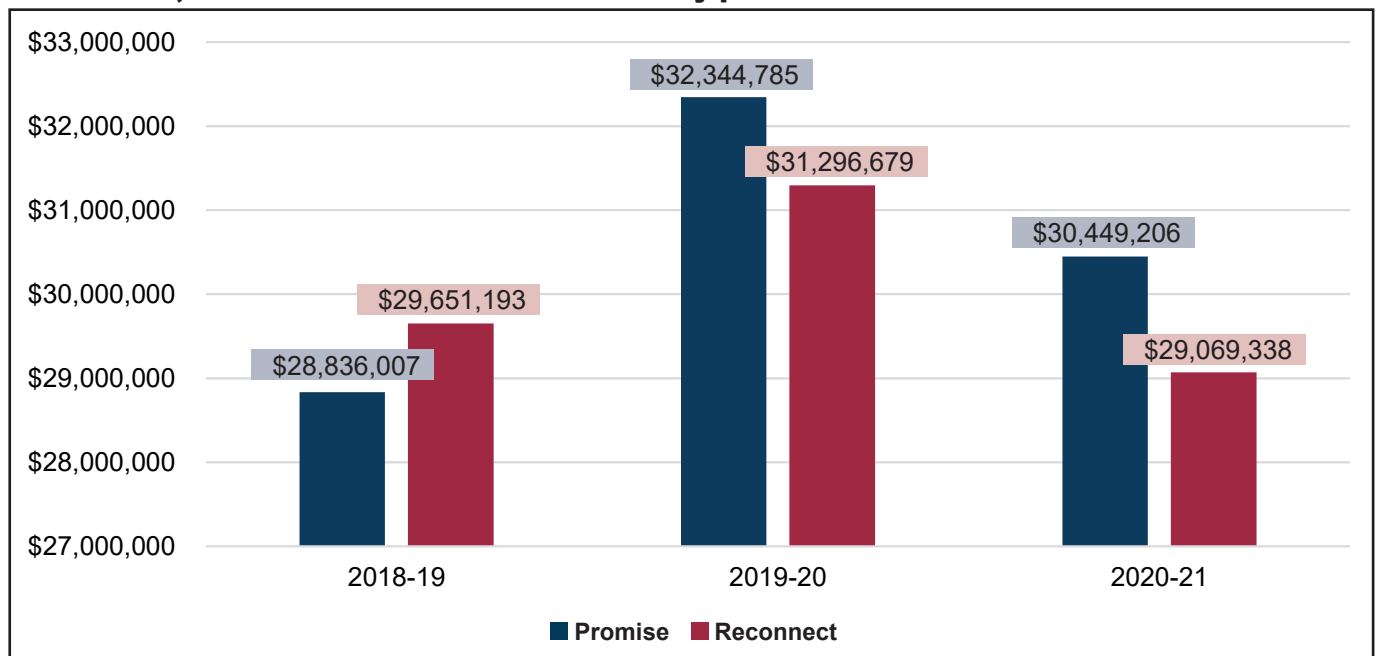
		Students	Total expenditure	Expenditure-per-student
	Reconnect	12,382	$29,651,193.00	$2,394.70
2018-19	Promise	15,341	$28,836,007.00	$1,879.67
	Difference	**(2,959)**	**$815,186.00**	**$515.03**
	Reconnect	12,735	$31,296,679.00	$2,457.53
2019-20	Promise	16,082	$32,344,785.00	$2,011.24
	Difference	**(3,347)**	**$(1,048,106.00)**	**$446.29**
	Reconnect	11,648	$29,069,338.00	$2,495.65
2020-21	Promise	16,633	$30,449,206.00	$1,830.65
	Difference	**(4,985)**	**$(1,379,868.00)**	**$665.00**

Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation, TELS Summary Report.

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[45] Except for the first year of the program, when about $800,000 more was spent on Reconnect Grants than Promise scholarships.

It is likely that Reconnect students receive more program funding than Promise students because Reconnect students are less likely to be eligible for other gift aid that would cover some or all of the cost of their tuition and mandatory fees. Both Reconnect and Promise are awarded on a last-dollar basis after other gift aid has been applied to the student's tuition and mandatory fee bill. Reconnect students who were previously enrolled in college may be less likely to qualify for other gift aid, such as the Pell Grant, if they have exhausted their length of eligibility or are in poor academic standing. Promise students, who are required to enroll in college immediately after high school, will receive the Pell Grant so long as they meet the financial need criteria. See pages 21-22 for more details.

Reconnect students can receive one-on-one guidance from a Navigator

Navigate Reconnect[46] provides general guidance and assistance to adult learners in Tennessee, including, but not limited to, Reconnect students. All Tennessee adults are eligible for Navigate Reconnect services at no cost, even if they do not participate in the Tennessee Reconnect Grant program. Navigate Reconnect staff, called "Navigators," based in regions across the state, 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 through graduation.

Reconnect students are given the option to work with a Navigator but are not required to do so. About 5,600 (21 percent) of Reconnect students from cohorts 1 and 2 worked with a Navigator.

Navigate Reconnect assists adult students on and off campus. For example, Navigators connect adult students with local resources such as childcare and affordable transportation options, make direct referrals to campus contacts (e.g., financial aid, admissions, academic advising), and provide encouragement throughout the process.

Navigators serve adult learners and Reconnect students in three regions: West, Middle, and East Tennessee. Each region is led by a director who is charged with making new and maintaining existing relationships among regional higher education institutions, employers, nonprofit organizations, and other agencies. Most Navigators are state-funded. Two locally funded Navigators serve students enrolled in Nashville State Community College.

Exhibit 1.12 shows the three Navigator service regions, the assigned community colleges, and the number of counties and Navigators per region.

Exhibit 1.12: There are 14 Navigators serving students across three regions

Region	Community colleges	Number of counties	Number of Navigators
West	Dyersburg State Jackson State Southwest	20	1 director 3 state-funded Navigators
Middle	Columbia State Motlow State Nashville State Volunteer State	39	1 director 4 state-funded Navigators 2 locally funded Navigators
East	Chattanooga State Cleveland State Northeast State Pellissippi State Roane State Walters State	36	1 director 5 state-funded Navigators

Source: OREA analysis of data provided by Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

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[46] Navigate Reconnect replaced what were formerly known as Tennessee Reconnect Communities on July 1, 2019.

Current and prospective adult students may learn about the services provided by Navigators from a word-of-mouth referral, the Tennessee Reconnect website,[47] or through information included in their Reconnect success plan. (Reconnect applicants receive a personalized success plan after completing the program application. See the following section for more details.) Regardless of how an individual makes initial contact with a Navigator, he or she is asked to complete an online intake form with questions about previous college enrollment, socioeconomic status, anticipated barriers to college enrollment, and demographics.[48] This information allows Navigators to assess an individual's eligibility for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, other scholarships, and financial aid, as well as troubleshoot potential enrollment challenges (i.e., if a student indicates they owe an outstanding balance to a previously attended college, the Navigator is able to advise the student that he or she must clear the outstanding balance before the institution will release their transcripts).[49]

The Reconnect application generates a personalized Reconnect Success Plan

State law[50] requires Reconnect students to participate in a college success program, as created by THEC, to maintain grant eligibility. The Reconnect Grant application, which is required for initial program eligibility and annually thereafter, asks a series of questions that generate a personalized Reconnect Success Plan. This fulfills the student's statutory requirement to participate in a college success program.

Similar to the Navigate Reconnect intake form, the Reconnect application asks questions about previous college enrollment, socioeconomic status, demographics, and perceived barriers to college success. The Reconnect application also asks if students intend to work while enrolled in college, if they have dependent children, their desired course schedule (i.e., if they are available to attend class in-person or online, weekdays, evenings, or weekends), and if they have access to the internet and transportation. See Appendix B to view the Reconnect application questions.

After completing the Reconnect application, students receive a personalized Reconnect Success Plan, which connects them to college and community resources. While each Success Plan is tailored to the individual student, a typical plan includes contact information for the regional Navigator and campus offices (e.g., financial aid, admissions and records, student support center, etc.) at the student's chosen institution. The plan also includes instructions to collect previous college transcripts, if applicable to the student, and links to learn more information about available degree programs, financial aid, and institutional scholarships. These resources are intended to help students overcome barriers that may prevent initial enrollment. Other resources included in the plan, such as computer and internet access locations as well as textbook rental options, are included to help students remain enrolled and on track to earn a credential. See Appendix C to view a sample Reconnect Success Plan.

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[47] Tennessee Reconnect, Talk to a Navigator, www.tnreconnect.gov/talk-to-a-navigator.
[48] Appendix A contains the intake form questions.
[49] Clearing a student's outstanding balance at previously attended institutions is not required by state or federal law, rule, or policy, but institutions are required to confirm if a student has previously earned a degree. To do this, a student's prior transcripts must be reviewed. Most institutions will not release transcripts if the student owes an outstanding balance.
[50] *TCA* 49-4-944(d)(6).

Section 2: Who applies for the grant and enrolls as a Reconnect student

Background and research methods

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant is part of the statewide effort to increase the number of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential to 55 percent by 2025. In particular, the Reconnect program supports college access and completion for adults without a degree. This section explores who goes to college as a Reconnect student through two lenses: who applies for the Reconnect Grant and who completes all the application requirements to become a Reconnect student. Since most Reconnect students in cohorts 1 through 3 attended community colleges, this section focuses specifically on applicants who intended to enroll at a community college.

In this report section, OREA analyzed Reconnect application data obtained from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), including demographic, socioeconomic, and geographic data for Reconnect applicants and students in the first three cohorts of the Reconnect program from fall 2018 to fall 2020. Application data also included applicants' answers to questions related to barriers (e.g., what an applicant considers to be their greatest challenge and whether an applicant has internet access or transportation). Applicant and student data were combined with data from the American Community Survey to compare applicant trends to the greater statewide population.

Application data was also combined with enrollment and financial aid data from THEC, as well as qualitative data from OREA's November 2020 survey of community college administrators. Together, these data points were used to track which Reconnect applicants ultimately became Reconnect students and which applicants received Reconnect dollars. Once a Reconnect applicant completes the application requirements and enrolls in college, they become a Reconnect student and can begin receiving the Reconnect Grant, on a last-dollar basis, for up to five years while enrolled.

The following section describes the characteristics and trends of students who applied for the program and became Reconnect students.

Section 1			Section 2: Access		Section 3: Progression Credit accumulation		Section 4: Completion Credential attainment and enrollment status		Section 5
How Tennessee Reconnect works	Cohort	Semester that Reconnect student entered program	Application rate	Enrollment rate	End of 1st academic year	End of 2nd academic year	1 year after enrollment	2 years after enrollment	Tennessee and the Drive to 55: Where are we now?
	1	Fall 18-Summer 19	yes	yes	Summer 19	Summer 20	Fall 19, Spring/ Summer 20	Fall 20, Spring/ Summer 21	
	2	Fall 19-Summer 20	yes	yes	Summer 20	Summer 21	Fall 20, Spring/ Summer 21	Fall 21, Spring/ Summer 22	
	3	Fall 20-Summer 21	yes	yes	Summer 21	Summer 22	Fall 21, Spring/ Summer 22	Fall 22, Spring/ Summer 23	
	Included in this report				Not included in this report				

Who applied and became a Reconnect student?

Between fall 2018 and fall 2020, 91,180 people applied to become a Reconnect student at one of the state's 13 community colleges. By fall 2020, 32,236 adults (35 percent of applicants) had become Reconnect students. The remaining 58,944 applicants did not become Reconnect students.

OREA used data from THEC to analyze students and applicants by their demographic, socioeconomic, and academic traits. The text box to the right describes a typical Reconnect student from the first three years of the program based on average and median characteristics.

The available data can be split into three cohorts based on academic years. The first cohort includes students who applied and enrolled between fall 2018 and summer 2019, and the second includes those who applied and enrolled between fall 2019 and summer 2020. Reconnect students who applied and enrolled between fall 2020 and summer 2021 are considered part of the third cohort; however, due to data availability, this report includes data only through fall 2020. Subsequent evaluations of Tennessee Reconnect will provide a more comprehensive analysis of cohort 3.

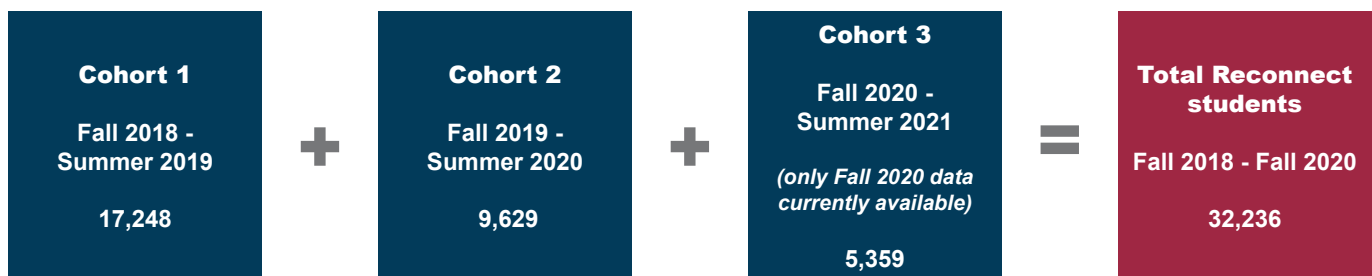| Typical Reconnect Student		
Demographic	**Socioeconomic**	**Academic**
• White • Female • 32 years old	• Annual income of $31,040 • Plans to work full-time during their first year • Cares for dependents • Receives between $1,186 and $1,436 in Reconnect funds per term	• Has earned 12+ credits prior to program enrollment • Enrolls in 9 credit hours in their first term • Earns a 2.79 term GPA in the fall and a 2.87 term GPA in the spring

Note: Age is based on birth year only, so the true average age of a Reconnect student may vary slightly. Based on students who enrolled between fall 2018 through fall 2020; characteristics of a typical Reconnect student may change over time.

As shown in Exhibit 2.1, the first cohort contained 17,248 students. The second cohort was smaller, with 9,629 students. In the fall of 2020, 5,359 Reconnect students enrolled as part of cohort 3. Of the 32,236 Reconnect students in cohorts 1 through 3, 101 students (roughly 0.3 percent) submitted their applications in some way other than the online portal. Because of this, OREA was unable to access application data for these students. While these 101 students are included in general headcounts of Reconnect students throughout this section, they have been excluded from all analyses that involve application data.

A majority of Reconnect students (76 percent) in cohorts 1 and 2 enrolled in the fall; if this trend continues, cohort 3 would be smaller than the first two cohorts. The first cohort may have been larger due to the advertising campaigns that preceded the implementation of Reconnect in fall 2018, as well as the fact that most eligible students who were already enrolled took advantage of the grant during its first year. Cohort 3 (and to a lesser extent, cohort 2) may have been smaller due to the impacts of COVID-19.

Exhibit 2.1: Cohorts have decreased in size since the program's implementation

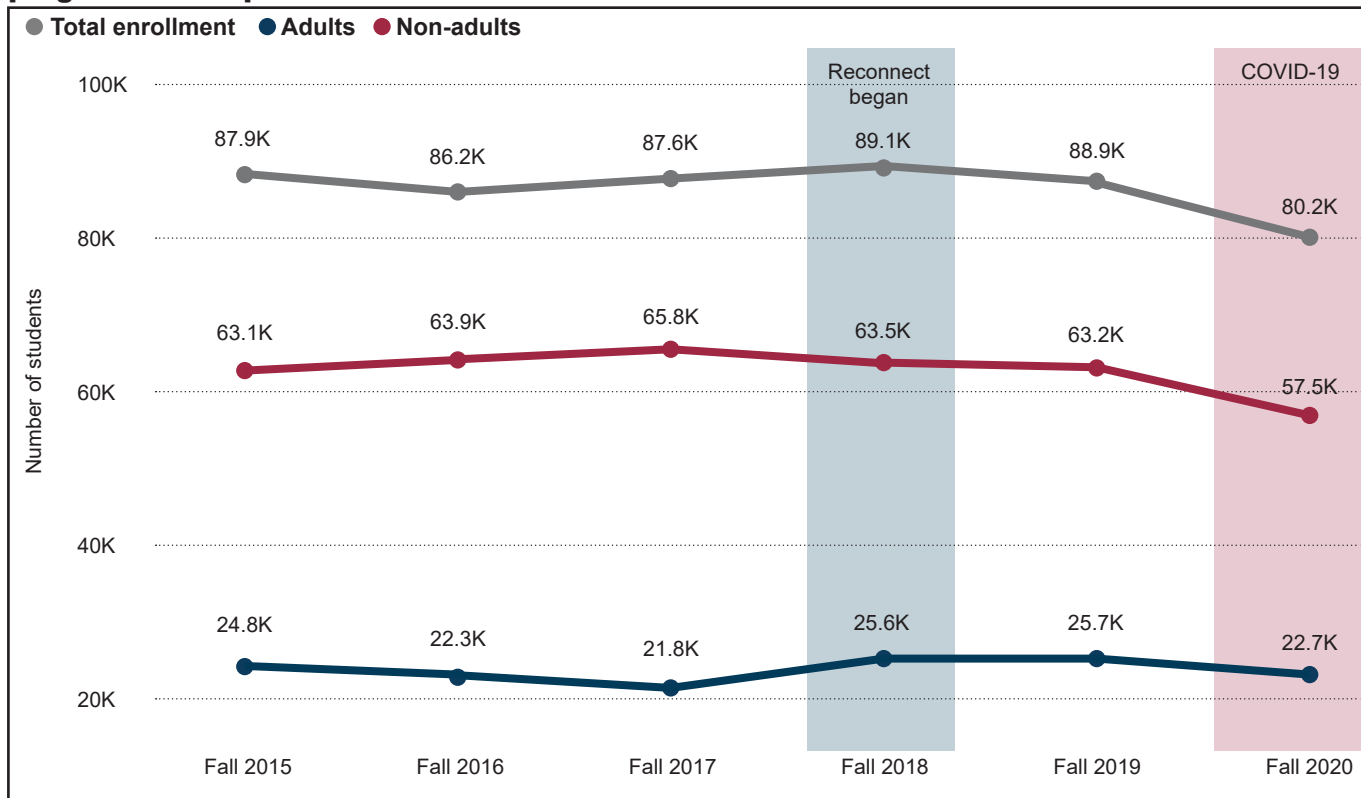| Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	Total Reconnect students
Fall 2018 - Summer 2019	Fall 2019 - Summer 2020	Fall 2020 - Summer 2021 *(only Fall 2020 data currently available)*	Fall 2018 - Fall 2020
17,248	**9,629**	**5,359**	**32,236**

Source: Tennessee Higher Education Commission Reconnect applicant data.

Data suggests that the implementation of Reconnect is correlated with an increase in the number of adult students attending community college. As shown in Exhibit 2.2, 21,805 adult students were enrolled at a community college in fall 2017. By fall 2018, this number had grown to 25,565, representing a 17 percent increase.

This increase led to a higher ratio of adult students to non-adult students. In fall 2017, adult students (age 25 and over) made up 24.9 percent of the state's total community college headcount. By fall 2018, the first Reconnect term, the share of adult students had increased to 28.7 percent (an increase of nearly 4 percentage points).

Adult enrollment continued to increase, peaking at 28.9 percent of the state's total community college headcount in fall 2019. While adult enrollment decreased due to COVID-19 in fall 2020, it is important to note that overall enrollment also decreased.

Exhibit 2.2: Adult student enrollment at community colleges increased after the Reconnect program was implemented

Legend: ● Total enrollment ● Adults ● Non-adults

Data points (Number of students):
- Total enrollment: Fall 2015: 87.9K, Fall 2016: 86.2K, Fall 2017: 87.6K, Fall 2018: 89.1K, Fall 2019: 88.9K, Fall 2020: 80.2K
- Non-adults: Fall 2015: 63.1K, Fall 2016: 63.9K, Fall 2017: 65.8K, Fall 2018: 63.5K, Fall 2019: 63.2K, Fall 2020: 57.5K
- Adults: Fall 2015: 24.8K, Fall 2016: 22.3K, Fall 2017: 21.8K, Fall 2018: 25.6K, Fall 2019: 25.7K, Fall 2020: 22.7K

Reconnect began (Fall 2018); COVID-19 (Fall 2020)

Year before and first year of Reconnect				
	2017	**2018**	**Total change**	
Total enrollment	87,569	89,078	1,509	1.72%
Non-adults	65,764	63,513	-2,252	-3.42%
Adults	21,805	25,565	3,761	17.25%

Notes: Adults are age 25 and older; non-adults are 24 and younger. Numbers may differ from other references throughout this report because this figure includes dually enrolled students.
Source: Tennessee Higher Education Commission Factbooks, 2016-2021.

Exhibit 2.3 examines the Reconnect applicants from cohorts 1, 2, and 3, including the number who became Reconnect students at community colleges and the other options pursued by applicants who did not enroll at a community college.

Since the Reconnect program's implementation, the number of new applicants has declined (from nearly 42,000 in cohort 1 to 23,000 in cohort 3). However, the growing number of returning student applications has softened this decline.

Exhibit 2.3: The number of new Reconnect applicants and enrollees has declined over time

2,410,457 Tennesseans age 25+ with a high school diploma but no associate degree	**41,830** applicants in cohort 1	**17,248** enrolled as a Reconnect student at a community college
		24,582 did not enroll as a Reconnect student at a community college
	42,153 applicants in cohort 2 *(26,560 new applicants, 15,593 repeat)*	**9,629** enrolled as a Reconnect student at a community college
		9,168 students from Cohort 1 stayed enrolled
		23,356 did not enroll as a Reconnect student at a community college
	39,369 applicants in cohort 3 *(fall 2020 only)* *(22,790 new applicants, 16,579 repeat)*	**5,359** enrolled as a Reconnect student at a community college
		9,581 students from Cohorts 1 & 2 stayed enrolled
		24,429 did not enroll as a Reconnect student at a community college

Notes: (1) The number of Tennesseans age 25+ with a high school diploma but no associate degree does not include an upper age limit. Since most Reconnect students (99.4 percent) are under age 65, the number of Tennesseans between ages 25 and 64 with a high school diploma but no associate degree (1,868,063) may provide a closer estimate of how many individuals are eligible for Reconnect. (2) As a last-dollar scholarship, the Reconnect Grant is applied to a student's tuition and mandatory fees after other gift aid (i.e., TELS, TSAA, Pell grant) have been applied. Some students do not receive Reconnect Grant funds because their tuition and mandatory fees are covered by other sources of gift aid. Students are considered Reconnect students if they completed all program requirements and enrolled in college as part of the program, regardless of the amount of Reconnect Grant funds they receive. (3) Students in this table are considered to have stayed enrolled if they remained enrolled for the fall semester following their initial application, regardless of whether they remained a part of the Reconnect program.
Sources: Tennessee Higher Education Commission applicant data; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, five-year average.

Institutions recruit Reconnect students through academic events, community organizations, and social media, among other methods

In a November 2020 survey, OREA asked community college administrators to provide information on how their institutions recruited prospective Reconnect students. According to the survey, all thirteen community colleges hold information sessions to recruit students. Institutions also recruited students through various community events and organizations.

Reconnect information sessions were the most popular sites for recruitment. Ninety-five percent of administrators stated that their institutions recruit students at these sessions either monthly or several times per year.

Institutions also recruited Reconnect students at new student orientation sessions. While these sessions are typically geared toward traditional incoming freshmen, some parents who accompany their students may be eligible for the Reconnect Grant. Ninety-one percent of administrators stated that their institutions recruit students at these sessions either monthly or several times per year. Data from OREA's interviews suggest that this may be a relatively new strategy. After noticing a growing number of parents accompanying traditional students at these orientation sessions, orientation directors at two different community colleges began using these sessions as an opportunity to promote Reconnect.

> "We noticed we had a rise of parents in new student orientation. We started incorporating Reconnect in our parent sessions."
>
> Community college orientation director during 2020 interview with OREA

Career fairs, businesses, and meetings for the Tennessee Promise scholarship (i.e., speaking to parents who attend the meeting with their high school senior) were also popular recruitment locations. Some administrators indicated that their institutions occasionally recruit students through churches. See Exhibit 2.4.

Exhibit 2.4: All 13 community colleges frequently use Reconnect info sessions and orientation sessions for recruitment

How often does your institution recruit Reconnect students in the following locations? (n=174)

■ Several times per year ■ Every month

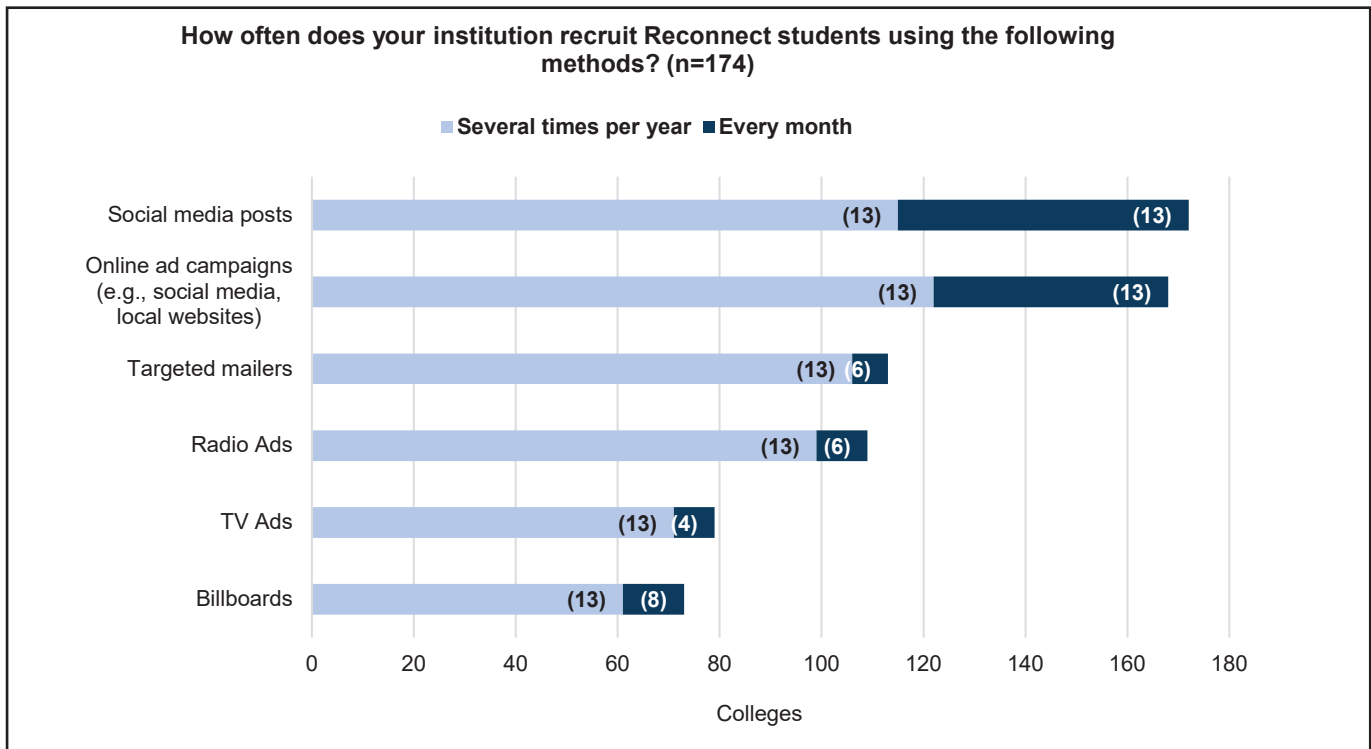| Location	Several times per year	Every month
Reconnect info sessions (on campus or virtually)	(13)	(10)
New student orientation sessions (i.e., speaking to parents who attend orientation with their incoming freshman)	(13)	(5)
Job/career fairs	(13)	(8)
Businesses	(13)	(10)
Mandatory meetings for Promise (i.e., speaking to parents who attend the meeting with their high school senior)	(13)	(6)
Churches	(13)	

Colleges (x-axis: 0, 50, 100, 150)

Source: OREA survey of community college administrators, November 2020.

Community colleges also promote the Reconnect Grant through promotional materials and advertisements. According to results from OREA's survey, the internet is the most popular medium for Reconnect student recruitment. Nearly all community college administrators who responded to this question (172 out of 174) indicated that their institution recruits Reconnect students through social media posts at least several times per year. Online ad campaigns were also popular; 97 percent of survey respondents stated their institution used online ad campaigns at least several times per year.

While more traditional advertising channels (such as radio ads, TV commercials, billboards, and mailers) were less popular, institutions still used them. Between 63 and 65 percent of respondents stated that their institutions used radio ads and targeted mailers at least several times per year. Between 42 and 45 percent of respondents noted that their institutions used TV commercials and billboards at least several times per year.

**Exhibit 2.5: Institutions frequently recruit Reconnect students through social media and online ad campaigns**

How often does your institution recruit Reconnect students using the following methods? (n=174)

■ Several times per year ■ Every month

Method	
Social media posts	(13) (13)
Online ad campaigns (e.g., social media, local websites)	(13) (13)
Targeted mailers	(13) (6)
Radio Ads	(13) (6)
TV Ads	(13) (4)
Billboards	(13) (8)

Colleges (0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100, 120, 140, 160, 180)

Source: OREA survey of community college administrators, November 2020.

Basic demographics

Most Reconnect students were between the ages of 25 and 44

The average age of a Reconnect student when they first enroll in the program is 32.[51] Between fall 2018 and fall 2020, most Reconnect students (67 percent) were between the ages of 25 and 44 years, as depicted in Exhibit 2.6. Just over 12 percent of Reconnect students were over the age of 44.

Exhibit 2.6: Nearly two-thirds of Reconnect students from cohorts 1-3 were between the ages of 25 and 44

- 0.2%
- 20.3%
- 67.1%
- 12.3%

Legend:
- 18 to 24 years
- 25 to 44 years
- 45 to 64 years
- 65 and over
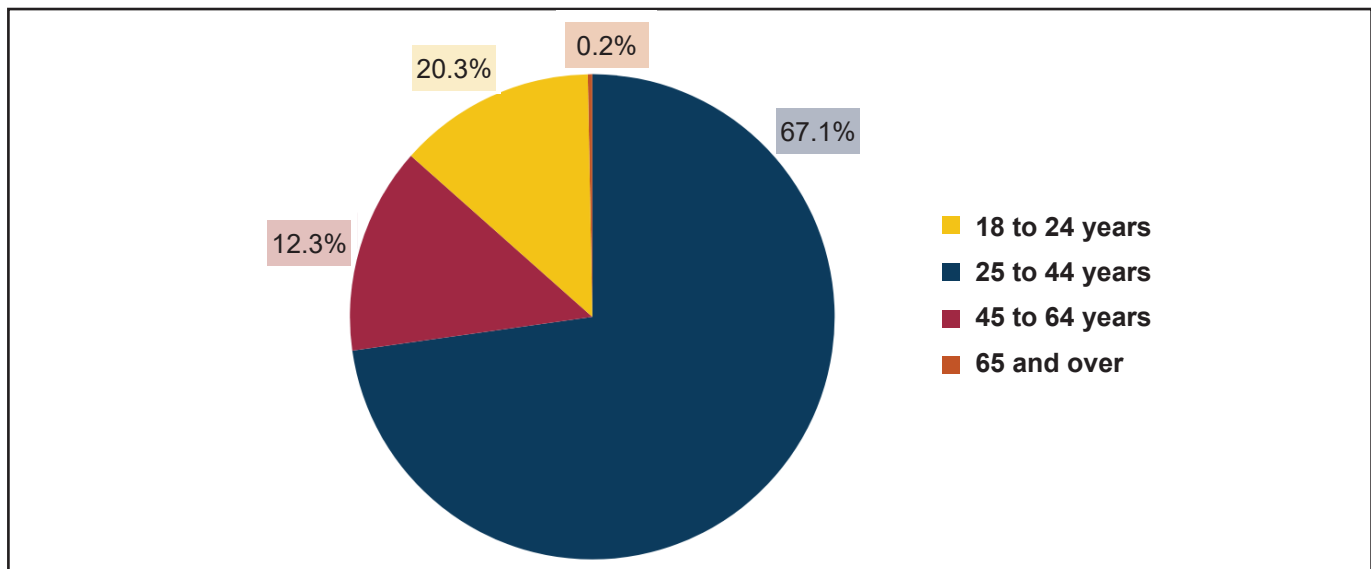
Source: OREA analysis of THEC data.
Note: Values will not total 100 percent because Reconnect students under the age of 18 (roughly 0.1 percent) are not shown.

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[51] OREA did not receive data on students' birth months. Ages were derived by subtracting students' birth years from one year less than the year the student first got Reconnect to ensure that students were of that age or greater. Thus, some calculated ages may be understated by one year from the true value.

As explained in section 1, an applicant must qualify as an independent student to be eligible for the Reconnect program. Students automatically qualify as independent once they reach the age of 24; however, some students under 24 are considered independent if they experience a qualifying life event.[52] Of all Reconnect students at community colleges, roughly 13 percent were under age 24. Less than half of these students (43 percent) indicated that they were caring for dependents while enrolled, according to information provided on their Reconnect application.

As part of OREA's November 2020 survey, administrators were asked to identify how Tennessee Reconnect might have changed the student body at their institution. More than half of administrators who responded (57 percent) identified a noticeable increase in the average age of their institution's student body.

More than two-thirds of Reconnect students were female

Roughly 71 percent of both Reconnect applicants and students who reported their gender were female. Despite this, males were more likely than females to receive Reconnect funds. Just over three-quarters (78 percent) of male Reconnect students received Reconnect funds, compared to 66 percent of female Reconnect students.

Notable differences exist between male and female Reconnect students. For instance, female Reconnect students were 22 percentage points more likely to have dependents and 11 percentage points less likely to indicate plans to work fulltime while enrolled.[53] Females were also 8 percentage points more likely to have earned a certificate or diploma from a technical college before enrolling as a Reconnect student.

The median income for a female Reconnect student is $29,991, compared to $34,000 for male Reconnect students (a $4,009 difference).[54] Compared to males, females were 8 percentage points more likely to be eligible for the Pell Grant at some point during their enrollment history. Since need-based types of financial aid like the Pell Grant are applied before Reconnect, this helps to explain why females are less likely to receive Reconnect funds.

Black and Hispanic Tennesseans become Reconnect students at disproportionately higher rates than White Tennesseans

Data suggests that Black and Hispanic Tennesseans apply for and become Reconnect students at disproportionately higher rates than White Tennesseans.[55] While White Tennesseans make up 77 percent of the Reconnect-eligible population, 2.4 percent of White Tennesseans applied and 1.2 percent enrolled. Among Tennessee's Black population (roughly 17 percent of the Reconnect-eligible population), 4.7 percent of residents applied and 1.6 percent enrolled. Hispanic Tennesseans make up 3 percent of the Reconnect-eligible population; of the Hispanic population, 3.8 percent applied and 1.8 percent enrolled. Exhibit 2.7 illustrates this breakdown by race/ethnicity.

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[52] To qualify as an independent student, an applicant must be at least 24 years old, married, have a child or other dependent(s), serve actively in the military or be a veteran, be orphaned or have lived in foster care, be an emancipated minor, or be an unaccompanied youth who is homeless or self-supporting.
[53] This statistic does not include the 795 female Reconnect students who indicated plans to work multiple jobs while enrolled.
[54] To calculate income, OREA used a student's self-reported adjusted gross income from their first year as a Reconnect student.
[55] U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, one-year estimate.

Exhibit 2.7: When looking at the statewide eligible population, Black and Hispanic Tennesseans apply and enroll at higher rates than White Tennesseans
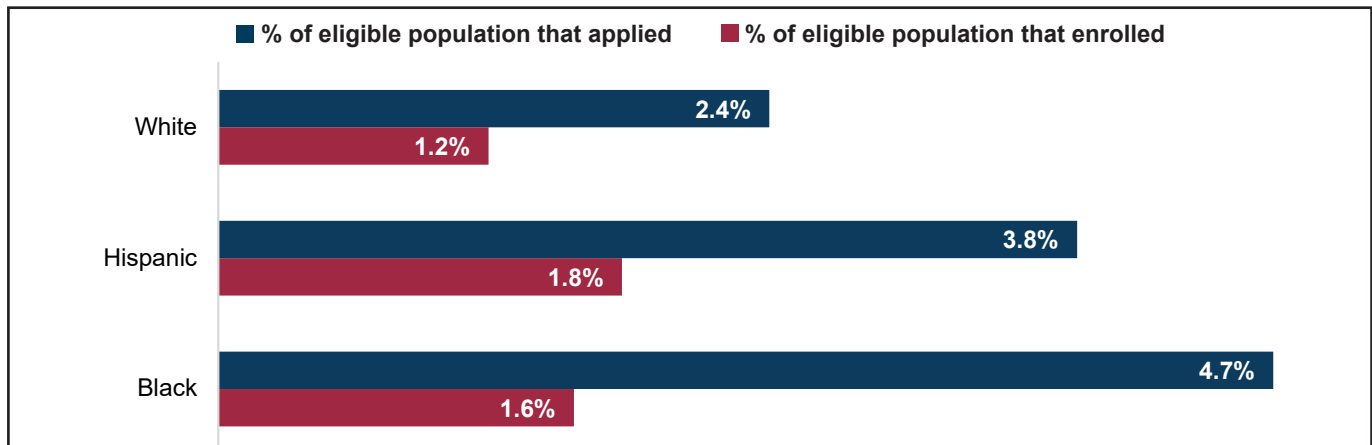
■ % of eligible population that applied   ■ % of eligible population that enrolled

White — applied: 2.4% / enrolled: 1.2%
Hispanic — applied: 3.8% / enrolled: 1.8%
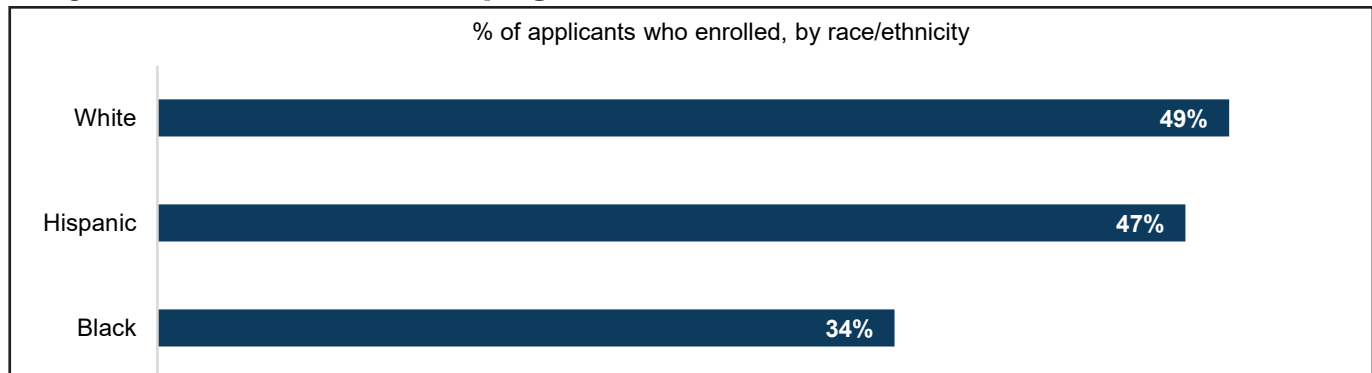Black — applied: 4.7% / enrolled: 1.6%

Sources: Tennessee Higher Education Commission applicant data; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, one-year estimate.

Based on the figures in Exhibit 2.7, Black Tennesseans were 2.3 percentage points more likely to apply for the program and 0.4 percentage points more likely to enroll in the program than White Tennesseans. Similarly, Hispanic Tennesseans were 1.4 percentage points more likely to apply and 0.6 percentage points more likely to enroll when compared to White Tennesseans.

However, when looking at applicants alone rather than the statewide Reconnect-eligible population, White applicants were more likely to enroll in the Reconnect program. Forty-nine percent of White applicants enrolled as Reconnect students, compared to 47 percent of Hispanic applicants and 34 percent of Black applicants.

Exhibit 2.8: When looking at the share of applicants who enroll, White applicants are more likely to enroll in the Reconnect program

% of applicants who enrolled, by race/ethnicity

White — 49%
Hispanic — 47%
Black — 34%

Sources: Tennessee Higher Education Commission applicant data; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, five-year average.

A relatively low share of Reconnect students were veterans

Just over 5 percent of Reconnect applicants and students were veterans as compared with the 8.5 percent of Tennessee's adult civilian population who are veterans.[56] The application rate for veterans may be disproportionately low due to other financial aid programs that are available to veterans at both the state and federal level. The Helping Heroes Grant, for example, is a state grant that provided $414,522 in funds to 287 student veterans in fiscal year 2019-20.[57]

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[56] U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, five-year average.
[57] https://comptroller.tn.gov/content/dam/cot/orea/advanced-search/2021/VeteransReport.pdf, p.15

Veteran Reconnect students were similar to non-veteran students in terms of their work plans. However, Veteran Reconnect students differed from non-veteran Reconnect students in several ways. Veteran Reconnect students made roughly $4,000 more per year compared to non-veteran Reconnect students. Veterans were also more likely to be male; while 70 percent of all veteran Reconnect students were male, 27 percent of non-veteran Reconnect students were male. In addition, veteran Reconnect students were two years older on average than non-veteran students. Veteran Reconnect students were also 4 percentage points less likely to cite family responsibilities as their greatest challenge. This makes sense given that veteran Reconnect students were 6 percentage points less likely to care for dependents while enrolled.

Half of all Reconnect students were first-generation students

First-generation college students who find college application and enrollment procedures difficult to navigate may benefit from some of the wraparound support services provided through the Reconnect program.

Fifty percent of Reconnect students who enrolled between fall 2018 and fall 2020 were first-generation college students. First-generation Reconnect students were similar to the overall population of Reconnect students in some regards, including work plans and self-identified challenges. However, first-generation Reconnect students' incomes were $6,234 higher, on average, compared to non-first-generation students. First-generation students were also about two and a half years older, on average, than non-first-generation students. In addition, Hispanic students and female students were more likely to be first-generation compared to the overall population of Reconnect students.

Half of Reconnect students were returning to college after time away; attendance plans varied by cohort
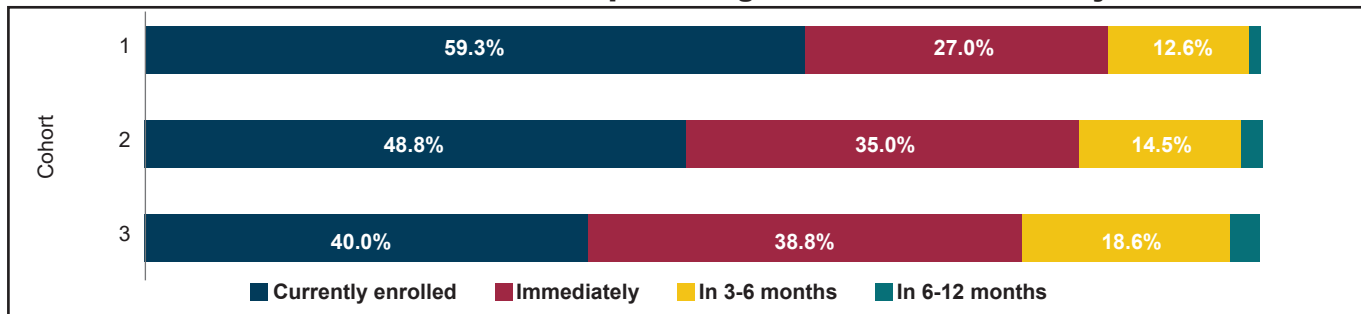
While Tennessee Reconnect is geared toward adults without a degree, under program rules, students are eligible for the Reconnect Grant as long as they have not previously earned an associate or bachelor's degree. This means that individuals who have previously earned a technical diploma from a Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT), for example, are still eligible for the Reconnect Grant. At the time of their enrollment, most Reconnect students (88 percent) had not earned educational credentials beyond a high school diploma or equivalent. The remaining 12 percent of Reconnect students had already obtained a certificate or diploma from a TCAT or other technical college at the time of their application. (See section 3 for more information on students' previous college experience.)

Despite the name of the grant, Tennessee Reconnect is available to students regardless of whether they were previously enrolled in an eligible postsecondary institution. Seventeen percent of all Reconnect students between fall 2018 and fall 2020 were first-time freshmen. Thirty-two percent of Reconnect students were already enrolled when they applied. About half (49 percent) returned to college after spending time unenrolled.[58]

Enrollment plans differed across the first three cohorts of Reconnect students. Students in the first cohort were more likely to be currently enrolled, while students in the second and third cohorts were more likely to enroll immediately after applying. This difference is likely because most eligible students who were already enrolled took advantage of the grant during its first year of implementation. The second and third cohorts captured a larger share of new and re-enrolling students.

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[58] Due to inconsistencies in the available data, roughly 2.6 percent of Reconnect students were omitted from this analysis.

Exhibit 2.9: The first Reconnect cohort captured a greater share of currently enrolled students

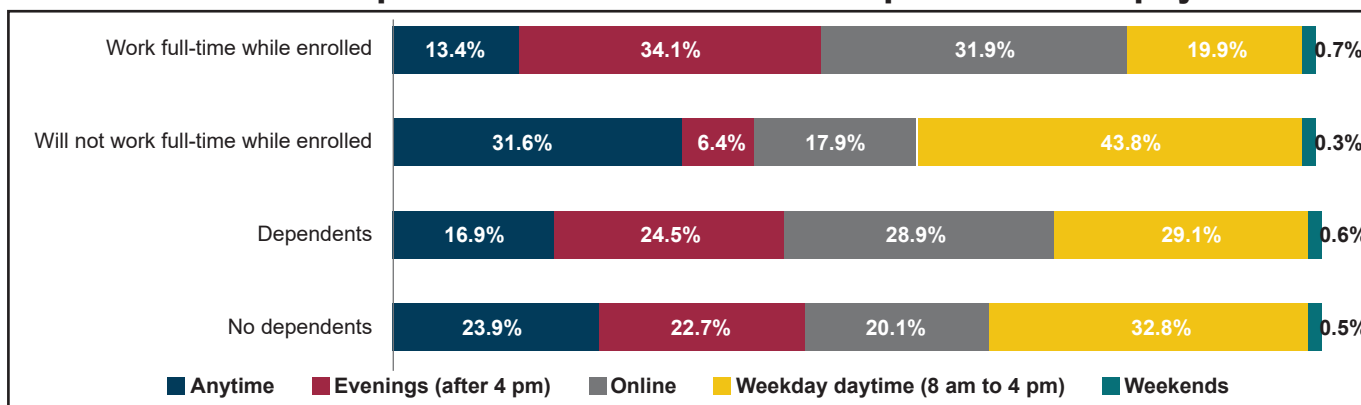| Cohort	Currently enrolled	Immediately	In 3-6 months	In 6-12 months
1	59.3%	27.0%	12.6%	
2	48.8%	35.0%	14.5%	
3	40.0%	38.8%	18.6%	

Source: Tennessee Higher Education Commission applicant data.

Between the three cohorts, nearly a third (31 percent) planned to attend classes in the daytime during the week. Roughly half of all Reconnect students indicated plans to attend evening classes (24 percent) or online classes (25 percent).[59] Cohorts varied in terms of when they planned to attend class. Students from cohort 3 were 15 percentage points more likely to prefer online classes, which may be due (at least in part) to the COVID-19 pandemic. Conversely, students from cohorts 1 and 2 were more likely to prefer weekday and evening classes.

Attendance plans differed based on students' work plans and whether they had dependents under their care. Students with dependents were roughly 9 percentage points more likely to prefer online classes compared to students without dependents. Compared to students who did not plan to work while enrolled, those who planned to work full-time were 14 percentage points more likely to prefer online classes and 28 percentage points more likely to prefer evening classes.

Exhibit 2.10: Attendance plans varied based on students' dependents and employment status

	Anytime	Evenings (after 4 pm)	Online	Weekday daytime (8 am to 4 pm)	Weekends
Work full-time while enrolled	13.4%	34.1%	31.9%	19.9%	0.7%
Will not work full-time while enrolled	31.6%	6.4%	17.9%	43.8%	0.3%
Dependents	16.9%	24.5%	28.9%	29.1%	0.6%
No dependents	23.9%	22.7%	20.1%	32.8%	0.5%

Note: This exhibit does not include applicants who indicated they plan to work part-time or multiple jobs.
Source: THEC applicant data.

According to data from OREA's November 2020 survey, some community colleges adjusted their course delivery methods in response to the Reconnect program. Roughly one-third of the survey's respondents stated that their institution increased online and night course offerings due to Reconnect. Approximately 73 percent of Reconnect students from cohorts 1, 2, and 3 enrolled in at least one online course from fall 2018 through fall 2020.
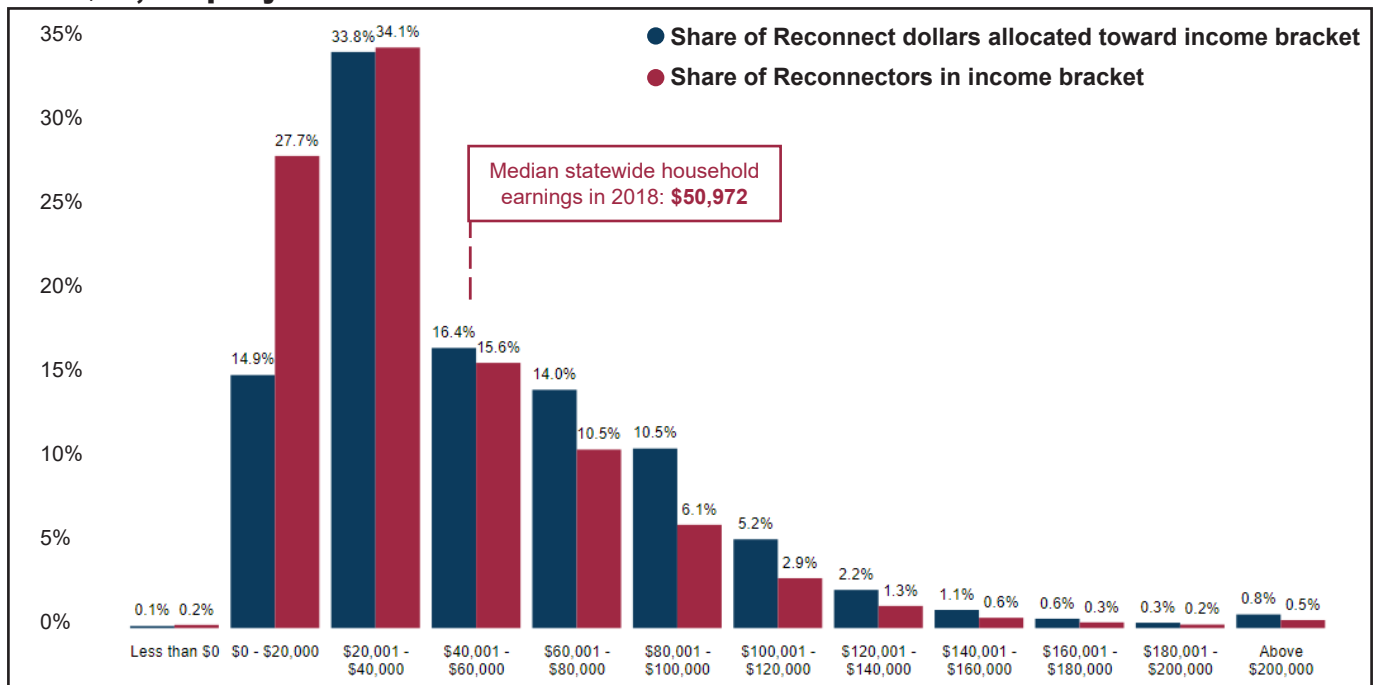
Nearly half of all Reconnect funds went to students who made $40,000 per year or less

The median adjusted gross income for a Reconnect student was $31,040.[60] Nearly half of all Reconnect funds (49 percent) were allocated to the 62 percent of Reconnect students who made less than $40,000 per year. As shown in Exhibit 2.11, just over a third of Reconnect dollars (34 percent) were allocated to students who made between $20,000 and $40,000 per year.

[59] Applicants could select only one option when asked about their availability to attend classes. For example, even if a student planned to attend online classes on weekends, their response would count toward only the "online" category and not the "weekends" category.
[60] To calculate income, OREA used a student's self-reported adjusted gross income from their first year as a Reconnect student.

Exhibit 2.11: Nearly half of all Reconnect funds were allocated to students who made less than $40,000 per year

Legend:
- Share of Reconnect dollars allocated toward income bracket
- Share of Reconnectors in income bracket

Median statewide household earnings in 2018: **$50,972**

Income bracket	Share of Reconnect dollars	Share of Reconnectors
Less than $0	0.1%	0.2%
$0 - $20,000	14.9%	27.7%
$20,001 - $40,000	33.8%	34.1%
$40,001 - $60,000	16.4%	15.6%
$60,001 - $80,000	14.0%	10.5%
$80,001 - $100,000	10.5%	6.1%
$100,001 - $120,000	5.2%	2.9%
$120,001 - $140,000	2.2%	1.3%
$140,001 - $160,000	1.1%	0.6%
$160,001 - $180,000	0.6%	0.3%
$180,001 - $200,000	0.3%	0.2%
Above $200,000	0.8%	0.5%

Note: Individuals with income adjustments that exceed gross income will have a negative adjusted gross income. See link for more information: https://www.irs.gov/e-file-providers/definition-of-adjusted-gross-income.
Sources: Tennessee Higher Education Commission applicant data and student FAFSA data; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, five-year average.

A majority of Reconnect students (86 percent) and Reconnect applicants (81 percent) have been eligible for the Pell Grant at some point in their financial aid history. Reconnect students who were eligible for the Pell Grant at some point during their enrollment received $2,226 fewer Reconnect dollars on average compared with Reconnect students who were not eligible for Pell. Of those who were considered Reconnect students but ultimately received zero Reconnect dollars throughout their participation in the program, 99.8 percent were eligible for Pell. For these students, the Pell grant may have been enough to cover tuition and mandatory fees.

Applicants and enrollees by institution

Of all Reconnect students who attended a community college from cohorts 1 through 3, nearly half (46.4 percent) attended one of the following four institutions: Pellissippi State, Nashville State, Volunteer State, and Southwest. This makes sense given that these four institutions served a similar proportion (42 percent) of students overall.

Across all 13 institutions, 54 percent of independent students were also Reconnect students.[61] However, as shown in Exhibit 2.12, this statistic varied significantly across institutions. At Motlow State, for example, seven out of every 10 independent students were Reconnect students in fall 2020. When asked by OREA to share practices that have been effective at increasing the number of students who enroll in Reconnect, five administrators from Motlow cited the use of mentors known as Success or Completion Coaches. These Coaches help students plan for and navigate the college experience.[62] While the Coaches fulfill roles similar to Reconnect Navigators, these positions are paid for by a mixture of institutional and grant funds rather than the State of Tennessee.[63] To prepare for the implementation of Reconnect, Motlow also created a new position called the Director of Adult Initiatives.[64] The director recruits adult students and guides them through the enrollment process.
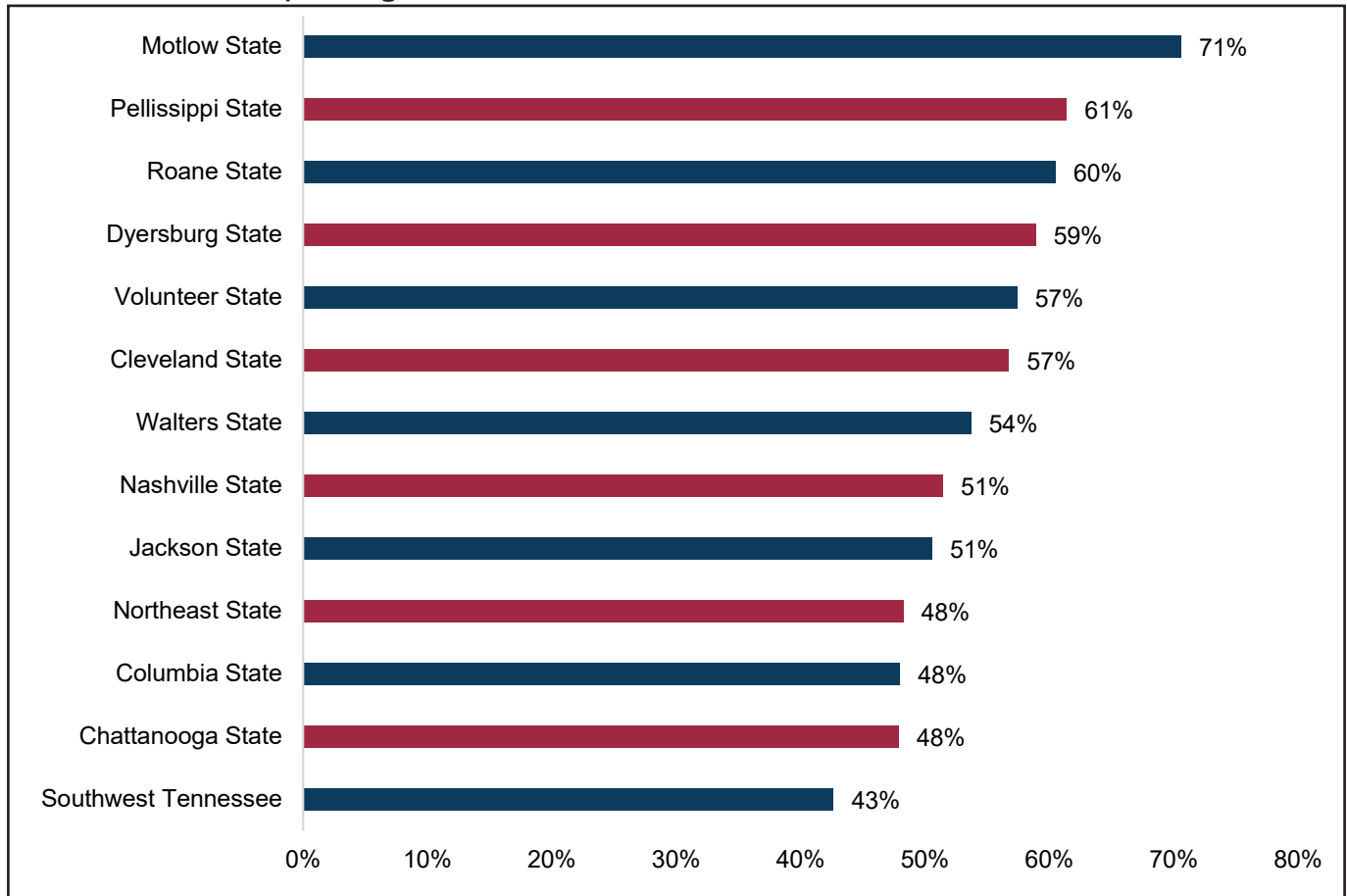
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[61] This statistic was calculated using student headcounts from fall terms (fall 2018, 2019, and 2020).
[62] Motlow State Community College, Completion Coaches, https://www.mscc.edu/students/completion-coaches/index.html.
[63] These positions exist at all 13 community colleges and are funded by those institutions rather than the state.
[64] Motlow State Community College, "Motlow State Adult Guided Pathway Approach gains National Attention," March 1, 2021, https://www.mscc.edu/news/adult-guided-pathway-approach.html.

Exhibit 2.12: The percentage of independent students who are Reconnect students varied across institutions | average across fall terms 2018-2020

Institution	Percentage
Motlow State	71%
Pellissippi State	61%
Roane State	60%
Dyersburg State	59%
Volunteer State	57%
Cleveland State	57%
Walters State	54%
Nashville State	51%
Jackson State	51%
Northeast State	48%
Columbia State	48%
Chattanooga State	48%
Southwest Tennessee	43%

Note: These percentages were calculated using student headcounts from fall terms (fall 2018, 2019, and 2020).
Source: Tennessee Higher Education Commission, Reconnect independent student data.

Applicants and enrollees by county

County data from fall 2020 was unavailable for Reconnect applicants at the time of this analysis. The conclusions below reflect data from the first two cohorts of Reconnect students and applicants only.

The number of Tennesseans eligible for Reconnect can be estimated by examining the number of adults 25 and over with a high school diploma but no degree. According to Census Bureau data from 2018, more than two million adults (2,410,457) fall into this category. In the first two Reconnect application cycles, roughly 2.5 percent of eligible adults applied for Reconnect, and 1.2 percent enrolled as Reconnect students.[65]

Exhibit 2.13 shows the percentages of eligible residents who applied for Reconnect within each county. Counties with blue shading had application rates above the state average (2.5 percent), while counties with red shading had rates below the state average.

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[65] Of the 68,339 Tennesseans who applied for the Reconnect grant in the first two cycles, 7,545 (11 percent) were ineligible because they were either a dependent or had previously earned an associate degree (or higher). OREA did not have the data necessary to determine all applicants' eligibility status, so the total number of ineligible applicants may be higher.

Exhibit 2.13: Percent of eligible residents who applied for Reconnect
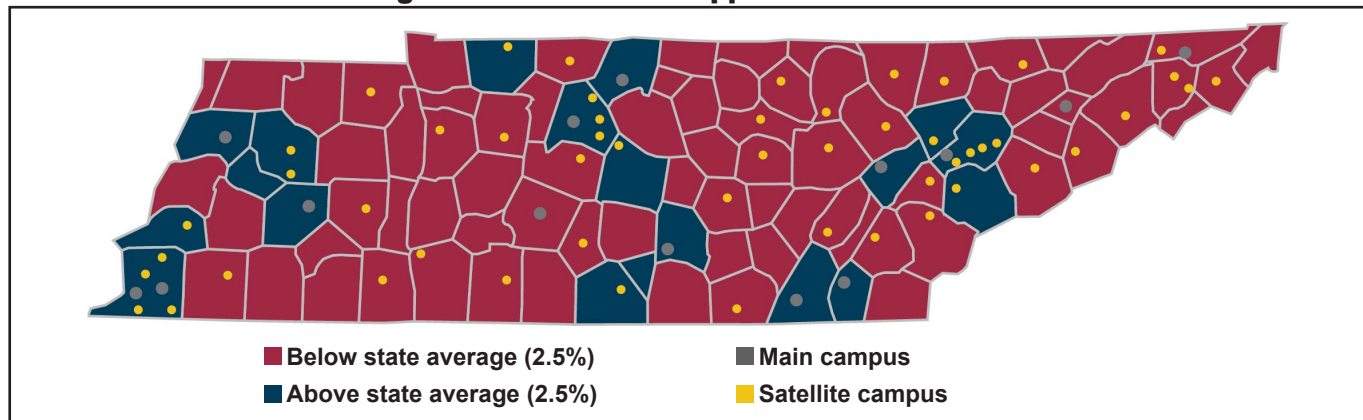
Legend:
- Below state average (2.5%)
- Above state average (2.5%)
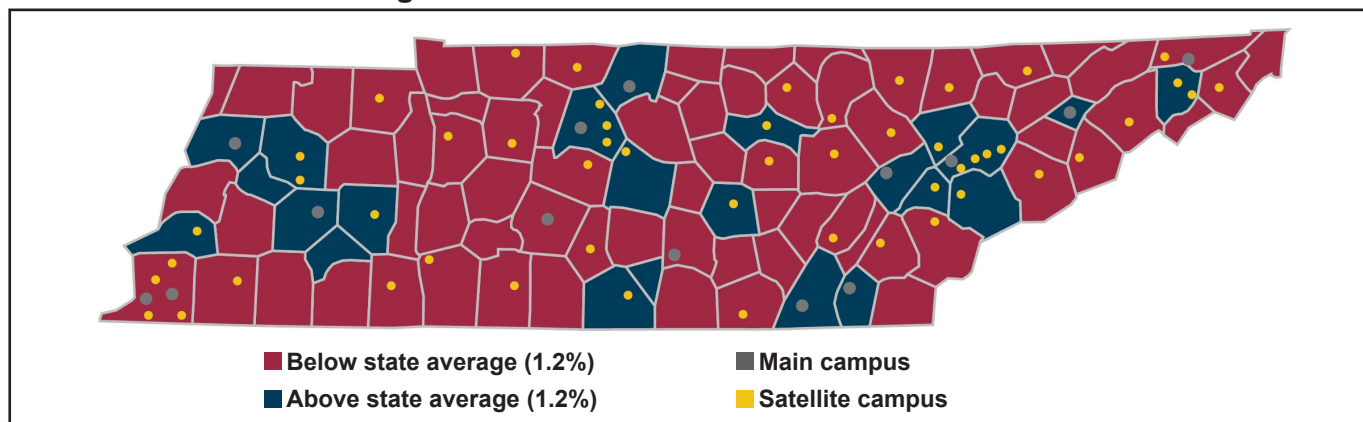- Main campus
- Satellite campus

Note: "Eligible residents" refers to the number of adults 25 and over with a high school diploma but no degree.
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, five-year average; Tennessee Higher Education Commission, Reconnect applicant data.

With some exceptions, most counties with an above-average ratio of applicants to eligible adults also had an above-average ratio of Reconnect students to eligible adults. Similarly, those with low application rates generally had low enrollment rates.

Exhibit 2.14: Percent of eligible residents who became Reconnect students

Legend:
- Below state average (1.2%)
- Above state average (1.2%)
- Main campus
- Satellite campus

Note: "Eligible residents" refers to the number of adults 25 and over with a high school diploma but no degree.
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, five-year average; Tennessee Higher Education Commission, Reconnect applicant data.

The two greatest anomalies were Shelby and Montgomery counties; both had an above-average application rate and a relatively low enrollment rate. In both counties, more than 3 percent of the eligible adult population applied for the Reconnect Grant. However, both counties' percentages of eligible adults who became Reconnect students were below the state average (0.95 and 0.72 percent, respectively).

In Montgomery County, this may be due to a high share of veteran applicants since the county is home to an active U.S. Army base (Fort Campbell). Sixteen percent of Reconnect applicants here were veteran, compared to 5 percent statewide. As mentioned earlier in this report, veterans often receive other types of financial aid, like the Helping Heroes Grant or the GI Bill.[66] These types of aid would be applied before the Reconnect Grant.

Shelby County's low share of eligible adults who became Reconnect students may be explained by a higher share of applicants ultimately choosing not to enroll in college. In Shelby County, 56 percent of applicants did not enroll in a postsecondary institution between fall 2018 and summer 2020. Statewide, 52 percent of applicants did not enroll in a postsecondary institution during this time period.

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[66] U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, About GI Bill Benefits, https://www.va.gov/education/about-gi-bill-benefits/.

Exhibit 2.15: Reconnect application rates in Shelby and Montgomery Counties were higher than average, but enrollment rates were relatively low

County	Eligible residents	Eligible applicants	Became Reconnect students
Shelby	309,435	7,970 (2.6%)	2,954 (0.95%)
Montgomery	67,354	1,848 (2.7%)	487 (0.72%)
TN totals/averages	2,410,457	60,794 (2.5%)	28,176 (1.2%)

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, five-year average; THEC Reconnect applicant data.

Counties with more Reconnect-eligible institutions tended to have higher ratios of applicants per resident. Of the six counties with three or more Reconnect-eligible institutions, five had ratios of applicants per resident that were higher than the state average (2.5 applications per 100 residents). Sullivan County was the lone exception. Despite being home to three Reconnect-eligible institutions (King University and two Northeast State Community College sites), Sullivan County's ratio of applicants per resident (two applications per 100 residents) was lower than the state average.

Exhibit 2.16: Counties with more Reconnect-eligible institutions tend to have higher-than-average application rates

County	% of Eligible Residents who Applied	Reconnect-eligible institutions
Shelby	2.58	10
Knox	3.45	8
Davidson	3.00	6
Madison	3.65	3
Montgomery	2.74	3
Sullivan	1.98	3
State Average	2.52	-

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, five-year average; Tennessee Higher Education Commission Reconnect applicant data.

Since Sullivan County borders Virginia, its lower ratio of Reconnect applicants per 100 residents may be (at least partially) due to its proximity to postsecondary institutions in Virginia. For example, students located in Bristol, Tennessee, are about 15 miles away from Virginia Highlands Community College.

Barriers may prevent prospective students from enrolling

Finances and family responsibilities were students' greatest self-identified challenges

Reconnect students are required to fill out an application annually, and part of the application asks them to self-identify challenges related to pursuing their education. Just over two-thirds (69 percent) of Reconnect students identified finances as a challenge in the first year of the program. The second and third most cited challenges (34 and 31 percent of students, respectively) were family responsibilities and work demands. Seventeen percent noted that none of their challenges were listed in the survey options, and another 12 percent cited academic preparation. (See Appendix B for Reconnect application questions.)

Challenges did not vary greatly when analyzed by cohort or first-generation status. However, notable differences emerged when examining challenges by race/ethnicity, age, work plans, gender, and number of dependents. Female Reconnect students, students eligible for Pell, and students with dependents were more likely to cite family responsibilities as a challenge. Black students were 6 percentage points more likely to indicate that none of their challenges were listed within the survey options. In addition, students between the ages of 18 to 24[67] and students who planned to work part-time or multiple jobs while enrolled were more likely to cite finances as a challenge.

[67] Out of the 32,236 total Reconnect students at community colleges, 2,039 were under age 24.

The self-identified challenges of applicants who became Reconnect students were similar to the challenges of those who applied but did not become Reconnect students.

## Having to obtain prior college transcripts may prevent students from enrolling

As part of its November 2020 survey of community college administrators, OREA asked administrators to indicate how frequently certain barriers impede or delay the enrollment of Reconnect students.

According to the administrators who responded, the greatest barrier for Reconnect students was having to obtain prior college transcripts. Eighty-six percent of administrators stated that transcripts sometimes or often posed a barrier. When asked to explain why, many administrators (29) noted that transcripts pose a barrier when prospective students owe an outstanding balance to a previous institution, as many institutions will not release transcripts to those who owe a balance. To address this issue, the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), which governs Tennessee's community and technical colleges, has instituted a Promise to Pay policy. Under this policy, students who owe an outstanding balance to a TBR institution can obtain their transcripts if they establish a payment plan.

Sixteen administrators also noted that students often struggle to obtain transcripts from institutions that no longer exist. Community colleges may waive the requirement to obtain previous transcripts under certain circumstances. Students must sign a statement attesting to never previously completing an associate degree or higher. Doing so allows the student to enroll in college and receive the Reconnect Grant, but the student must forgo access to any previously earned credits that could be applied toward a credential.

Another barrier to enrollment was having to complete the FAFSA, with 64 percent of administrators stating that it was sometimes or often a barrier. Two-thousand Reconnect applicants over the first three application cycles had an incomplete FAFSA. Four administrators noted that students are often unaware that the FAFSA is required to receive the Reconnect Grant. Obtaining proof of high school graduation (or equivalent) is also a significant challenge, as 58 percent of administrators indicated that it is sometimes or often a barrier. According to six administrators, students often struggle to obtain diplomas (or equivalent) from high schools that have closed.

Exhibit 2.17: Barriers to Reconnect program enrollment, as reported by community college administrators
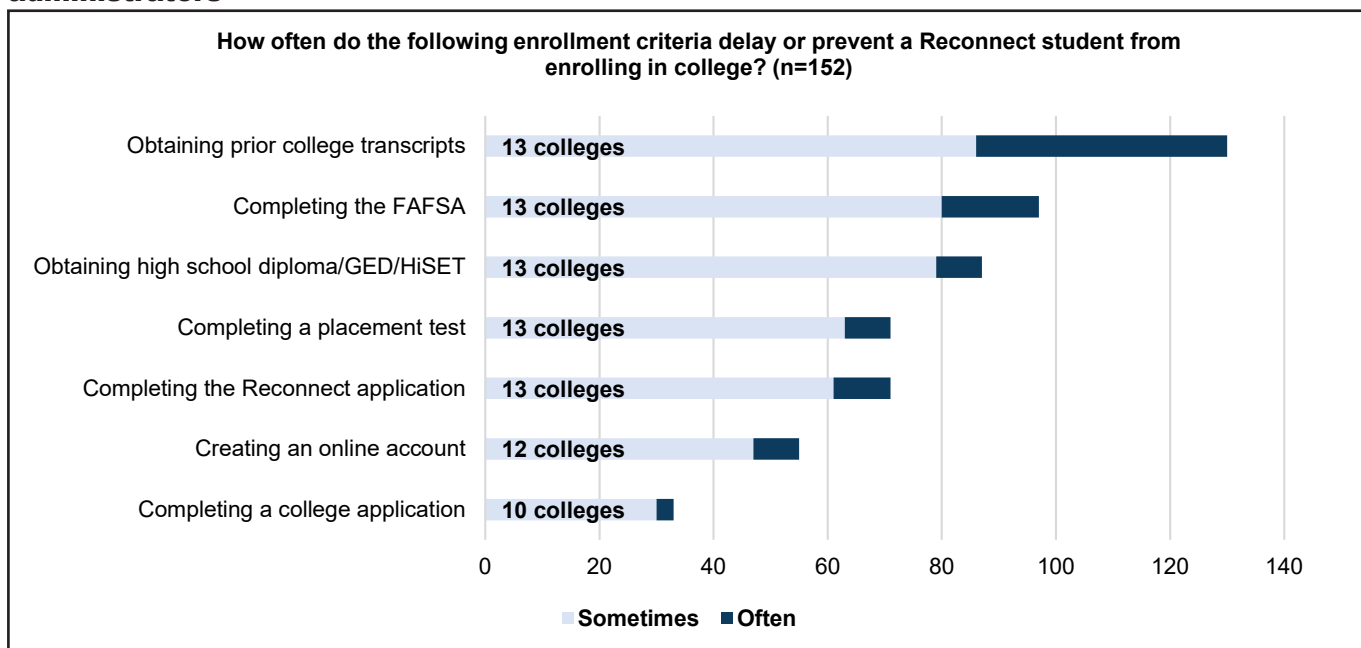
Source: OREA survey of community college administrators, November 2020.

Most Reconnect students had home internet access; applicants without internet were less likely to enroll

Technology did not appear to be a significant barrier for Reconnect students and applicants. Three and a half percent of Reconnect students and 3.8 percent of applicants cited technology as a challenge. Eighty-nine percent of Reconnect students and 87 percent of applicants reported having internet access within their homes. Out of over 32,000 students ever enrolled in the program, 212 reported that they did not have a computer and were unsure how they would access the internet during their first year as a Reconnect student. Despite these statistics, 76 percent of community college administrators who responded to OREA's survey indicated a noticeable increase in the number of students who need help with technology following the implementation of the Reconnect program.

In addition, many of the state's rural counties have relatively low rates of broadband internet coverage. While 91 percent of Tennesseans have access to high-speed internet, 37 percent of households in Benton County and 38 percent in Humphreys County have high-speed internet access, for example.[68] Individuals without a broadband internet connection could be deterred from enrolling. Applicants with home internet access were 6 percentage points more likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution compared to applicants without home internet access.[69]

Nearly all Reconnect students had reliable transportation; applicants without transportation were less likely to enroll

Data also suggests that transportation was not a major challenge for most Reconnect students. Almost all Reconnect students and applicants (99 and 98 percent, respectively) reported having access to reliable transportation. Of the 395 Reconnect students who indicated that they did not have reliable transportation, more than one-third (141 students) planned to take their courses online during their first year of enrollment.

Although transportation did not appear to be a significant barrier for Reconnect students, data suggests that those who lack transportation may be deterred from enrolling in a postsecondary institution. Those with reliable transportation were 17 percentage points more likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution compared to those without transportation.[70]

Most Reconnect students planned to work full-time while enrolled

Most Reconnect students (58 percent) indicated that they planned to work full-time during their first year of enrollment. Roughly 25 percent indicated that they would work part-time, and 14 percent indicated that they would not work while enrolled.

Employment plans varied significantly when analyzed by age. Sixty percent of Reconnect students age 65 and over indicated that they would not work while enrolled.[71] Conversely, younger Reconnect students were more likely to work part-time compared to other age groups. Thirty-three percent of Reconnect students between age 18 and 24 reported that they would work part-time, 8 percentage points higher than all age groups combined.

Female Reconnect students were less likely to work full-time compared to male students. Fifty-four percent of females indicated plans to work full-time while enrolled, compared to 65 percent of males (a difference of 11 percentage points).

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[68] Federal Communications Commission, 2019 Broadband Deployment Report, released May 29, 2019, https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-19-44A1.pdf.
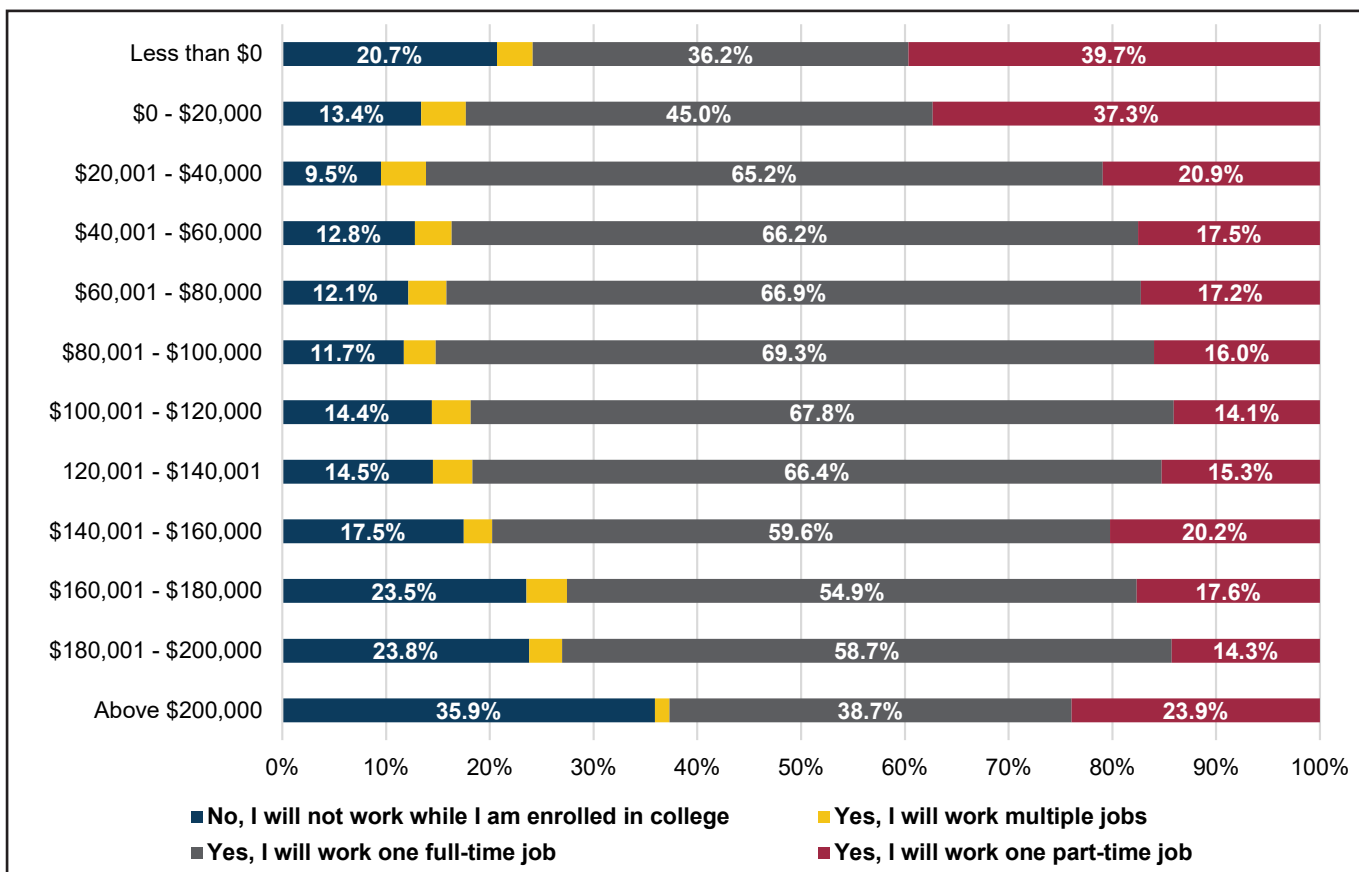[69] This analysis counted applicants who enrolled at any point between fall 2018 and fall 2020.
[70] This analysis counted applicants who enrolled at any point between fall 2018 and fall 2020.
[71] Of 32,236 Reconnect students in cohorts 1-3, only 77 (0.2 percent) are over the age of 65; therefore, this particular analysis has a small sample size.

Work plans also varied based on a student's income level, as shown in Exhibit 2.18. With several exceptions, Reconnect students with higher income levels were less likely to indicate they planned to work while enrolled. Further, Reconnect students making less than $20,000 or more than $200,000 were more likely to work part-time.

Exhibit 2.18: Reconnect students with higher income were less likely to work while enrolled

Income	No, I will not work while I am enrolled in college	Yes, I will work multiple jobs	Yes, I will work one full-time job	Yes, I will work one part-time job
Less than $0	20.7%		36.2%	39.7%
$0 - $20,000	13.4%		45.0%	37.3%
$20,001 - $40,000	9.5%		65.2%	20.9%
$40,001 - $60,000	12.8%		66.2%	17.5%
$60,001 - $80,000	12.1%		66.9%	17.2%
$80,001 - $100,000	11.7%		69.3%	16.0%
$100,001 - $120,000	14.4%		67.8%	14.1%
120,001 - 140,001	14.5%		66.4%	15.3%
$140,001 - $160,000	17.5%		59.6%	20.2%
$160,001 - $180,000	23.5%		54.9%	17.6%
$180,001 - $200,000	23.8%		58.7%	14.3%
Above $200,000	35.9%		38.7%	23.9%

- ■ No, I will not work while I am enrolled in college
- ■ Yes, I will work multiple jobs
- ■ Yes, I will work one full-time job
- ■ Yes, I will work one part-time job

Note: Individuals with income adjustments that exceed gross income will have a negative adjusted gross income; for the purposes of this report, such individuals are captured in the "Less than $0" income category. See link for more information: https://www.irs.gov/e-file-providers/definition-of-adjusted-gross-income.
Source: Tennessee Higher Education Commission financial aid data.

Reconnect students' employment plans were similar to those who applied but did not enroll in the program. Employment plans did not vary greatly when analyzed by race/ethnicity or cohort.

Most Reconnect students cared for dependents while enrolled

Among Reconnect students between fall 2018 and fall 2020, 58 percent cared for dependents while enrolled. More than three out of four Reconnect students with dependents (78 percent) were female. Like the overall population of Reconnect students, most students with dependents (57 percent) planned to work full-time while enrolled.

At the time of enrollment, Reconnect students with dependents were two years older, on average, than students without dependents. Despite this, Reconnect students with dependents had a significantly higher average income than Reconnect students without dependents. According to students' self-reported adjusted gross income on the FAFSA, Reconnect students with dependents earn a median income of $8,170 more per year compared to students without dependents.[72]

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[72] To calculate income, OREA used a student's self-reported adjusted gross income from their first year as a Reconnect student.

Navigators appeared to have a positive impact on enrollment

All adult students are given the opportunity to work with a regionally based mentor called a Navigator. Navigators help adult learners enroll in college, answer questions, and provide information about on- and off-campus resources. Students are not required to work with a Navigator. While the Navigator program is not exclusive to Reconnect students,[73] Navigators are discussed within this report because Reconnect students are more likely to interact with them.

Navigator data from fall 2020 was unavailable at the time of publication. The following conclusions reflect data from the first two cohorts of Reconnect students and applicants only, 2018-19 and 2019-20.

Compared to non-Reconnect students who enrolled between fall 2018 and summer 2020, Reconnect students were 9 percentage points more likely to work with a Navigator. Roughly one-fifth (21 percent) of students in cohorts 1 and 2 interacted with a Navigator. However, Reconnect students in cohort 1 were 6 percentage points more likely to interact with a Navigator than Reconnect students in cohort 2.

Those who chose to interact with a Navigator were similar to those who did not in terms of race/ethnicity, income, gender, and whether they cared for dependents while enrolled. Both groups were also similar in terms of whether they were first-generation students. Applicants who worked with a Navigator tended to be slightly older than those who did not work with a Navigator (by about four years).

Reconnect applicants who worked with a Navigator were 7 percentage points more likely to enroll 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; meanwhile, 37 percent of applicants who did not work with a Navigator became Reconnect students.

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[73] Navigate Reconnect provides general guidance and assistance to adult learners in Tennessee, including, but not limited to, Reconnect students. All Tennessee adults are eligible for Navigate Reconnect services at no cost, even if they do not participate in the Tennessee Reconnect Grant program.

Section 3: Student progression

The following section examines the progression of Reconnect students, including student credit accumulation and GPA.

Section 1		Semester that Reconnect student entered program	Section 2: Access		Section 3: Progression Credit accumulation		Section 4: Completion Credential attainment and enrollment status		Section 5
	Cohort		Application rate	Enrollment rate	End of 1st academic year	End of 2nd academic year	1 year after enrollment	2 years after enrollment	
How Tennessee Reconnect works	1	Fall 18-Summer 19	yes	yes	Summer 19	Summer 20	Fall 19, Spring/ Summer 20	Fall 20, Spring/ Summer 21	Tennessee and the Drive to 55: Where are we now?
	2	Fall 19-Summer 20	yes	yes	Summer 20	Summer 21	Fall 20, Spring/ Summer 21	Fall 21, Spring/ Summer 22	
	3	Fall 20-Summer 21	yes	yes	Summer 21	Summer 22	Fall 21, Spring/ Summer 22	Fall 22, Spring/ Summer 23	
			Included in this report			Not included in this report			

Background and research methods

While increasing adult student enrollment in higher education is one of the primary goals of Reconnect (i.e., increased access), students' progression toward college completion is just as important.

Research has shown that positive outcomes in students' first year of college – including higher credit accumulation and higher GPAs– increases the likelihood they will graduate. When students accumulate fewer credits each semester, a program of study takes longer to complete. Each additional semester a student needs to graduate increases costs for students and the likelihood that other factors, such as family obligations and job pressures, may derail a student's academic success. Students with higher GPAs likely possess a greater mastery of course materials and an elevated likelihood of employment after college.

The analysis below examines the progression of Reconnect students at community colleges from its first year, fall 2018, through summer 2020, two academic years after the program's start. All Reconnect students, including those receiving zero dollars from the scholarship, were included in the analysis. Reconnect students receiving no money may still benefit from supports of the program, such as Reconnect Navigators and targeted advising. (See section 1 for more information on Navigators.)

To determine if Reconnect students are performing better than their peers, the credit accumulation, retention rates, and GPAs of Reconnect students were compared to those of other independent students enrolled in 6 credit hours or greater (at least part-time). Students are classified as independent when they are age 24 or older or if they meet certain criteria such as being married, having dependents, being a U.S. veteran, or being in active-duty military service. For the purpose of this analysis, a student is considered independent if they are independent for the 2018-19, 2019-20, or 2020-21 school year as indicated on the FAFSA, or as specified in the analysis.

Many Reconnect students enrolled with previously earned credits

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant is available to independent students who have not previously earned an associate or bachelor's degree, among other requirements. These students, however, may have already been enrolled or previously earned credits when they become Reconnect students.

Students' previously earned credits help to explain retention and completion trends. A student's progression toward a degree is faster when he or she enters a program with previous credits. Reconnect students with previous credit may use Reconnect for a shorter period of time to earn an associate degree.

> "Some students need only a few credits, some students enter the program looking to move to a four-year program, while some just need a certification to move up in their industry. Most students will need at least a year in the program. Students are surprised that the grant allows five years to complete the associate degree."
>
> Source: OREA interview with Reconnect Navigator, Sept. 2020.

The majority (approximately two-thirds) of Reconnect students at community colleges already had earned 12 or more credit hours the first semester they enrolled in the program, representing a full year of part-time enrollment.

Two-fifths of students had five semesters or more of credit at a part-time load or were at least halfway to an associate degree (30 or more credit hours). Students may use the grant until the completion of an associate degree or eligible certificate or until five years have passed since they initially enrolled as a Reconnect student. Students who enrolled in the first semester of Tennessee Reconnect, fall 2018, will have until summer 2023 to complete a degree. Exhibit 3.1 suggests many Reconnect students in cohort 1 at community colleges will earn an associate degree before summer 2023.

Exhibit 3.1: Number of credits students had already earned when they first enrolled as Reconnect students at a community college | cohorts 1, 2, and 3

Number of credits	Number of students	Percent of students	Time those credits represent
0	7,159	22.2%	No previous credits
1-11.9	3,600	11.2%	Less than two part-time semesters
12-23.9	5,102	15.9%	Two part-time semesters or more, but less than four
24-29.9	2,351	7.3%	Four or more part-time semesters
30 and above	13,974	43.4%	Five part-time semesters or more

Note: 50 Reconnect students (0.2 percent) are not accounted for in the table. These students had missing or inconsistent term credit hours when first enrolled as a Reconnect student.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Since Reconnect was implemented, community colleges have reported an increase in students with prior college experience. When asked how the Reconnect Grant has changed their institution's student body, over half of community college administrators (117 out of 207), responded that Reconnect has increased the number of students on campus with previous college credit.

Exhibit 3.2: Changes in student body as reported by community college administrators | Students with previous college credit
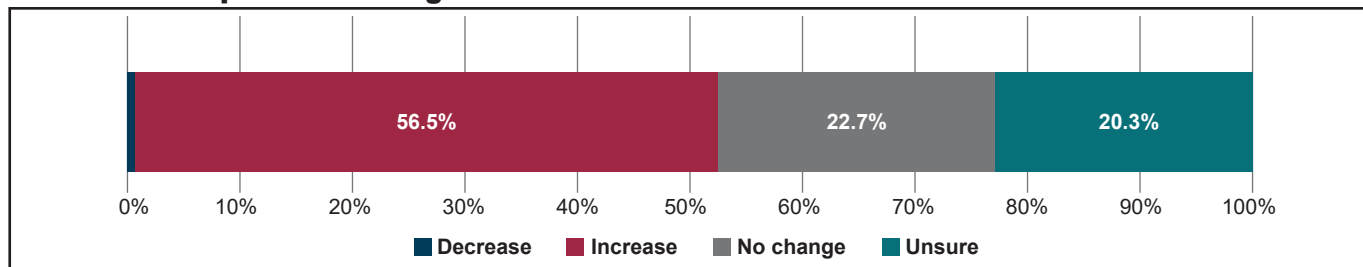
56.5%	22.7% 20.3%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ Decrease ■ Increase ■ No change ■ Unsure

Students may have previously earned college credentials and still use Tennessee Reconnect

While Tennessee Reconnect is geared toward adults without a degree, under program rules, students are eligible for the Reconnect Grant as long as they have not previously earned an associate or bachelor's degree. Thus, students may have earned other types of postsecondary credentials and still remain eligible for the Reconnect program. (See section 1 for an explanation of Reconnect eligibility.)

Completion of a short-term certificate (less than one year) or long-term certificate (one to two years), or completion of a diploma from a Tennessee College of Applied Technology, does not render a student ineligible for Tennessee Reconnect. Students may also continue to receive Tennessee Reconnect after earning a sequential certificate at a community college, which is designed to lead into an associate degree program or is awarded after completion of courses that are part of an associate degree program.[74] Students may not, however, continue to use Reconnect after earning a certificate that represents the highest possible credential within a program of study.

About one in 10 Reconnect students (12 percent) had earned a technical certificate or diploma before they enrolled in the Reconnect program.

Exhibit 3.3: Credentials earned prior to Reconnect enrollment at a community college

Credential earned?	Number of Reconnect students	Percent of total Reconnect students
Earned short- or long-term certificate, or diploma	3,829	11.9%
No credential earned	28,407	88.1%

Note: (1) Students may indicate their highest education level on the annual Reconnect applications. Due to data inconsistencies, OREA used data provided by THEC instead of self-reported data, which showed a larger number of students with an associate degree or higher. (2) THEC data showed that 60 students received an associate degree or higher before enrolling as a Reconnect student at a community college. Degrees include associate degree, bachelor's, certificate (post-bachelor's), master's, certificate (post-master's), first professional, or doctoral degree. THEC reported that these students were granted exemptions. They are not included in the analysis above.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Credit accumulation at community colleges

The majority of all Reconnect students enrolled in a community college (95 percent, on average, from fall 2018 to fall 2020). (About 5 percent of Reconnect students enrolled in an eligible public university or private institution. See page 10 for a list of all eligible institutions.) Due to this, community college student outcomes, analyzed below, provide considerable insight into the success of the program.

Tennessee Reconnect requires that students enroll at least part-time, or in a minimum of 6 credit hours per semester. At community colleges, students who complete two part-time semesters earn at least 12 credits in

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[74] For example, Columbia State Community College offers an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) program in business that awards a student with a business technical certificate after completion of year two, and an AAS degree with completion of year three. Students may continue to use Reconnect after receiving the business technical certificate, until completion of the business AAS degree.

their first year. An associate degree may be earned with 60 credit hours, which part-time, first-time freshman students can complete in five years. Students who were already enrolled or earned previous credit may complete their associate degree sooner than a first-time freshman.

At the end of each academic year, 70 percent of Reconnect students had 24 credits or more

Slightly less than three-quarters (70 percent) of Reconnect students in cohorts 1 and 2 had 24 credits or more (four part-time semesters) at the conclusion of the academic year – fall 2018 through summer 2019 for cohort 1, fall 2019 through summer 2020 for cohort 2. Credits are counted regardless of whether the student attended the full academic year. For example, if a student does not participate in the summer semester, his or her credits from the last semester during the cohort will be counted in Exhibit 3.4 (e.g., if a student begins as a Reconnect student in fall 2018 and remains a Reconnect student for spring 2019, earned credits as of spring 2019 will be recorded in Exhibit 3.4). More than half (61.3 percent) of students had five part-time semesters or more of credit at the end of the cohort's summer semester.

About a quarter (22.2 percent) of Reconnect students started without previously earned credit. After three semesters, 3 percent of students had still not earned credits. (Reconnect students who did not accumulate any hours and failed to re-enroll are accounted for in Exhibit 3.4.)

Exhibit 3.4: Percent and number of Reconnect students at community colleges by credits earned after academic year's end | fall 2018 through summer 2019 for cohort 1 and fall 2019 through summer 2020 for cohort 2

Number of credits earned	Number of students	Percent of students	Number of semesters those credits represent
0	833	3.1%	No credits earned
1-11.9	2,259	8.4%	Less than two part-time semesters
12-23.9	4,874	18.1%	Two part-time semesters or more, but less than four
24-29.9	2,433	9.1%	Four part-time semesters or more, but less than five
30 and above	16,470	61.3%	Five part-time semesters or more
Total	26,869	100.0%	

Notes: (1) This number differs from the total number of Reconnect students in cohorts 1 and 2 (26,877) by eight students. These students, representing 0.03 percent of the total number of cohort 1 and 2 Reconnect students, had missing or inconsistent hours and are not analyzed here. (2) Students in cohort 3 are not included in Exhibit 3.4 since data from summer 2021 was not available, but are included in Exhibit 3.5, which analyzes credit accumulation to fall 2020.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Through fall 2020, two out of three Reconnect students were at least halfway to an associate degree

Since Reconnect students may use the scholarship until they attain an associate degree or terminal certificate or until five years have passed since initial enrollment as a Tennessee Reconnect student, some students who enrolled during the first year of the program (fall 2018) are likely still eligible as of this evaluation's publication date. The first cohort's time-related eligibility expires in summer 2023.

Reconnect students' overall credit history up to the most recent semester of data, fall 2020, is shown in Exhibit 3.5. Credits were counted through students' last active semesters to determine the most up-to-date number of cumulative credits earned. The majority of students (67 percent) were at least halfway to an associate degree, with five part-time semesters or more of credit. These students will likely appear in completion data earlier than 2023, the first cohort's ending date.

Exhibit 3.5: Credits Reconnect students at community colleges earned by end of fall 2020

Number of credits earned	Number of students	Percent of students	Number of semesters those credits represent
0	1,055	3.3%	No credits earned
1-11.9	2,703	8.4%	Less than two part-time semesters
12-23.9	4,706	14.6%	Two part-time semesters or more, but less than four
24-29.9	2,310	7.2%	Four part-time semesters or more, but less than five
30 and above	21,455	66.6%	Five part-time semesters or more
Total	32,229	100.0%	

Notes: (1) The total in the exhibit differs from the total number of Reconnect students in cohorts 1, 2, and 3 (32,236) by seven students. These students, representing 0.02 percent of the total number of Reconnect students, had missing or inconsistent hours and are not analyzed here. (2) Due to the nature of Reconnect, Exhibit 3.5 includes credits students earned before receiving Reconnect, if they were previously enrolled or had previous college credit.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Positive outcomes (fall retention and credential attainment) at community colleges for all independent students have remained fairly steady

OREA analyzed positive outcomes at community colleges for all independent students enrolled in community colleges since 2015-16. Students who either earned a credential or returned for the fall semester were included in Exhibit 3.6.

Exhibit 2.2 in section 2 suggests that the implementation of Reconnect is correlated with an increase in the number of adult students attending community college. In fall 2017, 21,805 adult students were enrolled at a community college. By fall 2018, this number had grown to 25,565, representing a 17 percent increase. More independent students enrolled at community colleges in 2018 and 2019 than in 2017 (the year before Reconnect students began enrolling). This has increased the number of students, whether enrolled in Reconnect or not, who are retained for a second year, resulting in more students on track to receive a credential. (Both adult enrollment and overall enrollment decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic in fall 2020.)

"Reconnect restored the balance to the student population that existed before Tennessee Promise. [The proportion of] adult enrollment was declining through 2014-16. The '18-year-old right out of high school' enrollment was going up. Reconnect has diversified our student population."

Source: OREA interview with Pellissippi State, September 2020.

Community college administrators suggested in OREA surveys and interviews that the Reconnect Grant program increased the number of adult students on campus, and therefore presented new challenges to institutions. Officials explained that more students are using prior college outcomes and previous life experiences with varying rates of success (e.g., taking prior learning assessments to earn credit) and experiencing greater difficulties with navigating both college and its required technology. Despite this period of changing demographic trends at the community colleges, retention rates have remained fairly steady since 2016-17. (See Exhibit 3.6.)

Exhibit 3.6: Number and percent of independent students who either earned a credential at a community college or returned for the next year (fall) at a community college
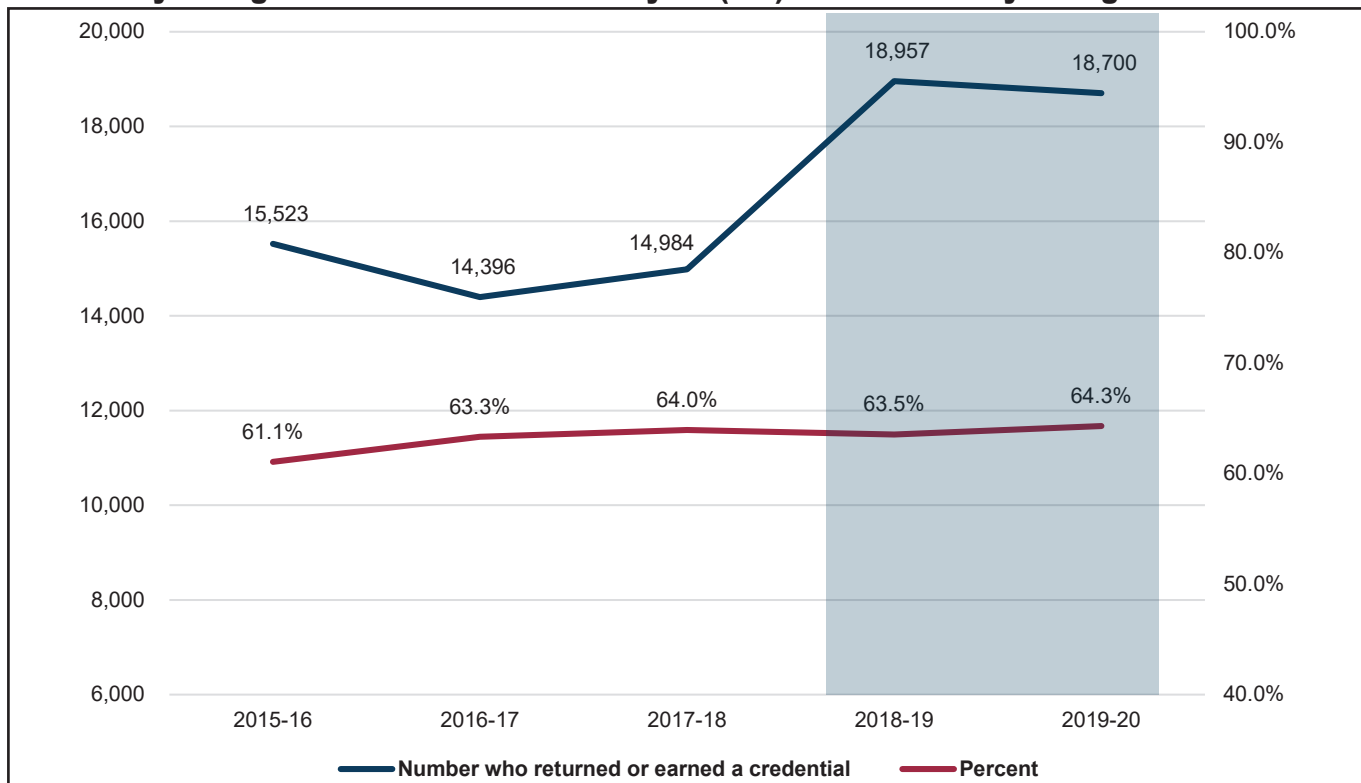
Note: The blue shaded box represents years in which the Reconnect Grant has been active.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

In interviews with OREA, administrators from four community colleges related previous familiarity with serving adult students but noted increased programmatic and academic offerings since Reconnect. According to OREA's November 2020 survey of community college administrators, some of the changes made to support an older student body included diversifying course formats (e.g., offering evening and night classes), providing additional advising targeted to adult students, and introducing adult-specific community centers.

Reconnect students earned higher GPAs than similar independent students

As directed by state law,[75] Reconnect students are required to maintain a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA at the end of each academic year, as determined by the institution. (See section 1 for more information on terminating events.)[76] The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) instituted a policy for the 13 community colleges to stipulate that a student's "Reconnect GPA" begins when the student initially enrolls as a Reconnect student. This differs from how a student's cumulative GPA is calculated to determine eligibility for other sources of financial aid, such as the federal Pell Grant. In most cases, all previously earned credits are included in a student's cumulative GPA. The GPA required for the Reconnect Grant is not a student's overall cumulative GPA but the cumulative GPA while enrolled as a Reconnect student.

> "They have to maintain a certain GPA. I don't think it's clear to students that it's the Reconnect GPA, not the cumulative GPA. Students may lose eligibility."
>
> Interview with community college financial aid officer, September 2020
>
> (Other officials indicated that the Reconnect GPA provides a fresh start to students who performed poorly in past college courses.)

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[75] *TCA* 49-4-944(d)(2).
[76] TBR establishes the criteria for undergraduate academic retention standards at Tennessee community colleges. A 2.0 average GPA represents a "C" letter grade. The maximum GPA obtainable is a 4.0.

Students with higher GPAs may be more employable. Higher GPAs suggest greater mastery of course materials (i.e., academic coursework) and skills taught in college courses. Studies typically link high school GPA with college success; for example, higher GPAs in high school correlate with positive outcomes in college (greater retention and completion). Less analysis has been done on the link between college GPA and post-college success; however, studies indicate that students with higher GPAs may appeal to employers who differentiate job candidates based on high academic achievement.

Reconnect students at community colleges on average earned a 2.79 term GPA in the fall semesters and a 2.87 GPA in the spring semesters, a higher average GPA compared to other similar independent students at community colleges enrolled at least part-time who were never Reconnect students from fall 2018 to fall 2020. Those students, on average, earned a 2.26 GPA in the fall terms and a 2.38 GPA in the spring terms. Reconnect student GPAs generally increased term after term from fall 2018 to summer 2020, while similar independent students had higher GPAs in each spring term. Both groups of students' GPAs decreased from spring 2020 to fall 2020, likely due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. (See section 1 for more information on COVID-19 and the Reconnect Grant.)

Exhibit 3.7: GPA comparison | Reconnect students and similar independent students at community colleges
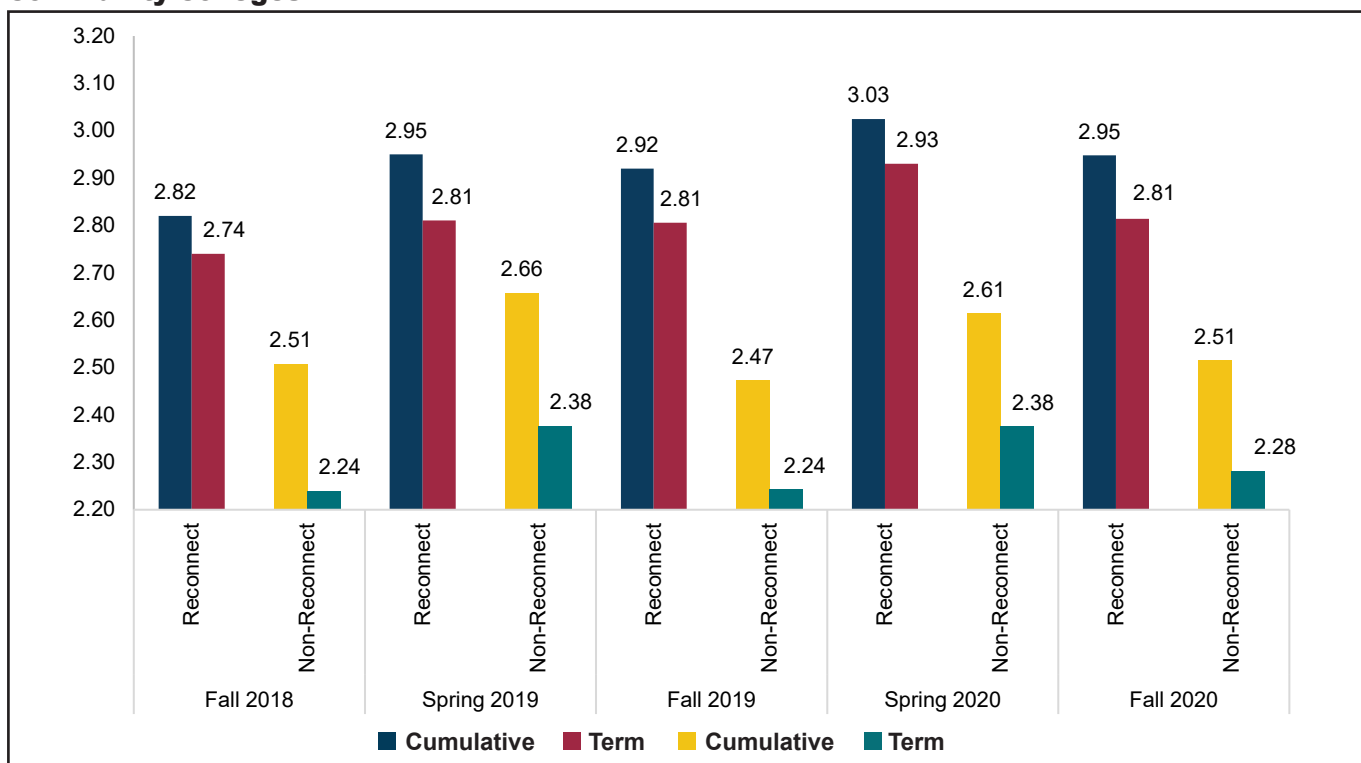
Note: Reconnect students' cumulative GPAs may include grades from coursework in which they were not in the Reconnect program if they had previous college credits or were already enrolled in college.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

While Reconnect students outperformed their peers in average GPA, 834 students from fall 2018 to summer 2020 (3 percent) lost eligibility due to not meeting the program's academic progress requirement (which requires a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0). On the 2018-19 Reconnect application (cohort 1), 4,818 students (11.5 percent) indicated that academic preparation was their top challenge while pursuing a college degree or certificate.

Administrators at community colleges indicated that students have issues meeting the GPA requirement.[77] On the November 2020 OREA survey, 13 administrators (17 percent of respondents) related that the most often missed eligibility requirement was the GPA requirement – other eligibility requirements include remaining enrolled at least part-time and completing the application annually.

When asked about barriers that may prevent Reconnect students from maintaining a cumulative 2.0 GPA at the end of each academic year, 45 administrators cited family or life obligations. Other administrators said that those students who are "reconnecting" (i.e., those students who have not been enrolled recently) have academic difficulties after returning. About half of community college Reconnect students were not enrolled at an institution the prior semester and were not first-time freshmen.

Currently, Reconnect students who drop below a 2.0 GPA, as determined at the end of each academic year, lose the Reconnect scholarship and do not have the ability to regain eligibility. In contrast, HOPE scholarship recipients are given one opportunity to regain the scholarship if they fail to maintain the required GPA. In OREA's survey and interviews, administrators across the state related the need for a GPA probation period or the ability to appeal for GPA.

> "The biggest challenge to staying enrolled is performance – maintaining the GPA. You cannot appeal GPA. They may have something catastrophic happen, and they were able to finish but it didn't come out pretty. We cannot appeal GPA. We cannot even send them to the state to appeal. Sometimes life happens. If I could change anything, I would let them appeal GPA. There are circumstances that prevent students from having that GPA."
>
> Interview with community college financial aid officer, September 2020

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[77] Based on OREA interviews with community college administrators, fall 2020.

Section 4: Reconnect student completion

This section analyzes Reconnect student enrollment status and credential (certificate, associate degree) attainment.

Section 1			Section 2: Access		Section 3: Progression Credit accumulation		Section 4: Completion Credential attainment and enrollment status		Section 5
	Cohort	Semester that Reconnect student entered program	Application rate	Enrollment rate	End of 1st academic year	End of 2nd academic year	1 year after enrollment	2 years after enrollment	
How Tennessee Reconnect works	1	Fall 18-Summer 19	yes	yes	Summer 19	Summer 20	Fall 19, Spring/ Summer 20	Fall 20, Spring/ Summer 21	Tennessee and the Drive to 55: Where are we now?
	2	Fall 19-Summer 20	yes	yes	Summer 20	Summer 21	Fall 20, Spring/ Summer 21	Fall 21, Spring/ Summer 22	
	3	Fall 20-Summer 21	yes	yes	Summer 21	Summer 22	Fall 21, Spring/ Summer 22	Fall 22, Spring/ Summer 23	
			Included in this report				Not included in this report		

Background and research methods

Since fall 2018, Tennessee residents have been enrolling at community colleges or eligible four-year universities or private institutions using the Tennessee Reconnect Grant. The grant requires students to enroll at least part-time (6 credit hours or greater) each fall and spring semester (the summer term is optional) in an eligible program of study. Most associate degree programs can be completed in 60 hours. Attending part-time at 6 credit hours per semester would put a student on track to earn an associate degree in 10 semesters, or five years. Students may remain eligible for Reconnect for five years from their initial enrollment as a Reconnect student.

Since Reconnect began in fall 2018, the data shows only a partial picture of completion. Students awarded Reconnect in fall 2018 may use the grant until summer 2023 or until they earn an associate degree or terminal certificate.[78] Students may, however, earn a degree faster if they take a credit load above 6 hours per semester, or if they have previous credit as analyzed in section 3.[79] This section examines student completion after one year from initial enrollment at community colleges.

This section contains an analysis of *all* community college students in the first year of the Reconnect program, fall 2018 to summer 2019. (OREA analyzed only community college student outcomes, since the majority of all Reconnect students enrolled in a community college). To determine if Reconnect students are performing better than their peers, the retention and credential attainment of Reconnect students were compared to those of other independent students enrolled at least part-time (6 credit hours or greater) who had not earned an associate degree or higher. Students are classified as independent when they are age 24 or older or if they meet certain criteria such as being married, having dependents, being a U.S. veteran, or being in active-duty military service. For the purpose of this analysis, a student is considered independent if they are independent for the 2018-19, 2019-20, or 2020-21 school year as indicated on the FAFSA, or as specified in the analysis.

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[78] A terminal certificate is an award that represents the highest possible credential within a program of study. Under program rules, a student may remain eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant after receiving a sequential certificate, a certificate which is awarded after the completion of certain courses that are part of the degree requirements. By contrast, a student who completes a terminal certificate is no longer eligible for the Reconnect Grant.

[79] About half of Reconnect students (43 percent) begin initial enrollment with 30 or more credit hours, halfway to an associate degree or greater.

Since many Reconnect students (about three out of four) had previously earned credits when they first enrolled as Reconnect students, credential attainment analysis was conducted using previously earned credit hours to segment populations. (See Exhibit 3.1 in section 3 for more information on students' previously earned credit.) OREA compared Reconnect students against other independent students at community colleges enrolled at least part-time (taking 6 credit hours or greater) with similar hours who had not previously received an associate degree or higher, as detailed below:

- students with no previous college completed or no cumulative credit hours earned;
- students with 0.1-29.9 cumulative credit hours (some college completed but less than half of an associate degree);
- students with 30 to 59.9 cumulative credit hours, which is five or more part-time semesters, or about halfway to earning an associate degree; and
- students with 60 or more cumulative credit hours, which is 10 or more part-time semesters, or the required hours to earn an associate degree.[80]

Cohort 1 outcomes

Reconnect students enrolled fall 2018 to summer 2019 were analyzed for retention and completion in multiple ways. Students' one-year outcomes, including continuous enrollment status and associate degree attainment, are displayed in Exhibit 4.1 against similar independent students' outcomes. Outcomes were analyzed by demographic information, including race/ethnicity and first-generation status. Students with less than 30 hours of initial credit were excluded due to low credential attainment rates. Finally, OREA analyzed outcomes for the first semester of Reconnect students using the most recent completion data available – those starting in fall 2018 are analyzed over six semesters (through summer 2020) and compared to similar independent students enrolled at a community college in fall 2018.

Cohort 1 one-year outcomes by cumulative credit hours when first enrolled in program

OREA analyzed positive one-year outcomes (i.e., students continuously enrolled in a postsecondary institution or earning an associate degree after one year) for Reconnect students enrolled fall 2018 to summer 2019 (cohort 1). (Although students may use the Reconnect Grant to pursue a certificate or associate degree, this section considers students who attained an associate degree and does not include those who may have completed a certificate. See pages 64-67 for information on specialized interest points including certificate attainment.)

Independent students with 30 or more hours outpaced Reconnect students in associate degree attainment after one year, though Reconnect students remained continuously enrolled at higher rates if they did not earn an associate degree

To retain eligibility for the Reconnect Grant, students must remain continuously enrolled in at least 6 credit hours per fall and spring terms. A little over half of Reconnect students from cohort 1 (enrolled fall 2018 to summer 2019) who did not earn an associate degree remained continuously enrolled after one year.

Independent students earned associate degrees at higher rates than Reconnect students with 30 or more credit hours of previously earned credit. In the groupings with fewer credit hours, Reconnect students had slightly higher rates of associate degree attainment than similar independent students who were not in Reconnect.

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[80] While an associate degree typically requires 60 hours of credit, students with 60 or more hours may have accumulated credit in programs not transferrable to their current program of study. Students may utilize the Tennessee Reconnect official website to determine which credits transfer to programs of study. From fall 2018 to summer 2020, Reconnect students had 86 hours, on average, when they earned associate degrees, about 40 percent higher than a typical associate degree requires (60 hours).

Exhibit 4.1: One-year outcomes by credit hours when first enrolled in the program | 2018-19

Cohort 1: start fall 2018, spring 2019, or summer 2019 17,248 Reconnect students 10,893 similar independent students			
Cumulative hours in student's first semester in cohort	Not continuously enrolled one year after	Continuously enrolled in a postsecondary institution one year after	Earned associate degree in one year
0 hours			
Reconnect	1,524 (44.6%)	1,874 (54.9%)	16 (0.5%)
Non-Reconnect	1,936 (71.6%)	766 (28.3%)	2 (0.1%)
0.1-29.9 hours			
Reconnect	2,697 (46.0%)	2,999 (51.2%)	164 (2.8%)
Non-Reconnect	2,166 (64.0%)	1,134 (33.5%)	87 (2.6%)
30-59.9 hours			
Reconnect	1,792 (36.3%)	1,983 (40.2%)	1,162 (23.5%)
Non-Reconnect	1,328 (45.7%)	725 (25.0%)	853 (29.4%)
60 and above hours			
Reconnect	927 (30.8%)	898 (29.8%)	1,187 (39.4%)
Non-Reconnect	736 (37.1%)	428 (21.6%)	822 (41.4%)

Notes: (1) Reconnect students are measured one year after initial enrollment as a Reconnect student, while non-Reconnect students are measured one year after initially enrolling as a part-time independent student. (2) Total number of students differs slightly from the total number of students in cohort 1 (by 25 Reconnect students and seven non-Reconnect students, or 0.1 percent) because some students may have "missing" or inconsistent hours for cumulative hours when first enrolled. (3) Reconnect students are required to maintain continuous part-time enrollment but may be granted a leave of absence from the continuous part-time requirement under certain circumstances. Such students would be counted as "not continuously enrolled" in Exhibit 4.1, despite retaining eligibility for the Reconnect Grant.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Cohort 1 one-year associate degree attainment by race/ethnicity

This analysis looks at Reconnect student completion by race/ethnicity, one year after enrollment in the Reconnect program.

Reconnect students have five years to earn an associate degree or certificate. Students enrolled in the first semester of Tennessee Reconnect, fall 2018, will have until summer 2023 to complete their degree. Since many students enrolled as Reconnect students with previous credit, and students can take more than 6 credit hours, an associate degree may be obtained sooner than the five-year limit. Students with under 30 hours of previously earned credit (less than halfway toward an associate degree) are excluded from the racial/ethnic analysis in Exhibit 4.2, as so few earned associate degrees after one year. Their overall outcomes are shown in Exhibit 4.1.

Black, Hispanic, and other non-White Reconnect students had below average associate degree attainment

After one year, 23.7 percent of Reconnect students who had between 30 and 60 hours of previously earned credit earned an associate degree.[81] All races/ethnicities except White students had below average attainment rates. Black students had the lowest associate degree attainment rate, at 9.8 percentage points below the average. One out of seven Black students with 30 to 60 hours of initial credit obtained an associate degree after one year in the Reconnect program, compared to one out of four White students.

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[81] This number differs from the number reported in Exhibit 4.1 by 0.2 percent, as rounded. In this grouping, 109 students were missing racial/ethnic information and are not accounted for in the exhibit.

About two in five students with 60 or greater hours, or 39.4 percent, earned a credential within one year of enrollment in the Reconnect program. White and Asian students earned associate degrees at a higher rate, with Asian students surpassing the average by 12.5 percentage points. (Asian students with 30 to 60 hours, however, were slightly below average.) All other races/ethnicities were below average in associate attainment after one year.

Exhibit 4.2: Percent of students with 30+ hours in cohort 1 at community colleges who earned an associate degree after one year, by race/ethnicity
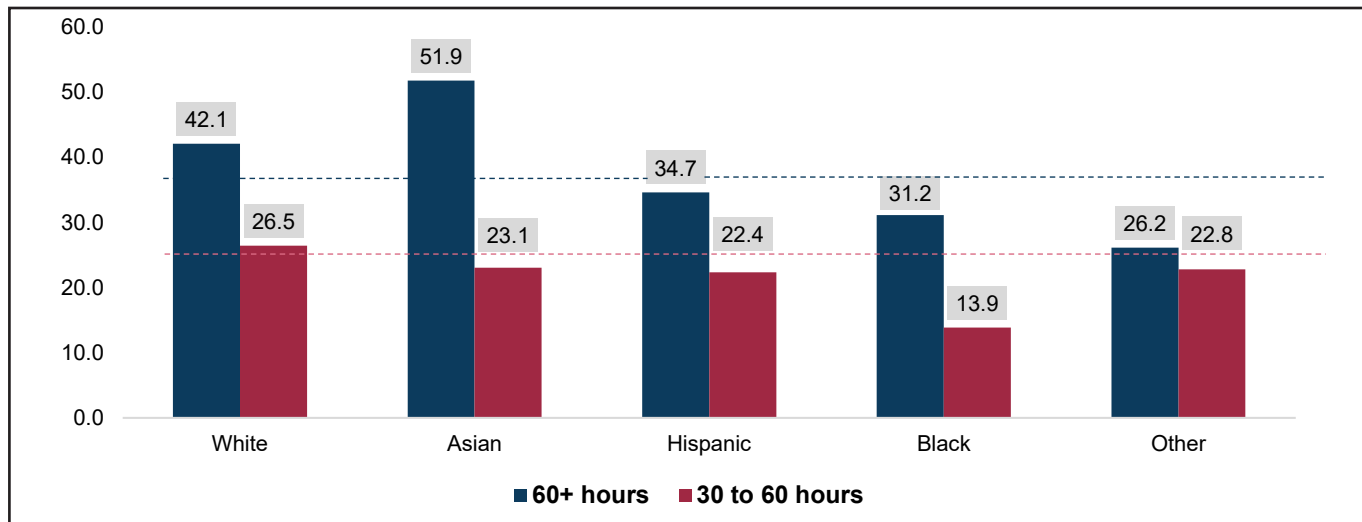
Notes: (1) Other includes Alaskan Native, American Indian, and multiracial. (2) Dashed lines represent averages for all students in respective hour groupings. (3) 155 Reconnect students in cohort 1 with 30 or more credit hours had missing or unknown racial/ethnic information (2.0 percent). They are not included in Exhibit 4.2. Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

As explained in section 2, data suggests that Black and Hispanic students apply for and become Reconnect students at disproportionately higher rates than White students. Black Tennesseans were 2.3 percentage points more likely to apply for the program and 0.4 percentage points more likely to enroll in the program than White Tennesseans. Similarly, Hispanic Tennesseans were 1.4 percentage points more likely to apply and 0.6 percentage points more likely to enroll when compared to White Tennesseans. These groups had below average associate degree attainment rates after one year, despite becoming Reconnect students at relatively high rates.

Cohort 1 one-year outcomes by first-generation status

This analysis looks at one-year continuous enrollment and completion status by first-generation status for Reconnect students in cohort 1 (enrolled fall 2018, spring 2019, or summer 2019) with 30 or more hours of previously earned credit when first enrolled as a Reconnect student. A first-generation college student is one whose parents did not earn a college degree. Research suggests that first-generation students may have more barriers to college completion than other students, such as work obligations, inadequate study skills, and difficulty navigating the college landscape.

First-generation Reconnect students had higher associate degree attainment than other Reconnect students

One-year outcomes of first-generation and other Reconnect students are shown in Exhibit 4.3. First-generation students had a higher rate of associate degree attainment than other Reconnect students. They were less likely to be continuously enrolled a year after due to their higher associate degree attainment rate.

Exhibit 4.3: One-year enrollment and completion of Reconnect students by first-generation status | cohort 1 with 30+ hours of credit
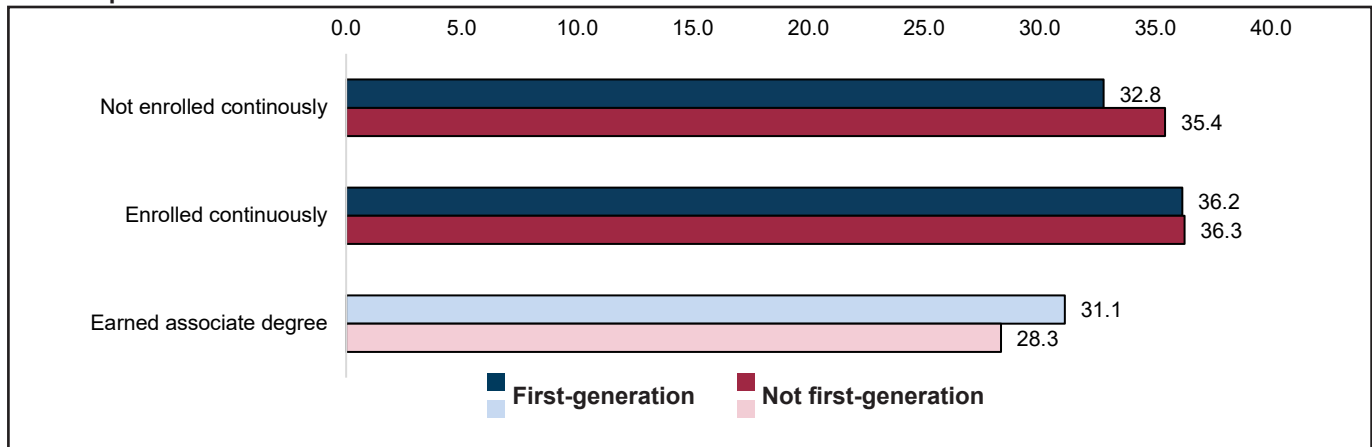
Note: 170 Reconnect students in cohort 1 with 30 or more credit hours had missing or unknown first-generation status (2 percent). They are not included in Exhibit 4.3. Lighter tones in the graph represent completion of degree.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

First-generation students in cohort 1 with 30 or more credit hours were, on average, slightly older when they first received Reconnect (2.7 years older)[82] and had slightly higher incomes than other students (18 percent higher based on students' median adjusted gross incomes from 2019). First-generation students were slightly more likely to be White (by 1.4 percentage points) than other students. First-generation students were also more likely to be women than other students (4 percentage points greater).

Data suggests that female students, regardless of race/ethnicity, are more likely to complete college than male students. In addition, students with higher incomes complete college at higher rates than students with lower incomes. The higher performance of first-generation students could be due to the demographic makeup of those included (i.e., white, women, and higher-income students are more likely to earn credentials).

Students from the first semester of Reconnect compared to similar independent students enrolled in fall 2018 over two academic years
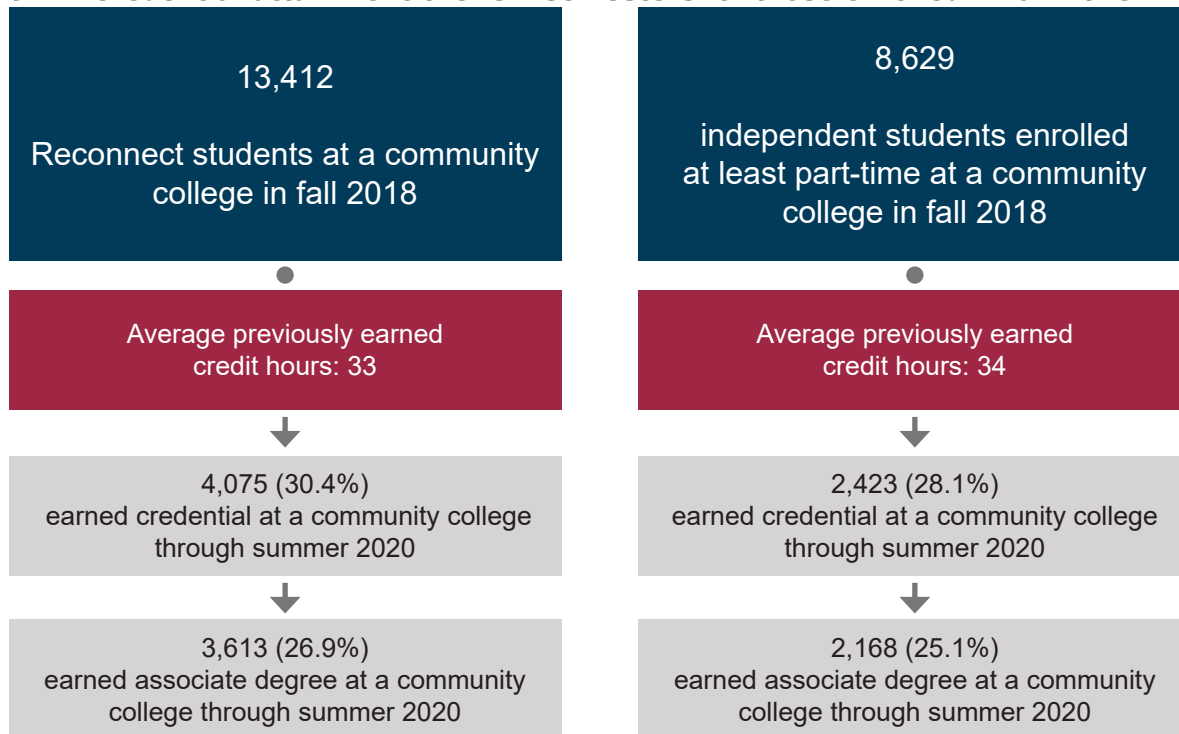
In Exhibit 4.1, OREA analyzed outcomes for cohort 1, which included Reconnect students first enrolled fall 2018, spring 2019, and summer 2019. This analysis compares the first semester of Reconnect students (fall 2018) in cohort 1 to other independent students who were enrolled at least part-time at a community college in fall 2018 over two academic years, or six semesters (through summer 2020), and had not previously earned an associate degree or higher. (At the time of publication, the most recent completion data available was from summer 2020. See page 7 for more information.)

More than a quarter, or 27 percent, of students enrolled in Reconnect in fall 2018 earned an associate degree at a community college through summer 2020. Comparably, 25 percent of other similar independent students enrolled at least part-time at a community college in fall 2018 earned an associate degree through summer 2020. About one-fourth of the Reconnect students enrolled at a community college in fall 2018 were enrolled at a community college two years later, in fall 2020.[83] Most of the students who were enrolled at a community college two years later (64 percent) remained in the Reconnect program, suggesting continued persistence toward a degree using the grant. Full analysis of Reconnect students' completion rates will be possible after 2023, the first year that Reconnect students from cohort 1 no longer qualify based on the program's time limit.

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[82] OREA did not receive data on students' birth months. Ages were derived by subtracting students' birth years from one year less than the year the student first got Reconnect to ensure that students were of that age or greater. Thus, some calculated ages may be understated by one year from the true value.
[83] Completion data for fall 2020 was not available at the time of publication.

Exhibit 4.4: Credential attainment over six semesters for those enrolled in fall 2018

13,412	8,629
Reconnect students at a community college in fall 2018	independent students enrolled at least part-time at a community college in fall 2018

Average previously earned credit hours: 33	Average previously earned credit hours: 34

4,075 (30.4%) earned credential at a community college through summer 2020	2,423 (28.1%) earned credential at a community college through summer 2020

3,613 (26.9%) earned associate degree at a community college through summer 2020	2,168 (25.1%) earned associate degree at a community college through summer 2020

Notes: (1) In fall 2018, 9,589 independent students without a previous associate degree or higher were enrolled in and taking at least 6 credit hours at a community college not receiving Reconnect. Of these, 10 percent (960 students) became Reconnect students later. Due to this, they are not included in Exhibit 4.4. (2) Credentials awarded include terminal and sequential certificates and associate degrees. (3) Reconnect students taking below 6 hours were excluded from the analysis. While part-time enrollment is required for eligibility, some Reconnect students may have been granted exceptions.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

As shown in Exhibit 4.4, Reconnect students from fall 2018 in cohort 1 had higher rates of associate degree attainment over six semesters than similar independent students (1.8 percentage points greater). Thus, while initial cohort 1 completion data indicated that Reconnect students with 30 or more credit hours lagged similar independent students in degree completion one year after initial enrollment, Reconnect students enrolled in the first semester of the program exceeded their peers in overall degree completion after two full academic years (through summer 2020).

The difference in associate degree attainment between these two groups may become clearer in the future, since Reconnect students have 10 part-time semesters to earn an associate degree (i.e., by summer 2023 for students who began in fall 2018).

Completion by institution

To analyze completion by institution, OREA compared the number of Reconnect students earning associate degrees in a term to the number of Reconnect students enrolled in that term for two years of the program, 2018-19 and 2019-20.[84]

OREA did not identify a completion pattern by county or geographic region, but four institutions exhibited high rates of completion

There was not one county or region of the state that produced a proportionally higher amount of associate degrees, but OREA identified community colleges where Reconnect students graduated at higher rates. Four institutions – one in West Tennessee, one in Middle Tennessee – and two in East Tennessee, exhibited persistently high rates of associate degree completion per Reconnect students enrolled.

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[84] Students may use Tennessee Reconnect to earn a certificate as well. The data, however, does not delineate between a sequential certificate, which would allow students to continue using Reconnect, and terminal certificates, which would terminate the scholarship upon receipt.

Notably, Dyersburg State Community College in West Tennessee had the highest percentage of associate degrees awarded per Reconnect students for two terms (fall 2018 and summer 2019) of all the state's community colleges, and above average rates in three out of the four other terms analyzed.[85] Since 2011, Dyersburg State has had the lowest total enrollment of all 13 community colleges. The college has a higher than average share of independent students who enroll as Reconnect students, however (5 percentage points greater). Dyersburg State has instituted several initiatives for Reconnect students. The college's adult student coordinator serves as a "one-stop shop" for Reconnect students, advising them, helping them select classes, and providing information about program requirements. This coordinator, along with financial aid counselors at the college, carries out the majority of the college's efforts to recruit and counsel Reconnect students, which include a separate orientation for adult students, several Reconnect informational sessions, and personalized advising and counseling.

"We have really set up different areas that cater to our adult students. We started an adult student orientation that is just for adults, 24 and older, who are looking to come back to school or are enrolled. Also, our Reconnect informational sessions are great – it's a one-stop shop. [The financial aid counselors and adult student coordinator] work great together. We can do the application, FAFSA, and walk them through the processes. A lot of it is the individualized attention. Adults do want personalized attention. I make sure students receive individual emails with [the adult student coordinator's] contact information and [the financial aid counselor's]. I also reach out to students throughout the semester and say, 'What can I help you with?' Having someone they can reach out to and the consistency of that has made a difference. Making programs for that specific age group is so helpful. A lot of adults were intimidated coming to orientation [alongside students who are] fresh out of high school. It seemed to make a difference to have their own orientation."

Source: OREA interview with Dyersburg State, October 2020

In Middle Tennessee, Columbia State Community College had above average rates of associate degree attainment for all six semesters studied, fall 2018 to summer 2020. The college hosts an adult learner page on its website and one specifically for Tennessee Reconnect.[86] Columbia State, like Dyersburg, has an adult student services coordinator who serves as a single point of contact for Reconnect students. Columbia State designed outreach and messaging (e.g., phone calls and emails) specifically for adult students.

"As an adult learner, you will quickly discover you are not alone! About 1/3 of the students here at Columbia State are also adult learners, so it is easy to get connected to a learning community.

"With 5 campuses to meet your educational needs, we are sure you will find the location, classes and adult learner community you need to be successful. Advisors will work with you to set up individualized learning plans so that you can find the classes you need. Many of our classes are offered in a variety of formats."

Source: Columbia State adult learners webpage

Columbia's success in the Reconnect program may also be explained by its success overall. For instance, the college's three-year graduation rate for the 2017 cohort of first-time, full-time students was 26.4 percent, compared to 25.3 percent for all community colleges. In addition, Columbia's average first-year retention rate for 2019-20 exceeded the average for all community colleges by 4 percentage points. Columbia State has a robust advising model. Students are assigned to advisors based on earned college credit hours, program of study, and campus location. Since many Reconnect students have prior college credit, as explained in section 3, they may uniquely benefit from Columbia's advising, which sorts students based on credit hours earned.

Two institutions in East Tennessee, Chattanooga State Community College and Pellissippi State Community College, demonstrated consistently high performance in associate degrees awarded per Reconnect students enrolled. Both Chattanooga State and Pellissippi State were above average in five out of six terms. OREA interviewed and surveyed administrators from both institutions in fall 2020 and found that they have implemented several initiatives to recruit and retain adult students and encourage completion of credentials.

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[85] Roane State in East Tennessee also had the highest percentage of associate degrees awarded per Reconnect students enrolled for two terms (spring 2019 and spring 2020) but was below the state average for four other semesters analyzed.
[86] According to its webpage, Columbia also has regular Tennessee Reconnect information sessions. In November 2021, for example, Columbia held eight virtual Reconnect information sessions at a variety of times.

Chattanooga State has instituted various practices to spur success for both its adult students and general population. While Chattanooga State employs a full-time Director of Adult Services, it also has an adult learner club, "CADRE," through which Reconnect students can connect with and support other students. On OREA's November 2020 survey, one administrator noted that Reconnect students act as ambassadors to other adult learners and potential students. Chattanooga State also promotes both program and adult persistence through "Tennessee Reconnect Tuesday Student of the Week" in which the Director of Adult Services selects a Reconnect student to feature on social media and on campus announcements. She related that this initiative, which started in October 2019, inspires other adults to return to college, helps lift Reconnect student morale, and educates faculty and staff about the unique needs of adult learners.[87] One administrator credited the institution's work on improving completion and graduation rates for all students in helping Reconnect students remain on track to graduate. Chattanooga State makes college success courses, proactive advising, experiential learning, and career assessment programs available to all students, and all new students are required to attend a new student orientation program. In addition, administrators cited the college's evening childcare program as particularly helpful to students; financial assistance is available to students to help cover the cost. (When asked how to keep more Reconnect students enrolled and on track to graduate, nine administrators suggested childcare supports.)

Pellissippi State also adjusted its outreach in response to Reconnect, offering different advising and testing formats (later hours, weekend, and virtual). During the 2019-20 school year, Pellissippi created the Office of Student Care and Advocacy to centralize support services available to students for non-academic issues (e.g., housing, social services, food insecurity, etc.). Research suggests that adult students may have more nonacademic barriers to success than traditional students such as caring for children and job obligations. (The average Reconnect student is 32 years old, plans to work full-time, and cares for dependents).

Both Dyersburg State and Pellissippi State may have benefitted from experience with Tennessee Reconnect's predecessor, the Community College Reconnect Grant, which started in fall 2016 and ended in summer 2018.[88] Pellissippi State had the most students participate of all 13 community colleges in the Community College Reconnect Grant (32 percent in fall 2016 and 38 percent in spring 2017). For the 2016-17 academic year, 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. After the Community College Reconnect Grant, Pellissippi State launched Tennessee Reconnect a year early in fall 2017 using institutional funds. In an October 2020 interview with OREA, administrators from Chattanooga State indicated that they also had a relatively high proportion of adult students on campus before the grant.

[87] Chattanooga State also includes adult success stories on its Reconnect website, viewable at https://www.chattanoogastate.edu/adult-success-stories.

[88] See OREA's December 2017 report, *Tennessee Community College Reconnect Grant Program*, at https://tncot.cc/orea for more information.

Exhibit 4.5: Reconnect completion by institution by term, as a percentage of Reconnect students at institution | 2018-19
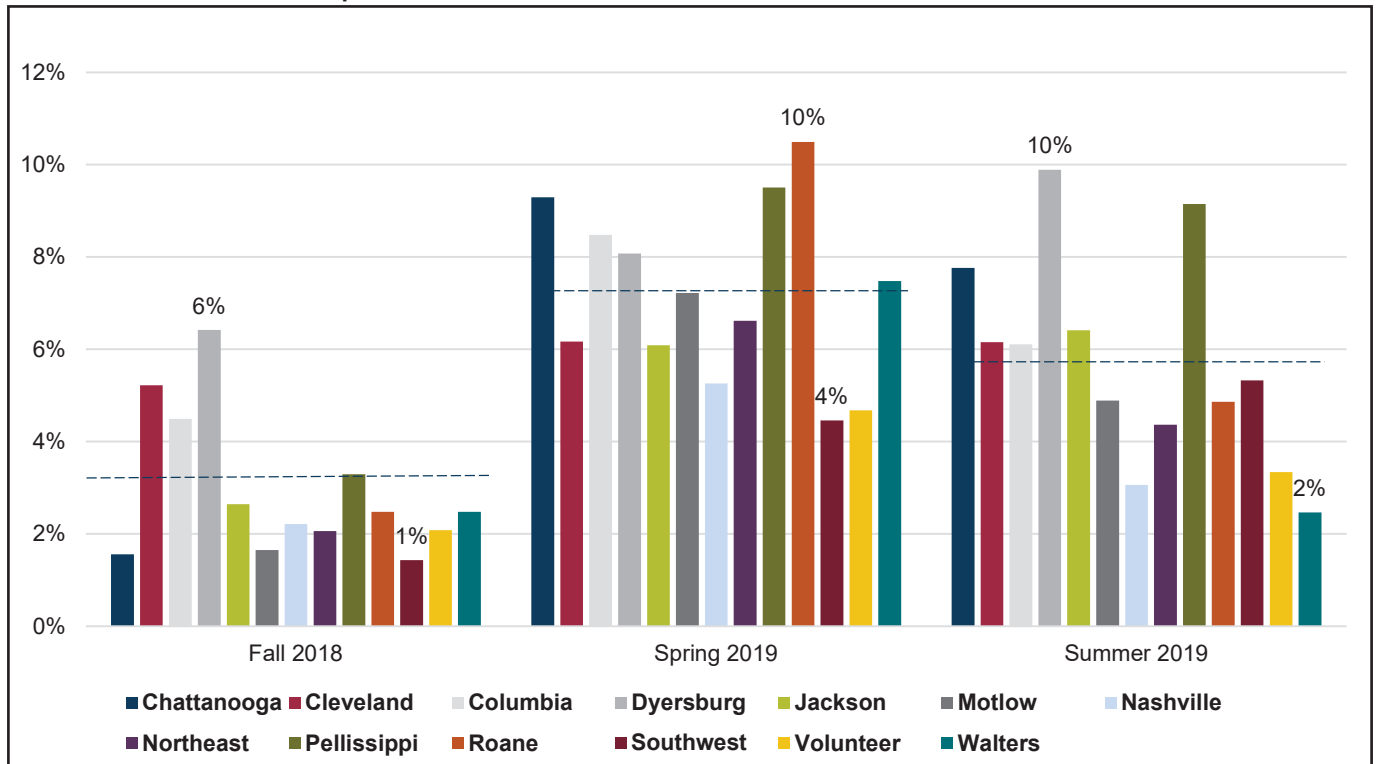
Notes: In the exhibit, (1) Reconnect students enrolled in multiple community colleges were excluded from Reconnect students per term, and (2) if a student received multiple credentials, he or she was considered a completer for whichever institution granted the credential.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Exhibit 4.6: Reconnect completion by institution by term, as a percentage of Reconnect students at institution | 2019-20
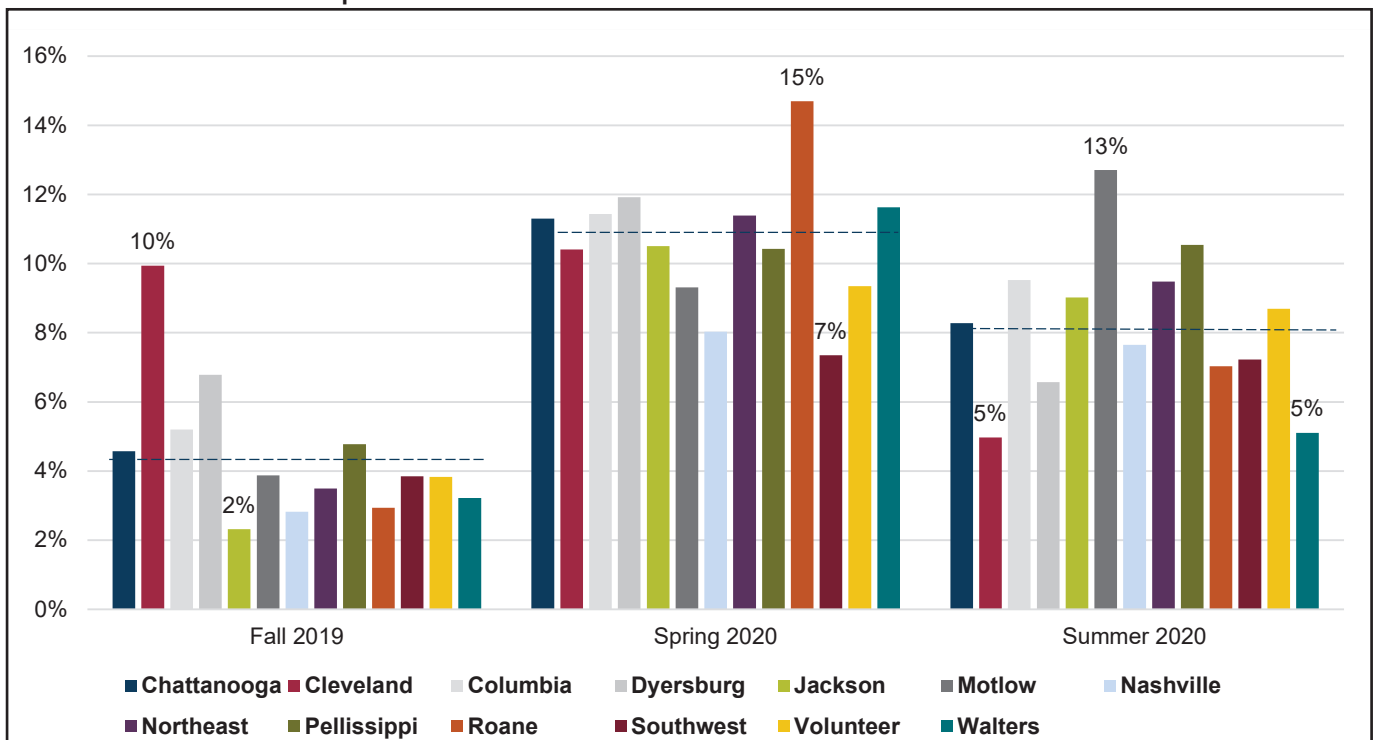
Notes: In the exhibit, (1) Reconnect students enrolled in multiple community colleges were excluded from Reconnect students per term, and (2) if a student received multiple credentials, he or she was considered a completer for whichever institution granted the credential.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Completion by special interest points

Research methods

In this section, OREA analyzed completion by special interest points (e.g., types of credentials earned). Students who were in the Reconnect program from fall 2018 to summer 2020 (cohorts 1 and 2) were compared to independent students who were not in the Reconnect program from fall 2018 to summer 2020 and had not previously earned an associate degree or higher.[89]

Reconnect students earned a higher proportion of workforce-ready degrees than similar independent students

Tennessee Reconnect supports the Drive to 55's goal of aligning workforce needs by seeking to increase the number of Tennesseans with postsecondary credentials. (See section 5 for more information on the Drive to 55.) Tennesseans of all ages need to possess credentials to succeed in the workforce. While earning a credential is important to meet workforce demand, the type of credential earned is especially critical to a student's success after college. Students who earn credentials that are aligned with workforce needs may find it easier to obtain employment and higher-paying jobs. Students may use Tennessee Reconnect to earn an associate degree, such as an Associate of Applied Science (AAS), Associate of Arts (AA), an Associate of Science (AS), or a certificate. An Associate of Applied Science (AAS) is a two-year terminal degree program. The AAS degree is designed for students planning to enter the job market immediately upon graduation. It is not a degree designed to transfer to a four-year university. AAS degrees provide more hands-on experience, with extra program components like laboratory or clinical training. In addition to associate degrees, students may also earn certificates using the Reconnect Grant.

Exhibit 4.7: Examples of credentials offered at Motlow State Community College

Associate of Applied Science (AAS)	Associate of Arts (AA)	Associate of Science (AS)	Certificate
Accounting*	Art	Agricultural business	Customer service
Cyber defense	English	Electrical engineering	Early childhood education**
Entrepreneurship	Foreign languages	Finance	Emergency medical technician
Medical lab technology	General studies*	Information systems	Mechatronics technology
Nursing	Sociology*	Physics	Paramedic

Notes: (1) A single asterisk indicates a program that may also be an Associate of Science program. (2) A double asterisk indicates a program that may also be an Associate of Science, Associate of Science in Teaching, or Associate of Applied Science program.
Source: Motlow State Community College website.

OREA compared Reconnect students' earned credentials, both associate degrees and certificates, to similar independent students' earned credentials over six semesters to determine differences in attainment of workforce-aligned (AAS) degrees.[90]

From fall 2018 to summer 2020, 4,480 Reconnect students earned a credential while remaining in the Reconnect program during those six semesters at community colleges, 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. Reconnect students earned AAS degrees at

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[89] While some Reconnect students may have left the program before earning a credential, they may have still benefitted from the Reconnect Grant and its supports, such as receiving a personalized Reconnect Success Plan, which connects them to college and community resources. Of those Reconnect students who earned a credential, 18 percent did not receive a Reconnect Grant. Reconnect students who did not earn degrees are excluded from both groups. In other words, a student who receives Reconnect in fall 2018 but drops out of the program in spring 2019 and earns a degree in summer 2019 will not be included in either the Reconnect group or the similar independent group.
[90] Certificates listed are not delineated as terminal or sequential certificates due to data limitations. Therefore, all certificates are analyzed, even though a Reconnect student may earn a sequential certificate and subsequently earn an associate degree.

higher rates than other similar independent students, suggesting that Reconnect students graduate with more workforce-ready degrees than their peers.

Exhibit 4.8: Reconnect student credentials compared to independent student credentials at community colleges, fall 2018 – summer 2020 (six semesters)

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

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.

Reconnect students earned a higher proportion of high-need credentials than similar independent students

In addition to credential type, OREA also analyzed the type of credential Reconnect students earned using Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) codes.[91] CIP codes sort higher education instructional programs into groups using a numerical coding system. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) identified nine two-digit CIP codes as high-need instructional areas using data projecting the state's need for various occupations.[92] OREA categorized credentials as high-need using the definitions in Exhibit 4.9. Programs not included in Exhibit 4.9 are classified as "not high-need."

Exhibit 4.9: Two-digit CIP codes identified as high-need

CIP code	Program title
01	Agriculture, agriculture operations, and related services
03	Natural resources and conservation
11	Computer and information sciences and support services
14	Engineering
15	Engineering technologies/technicians
26	Biological and biomedical sciences
27	Mathematics and statistics
40	Physical sciences
51	Health professions and related clinical sciences

Source: Tennessee Higher Education Commission.

Compared to similar independent students who had not previously earned an associate degree or higher award, Reconnect students earned a slightly higher proportion of high-need credentials as classified by the definition in Exhibit 4.9. From fall 2018 through summer 2020, 4,447 Reconnect students earned CIP-coded credentials at a community college. Of those, 40 percent earned a credential designated as high-need. Similar non-Reconnect independent students earned 1,189 high-need credentials (32 percent). Neither group had notable high-need credential production. Most independent students, Reconnect or otherwise, earned credentials that are classified as not high-need (about two out of three students).

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[91] The Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) is a code system of instructional programs to facilitate the organization, collection, and reporting of fields of study and program completions. Most of the CIP titles correspond to academic and occupational instructional programs offered for credit at the postsecondary level. These programs result in recognized completion points and awards, including degrees, certificates, and other formal awards. The CIP is the accepted federal government statistical standard on instructional program classifications and is used in a variety of education information surveys and databases. See https://siccode.com/page/what-is-a-cip-code.

[92] The data used are from the Department of Labor and Workforce Development's Jobs4TN database and Key Industry Clusters identified by the Department of Economic and Community Development. These codes were aligned with a high-needs field definition as part of the Quality Assurance Funding (QAF) revision approved by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission in May 2020.

Exhibit 4.10: Credentials earned by type | fall 2018 to summer 2020

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%)
	3,694	4,447

Note: The total numbers in Exhibit 4.10 differ from Exhibit 4.9 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.
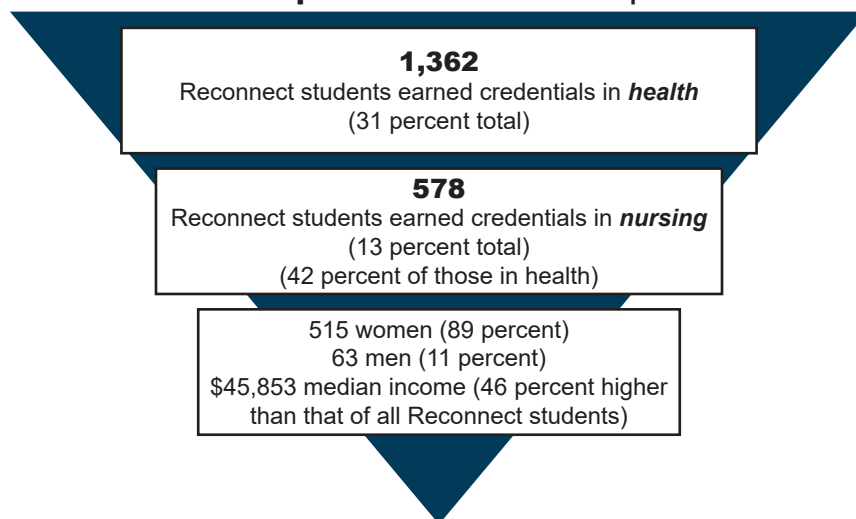Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Degrees in health professions are especially high-need. Between 2018 and 2028, employment in the health care industry in Tennessee is projected to grow by 72,000 jobs to reach almost half a million jobs. Contributing factors to the rise in demand for health care workers include an aging population and the turnover rate for health care workers who retire or leave the profession to pursue other occupations. The increased turnover rate has been exacerbated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic's strain on the health care system and the resulting worker fatigue.

About three out of 10 Reconnect students earning credentials (31 percent) earned credentials in health professions, representing 77 percent of students' credentials designated as high-need. The next two high-need categories with the largest number of graduates were engineering and computer/information sciences, at about 4 to 5 percent each.

Tennessee, and much of the U.S., is facing a shortage of nurses, with demand projected to be approximately twice that for all industries over 2018 to 2028. While some nursing positions may require a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) (i.e., a four-year program that is not an eligible program of study under the Tennessee Reconnect Grant and is not offered at Tennessee's community colleges), individuals may work as a registered nurse with an AASN and may apply their AASN degree toward the completion of a BSN. All 13 community colleges offer an AASN degree, and administrators mentioned the cost of nursing program fees as a barrier for some students. About one in eight Reconnect students who earned credentials from fall 2018 to summer 2020 earned nursing credentials (13 percent).[93] Almost half of students who earned credentials in health professions, though, earned credentials in nursing (42 percent). Most of the Reconnect students who earned credentials in nursing were women (89 percent) and had higher median incomes than other Reconnect students (46 percent higher).

Exhibit 4.11: Reconnect student completion in health fields | fall 2018 to summer 2020

1,362
Reconnect students earned credentials in *health*
(31 percent total)

578
Reconnect students earned credentials in *nursing*
(13 percent total)
(42 percent of those in health)

515 women (89 percent)
63 men (11 percent)
$45,853 median income (46 percent higher than that of all Reconnect students)

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[93] OREA measured students earning credentials in CIP code 51.38, which represents registered nursing, nursing administration, nursing research, and clinical nursing.

Additional analysis is needed to gauge the effect of Navigators on students' credential attainment rates

Navigate Reconnect provides general guidance and assistance to adult learners in Tennessee, including, but not limited to, Reconnect students.[94] All Tennessee adults are eligible for Navigate Reconnect services at no cost, even if they do not participate in the Tennessee Reconnect Grant program. Navigate Reconnect staff, called "Navigators," based in regions across the state, 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 through graduation. Roughly one-fifth (21 percent) of Reconnect students who were enrolled from fall 2018 to summer 2020 (cohorts 1 and 2) worked with a Navigator. (See section 1 for more information on Navigate Reconnect.)

Research methods

OREA obtained information on students' interactions with Navigators in a data transfer made separately from data used in other analyses in this report. Therefore, numbers in this section may differ slightly from completion information due to data limitations.

To appropriately analyze and compare students' credential attainment rates by whether they worked with a Navigator or not, both groups must have similar characteristics. Students who worked with a Navigator had, on average, slightly fewer previously earned credits when first enrolled in Reconnect. OREA conducted a hypothesis test to determine if there was any statistically significant difference between the two groups in previously earned credit.[95] The test results indicated a difference between the two groups. While the difference was seemingly minimal (30 credit hours compared to 31), it was statistically significant, suggesting that the two groups are different. Selection bias may be present; that is, students who worked with a Navigator may have had greater challenges and less previous college experience than those who did not elect to work with a Navigator.

Therefore, while the analysis below indicates that students who worked with a Navigator earned a proportionally lower amount of credentials than those who did not work with a Navigator, the implication is inconclusive. Future analysis may investigate Navigator effect on student completion by similar credit hour groupings, as was done in Exhibit 4.1.

About one in five (21 percent) of Reconnect students from fall 2018 to summer 2020 worked with a Navigator. Of the Reconnect students who worked with a Navigator, 15 percent earned credentials from fall 2018 to summer 2020. Comparably, of the Reconnect students who did not work with a Navigator, 16 percent earned credentials from fall 2018 to summer 2020.

Exhibit 4.12: Reconnect completion by Navigator interaction | fall 2018 to summer 2020

Earned a credential fall 2018 to summer 2020?	Interacted with a Navigator?		Total
	No	**Yes**	
No	17,855 (84.2%)	4,797 (85.5%)	22,652 (84.5%)
Yes	3,344 (15.8%)	814 (14.5%)	4,158 (15.5%)
Total	**21,199**	**5,611**	**26,810**

Note: This chart differs from Exhibit 4.8 slightly due to data limitations. There are 26,810 students accounted for in this chart, but 26,877 students in cohorts 1 and 2 (99.8 percent included). Similarly, while 4,480 Reconnect students earned credentials, 93 percent (4,158) are accounted for here.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

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[94] Navigate Reconnect replaced what were formerly known as Tennessee Reconnect Communities on July 1, 2019.
[95] OREA used a t-test to compare the mean previously earned credit hours of the two groups.

Barriers to keeping students in the program and on track to graduate

In the first two years of the program, 26 percent of Reconnect students lost eligibility

About one in four Reconnect students at community colleges (6,915) lost eligibility in the first two years of the program due to program requirements (e.g., maintaining a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA) or not completing other eligibility requirements (e.g., refiling the FAFSA). Most of these students (69 percent) lost Reconnect eligibility due to program eligibility (i.e., maintaining part-time continuous enrollment or a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA), and the remaining 31 percent lost the grant due to process requirements (i.e., failing to refile the annual application or the FAFSA).

Two out of three Reconnect students lost eligibility due to not meeting program requirements

Students may lose grant eligibility if they do not meet certain standards while enrolled; for instance, they must maintain a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA and part-time continuous enrollment (i.e., enrolling in at least 6 credit hours each fall and spring semester), unless granted an approved leave of absence. The majority of students who lost Reconnect eligibility lost eligibility due to these program requirements.

While some administrators indicated that the GPA requirement was a barrier for Reconnect students due to lack of academic preparation, most students lost eligibility due to the part-time requirement (54 percent of students who lost eligibility, or 3,747 students). Under program rules, Reconnect students can apply for a leave of absence, which would exempt them from continuous and/or part-time enrollment provided that all other program requirements have been met. Students seeking a leave of absence may submit a request for reasons including, but not limited to, illness of the student, illness or death of an immediate family member, extreme financial hardship, fulfillment of a religious commitment, or fulfillment of National Guard active duty. Some of the 3,747 Reconnect students who lost grant eligibility due to failing to maintain continuous part-time enrollment may have requested or could have been eligible to request a leave of absence.[96]

One out of three students lost eligibility due to not meeting process requirements

Some students lost eligibility because they either did not complete the annual Reconnect application or did not refile the FAFSA. Completing a Reconnect application and refiling the FAFSA are both required every year to maintain Reconnect Grant eligibility.
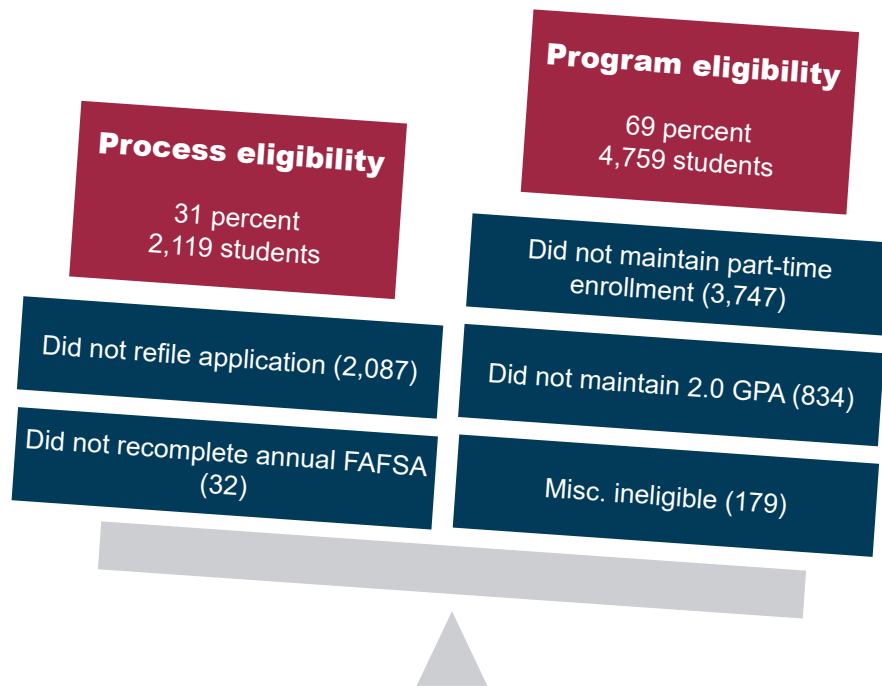
For instance, 1,188 students from cohort 1 met all eligibility requirements for the second year of the program (including completing the 2019-2020 FAFSA) and were enrolled in the following fall (fall 2019),[97] but did not complete the 2019-20 Reconnect application and were therefore ineligible to receive the grant. These students, representing 7 percent of cohort 1, would have remained in the Reconnect program if they had filled out the application. Most students who did not refile the application but would have otherwise been eligible never got Reconnect funds (67 percent). A similar trend existed for cohort 2, who entered the program from fall 2019 to summer 2020. (From fall 2018 to summer 2020, only 30 percent of Reconnect students never received grant funding.)

A minority of Reconnect students were not eligible for the grant because they did not refile the FAFSA. In fall 2019, 24 students in cohort 1 met all other program and process requirements and were enrolled but did not complete the FAFSA for the 2019-20 school year, making them ineligible for the Reconnect program. (Eight students in cohort 2 fell into this category.) These students had previously completed the FAFSA since it is a requirement to enter the Reconnect program but did not refile the FAFSA and therefore lost eligibility.

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[96] Due to data limitations, OREA was not able to identify students who were granted a leave of absence.

[97] Enrollment in the next year's fall is required to meet continuous eligibility if students are enrolled in cohort 1, did not earn a credential, and did not take a leave of absence.

Exhibit 4.13: Process and program ineligibility reasons | fall 2018 to summer 2020

Program eligibility
69 percent
4,759 students

Process eligibility
31 percent
2,119 students

Did not maintain part-time enrollment (3,747)

Did not refile application (2,087)

Did not maintain 2.0 GPA (834)

Did not recomplete annual FAFSA (32)

Misc. ineligible (179)

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.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC data provided by community colleges.

Exhibit 4.13 displays Reconnect students' reasons for losing eligibility after they had received the grant. According to state law,[98] a student who ceases to be eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant at any time may not regain eligibility unless granted a leave of absence. Students who lose grant eligibility may decide to stay enrolled at a community college or drop out altogether. Students who lost eligibility due to process requirements (e.g., not refiling the annual Reconnect application or the FAFSA) but maintained program eligibility (e.g., achieved a 2.0 GPA or higher) were more likely to be enrolled part-time the following fall despite not being Reconnect students. Students who lost eligibility due to program requirements (e.g., maintaining part-time enrollment and meeting the required 2.0 GPA) failed to re-enroll as part-time students in the following fall semester at higher rates.

Lack of technology proficiency, the cost of non-mandatory or online fees, missing classes due to work or family obligations, and other challenges may have been factors for students who lost eligibility and failed to re-enroll. On the November 2020 OREA survey of community college administrators, respondents pointed to the cost of textbooks and fees not covered by Reconnect as the barriers that often impede the success or persistence of Reconnect students. As explained in section 1, Reconnect students spend an average of about $800 per year on books, non-mandatory fees, and supplies that are not covered by the Reconnect Grant. (See pages 15-16 for more details.) Administrators also indicated issues with Reconnect students' academic preparation.

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[98] *TCA* 49-4-944(e).

Exhibit 4.14: Barriers to success and persistence for Tennessee Reconnect students, based on survey of community college financial aid officers and academic and student success officials
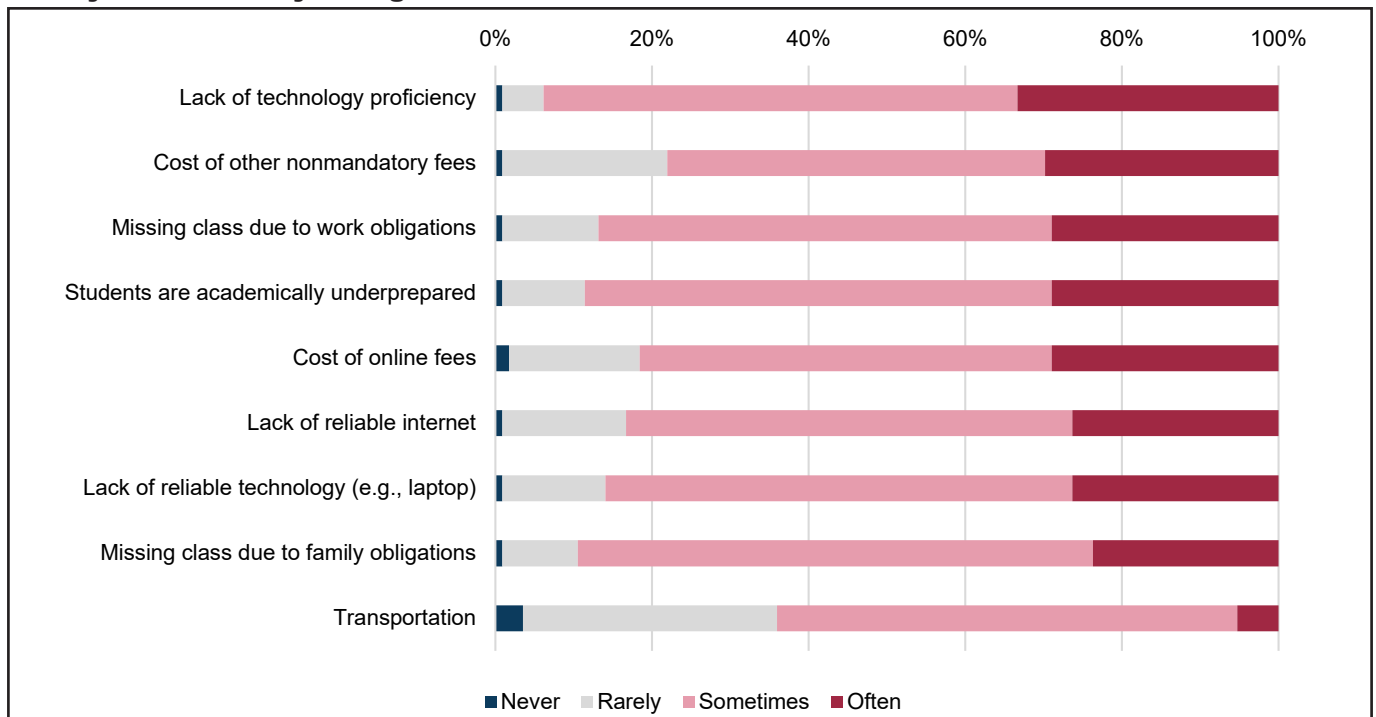
Source: OREA survey of community college administrators, November 2020. On this question, OREA received responses from 114 community college administrators.

Over a third of Reconnect students in cohort 1 did not enroll in the following fall semester or earn a credential, despite the majority (78 percent) having previous college experience

Analysis indicates some potential areas for improvement in retention and credential attainment.

Retaining more students in college would contribute to greater rates of credential attainment. In cohort 1 (2018-19), about 37 percent of Reconnect students were not retained at any institution after one year and did not earn a credential during that period, meaning they were not counted in the state's attainment rate (40 percent were not enrolled continuously and did not earn an associate degree). Students who struggle academically may lose Reconnect eligibility after failing to meet the required GPA and subsequently drop out of college. Other barriers preventing retention and credential attainment include family or work responsibilities, which studies indicate impact adult students more significantly than traditional students. Students who have significant family or work responsibilities may have to drop out of college.

Reconnect students' credential attainment will be more evident after 2023, the first year that Reconnect students' time-related eligibility expires. After one year, Reconnect students with 30 or more hours of previously earned credit received associate degrees at a lower rate than their peers. Targeted supports to this group of students – those with half of the hours or greater required for an associate degree or more – could encourage completion. Outreach to ensure returning students near degree completion (e.g., students with 30 or more hours) finish their degrees could increase institutions' graduation rates.
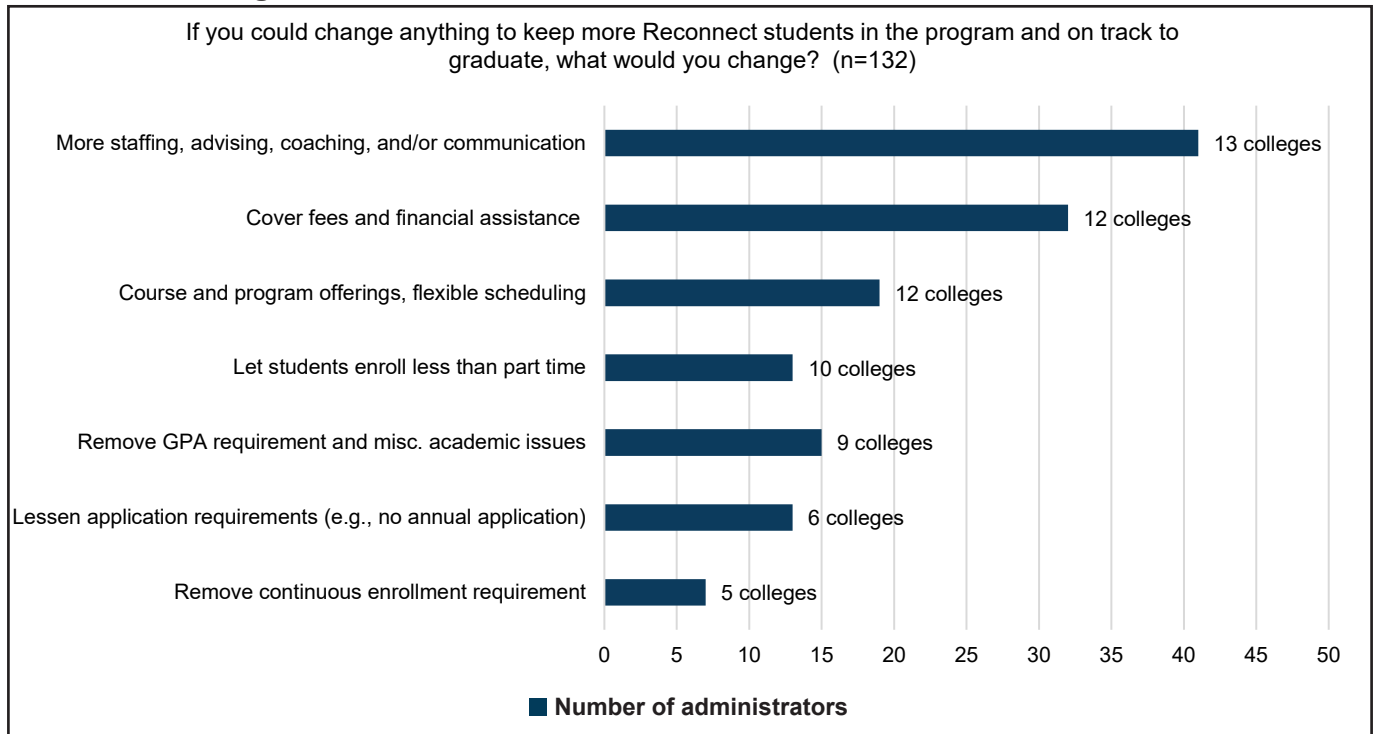
Institutions may also benefit from identifying Reconnect students who are academically underprepared. The majority of community college administrators who responded to OREA's survey (89 percent) reported that inadequate academic preparation impedes the success and persistence of Reconnect

> "After you complete your Roane State application for admission, you'll be assigned a personal Success Coach at your preferred campus. Your Success Coach is your go-to person during your first year—we're here to help with just about everything!"
>
> Source: Roane State Community College website, roanestate.edu/?11056-Success-Coaches.

students sometimes or often. (See Exhibit 4.14.) Supports to students who have concerns about academic preparation or whose academic performance is poor (e.g., low GPA) may increase the credential attainment rate. Institutional supports could include enhanced tutoring services for adult students and assigning Reconnect students to adult-focused success coaches who provide academic advising. On an open-ended survey question asking administrators to identify changes to keep more Reconnect students in the program and on track to graduate, administrators from all 13 community colleges recommended additional advising, more staffing, or greater communication to Reconnect students. One community college administrator suggested mandatory advisement for students who receive academic alerts[99] or do not maintain a 2.0 GPA per semester.[100]

Exhibit 4.15: Community college administrators said more student advisors and providing additional funding would increase the number of Reconnect students who remain enrolled

If you could change anything to keep more Reconnect students in the program and on track to graduate, what would you change? (n=132)

Response	Number of administrators
More staffing, advising, coaching, and/or communication	13 colleges
Cover fees and financial assistance	12 colleges
Course and program offerings, flexible scheduling	12 colleges
Let students enroll less than part time	10 colleges
Remove GPA requirement and misc. academic issues	9 colleges
Lessen application requirements (e.g., no annual application)	6 colleges
Remove continuous enrollment requirement	5 colleges

■ Number of administrators

Note: Open comment box responses were analyzed. Some respondents listed multiple reasons; therefore, the total number of respondents per response category will exceed the total n count.
Source: OREA survey of community college administrators, November 2020.

Analysis of Reconnect financials

Research methods

This section analyzes the finances behind the Tennessee Reconnect program, including average funds awarded, total state expenditures by student, and state funds spent on student completion.

THEC provided OREA with enrollment and financial aid payment data for all community college students from fall 2018 to fall 2020. OREA matched enrollment with payment data to determine the number of Reconnect students at community colleges. The analysis here represents totals derived from OREA's identification of Reconnect students (or, as indicated, Promise students) and state funds spent on them. As a result, figures in this section may differ slightly from figures reported in section 1, which is based on data from Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship (TELS) reports and reports funding for the entire 2020-21 academic year.

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[99] Institutions may issue academic alerts to students for poor attendance, lack of classroom participation, late or missing assignments, and/or poor performance on assignments/tests. Academic alerts function as an early detection for underperforming students.
[100] Reconnect requires a 2.0 GPA, but it is assessed at the end of each academic year.
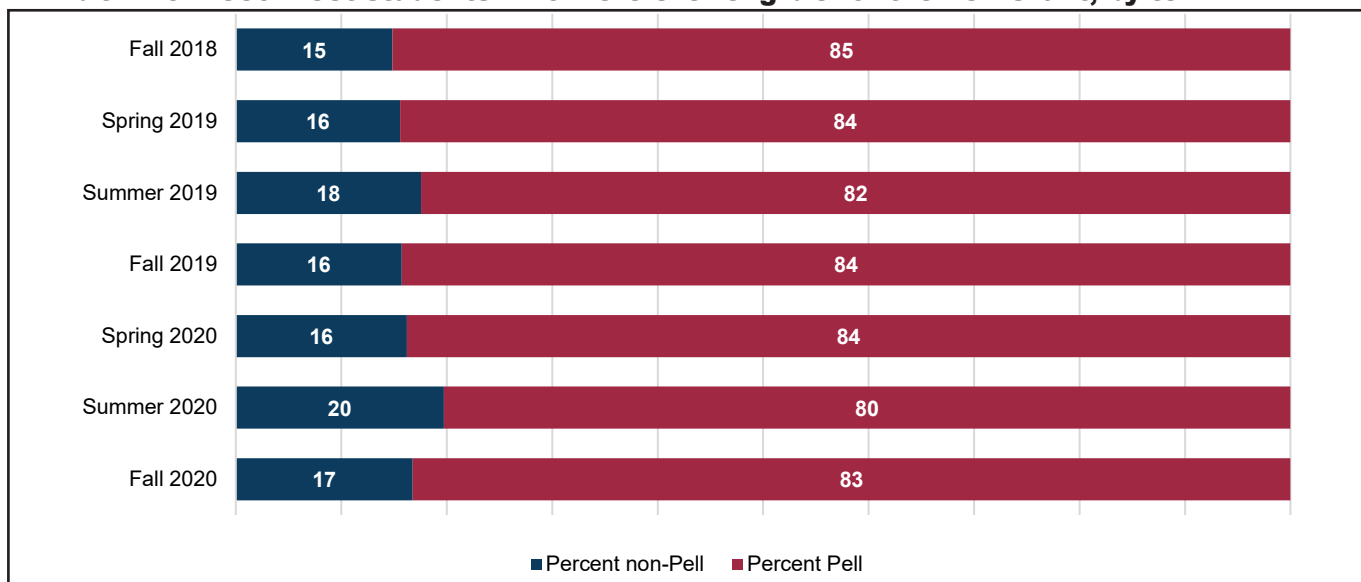
Background

Tennessee Reconnect is a last-dollar scholarship, meaning it is applied to a student's tuition and mandatory fees only after other sources of gift aid are applied. It is possible to be a Tennessee Reconnect student and receive no funds from the scholarship if tuition and mandatory fees are covered by other gift aid. Other sources of gift aid that are applied before the Reconnect Grant include the federal Pell Grant and any scholarships derived from the TELS or the Tennessee Student Assistance Award (TSAA). (See more information about how Tennessee Reconnect works in section 1.)

At community colleges, about one in three (30.2 percent) of Reconnect students received no funds from Tennessee Reconnect from fall 2018 to fall 2020, meaning their tuition and mandatory fees were covered by other gift aid.

Students may be eligible for federal Pell Grants, which are awarded to students with exceptional financial need who have not earned a bachelor's degree. The majority of Reconnect students were eligible for the federal Pell Grant at some time in their college careers, meaning they likely received federal funds that offset tuition costs. These funds would be applied before Tennessee Reconnect. (See page 14 for more information on last-dollar scholarships.) Of the 9,739 who received no funds from Tennessee Reconnect from fall 2018 to fall 2020, almost all (99.8 percent) were ever eligible for the federal Pell Grant. This, however, does not mean that Reconnect students are currently eligible and receive Pell Grants in place of Reconnect funds. Some students may no longer meet the income criteria to qualify for the Pell Grant, have previously exhausted their lifetime Pell Grant award amount (i.e., the equivalent of six years), or have failed to meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP), rendering them currently ineligible for the Pell Grant.[101]

Exhibit 4.16: Reconnect students who were ever eligible for the Pell Grant, by term

Term	Percent non-Pell	Percent Pell
Fall 2018	15	85
Spring 2019	16	84
Summer 2019	18	82
Fall 2019	16	84
Spring 2020	16	84
Summer 2020	20	80
Fall 2020	17	83

Note: Due to data limitations, Exhibit 4.16 represents the proportion of Reconnect students enrolled in a term who were ever eligible for the Pell Grant, but does not display the proportion of Reconnect students who received Pell Grants in that term. For example, a Reconnect student could have been eligible for the Pell Grant in 2015 during previous college enrollment but expended eligibility by fall 2019. Such a student would be included in the proportion of students ever eligible for Pell in fall 2019, even though not actually eligible in that term.
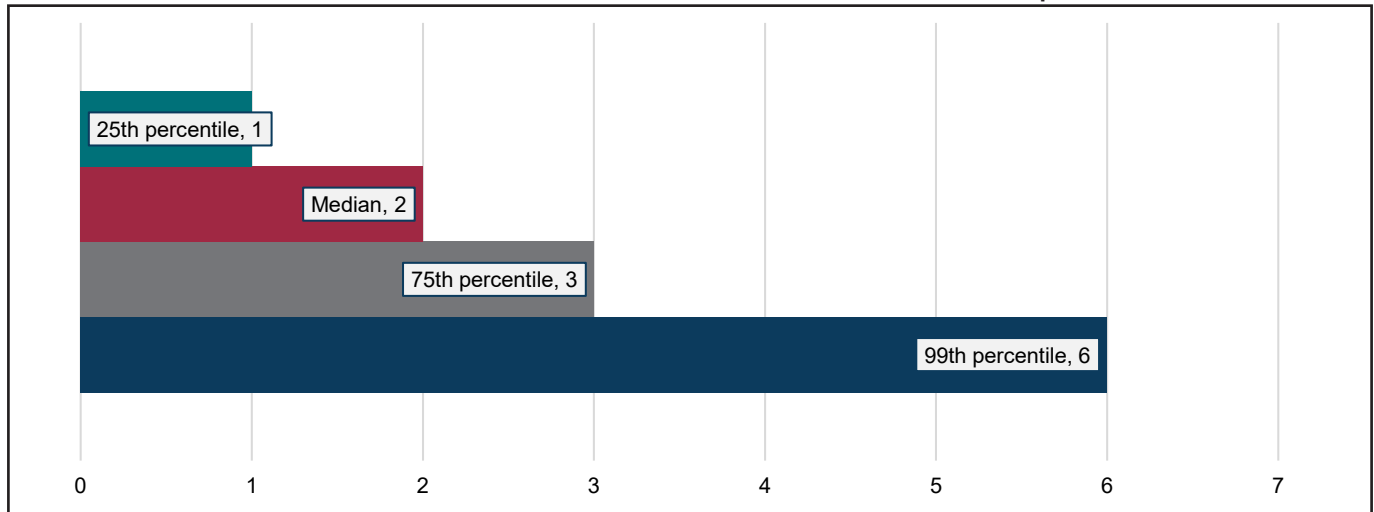Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Average Reconnect grant amounts by terms enrolled

From fall 2018 to fall 2020, 32,236 Reconnect students were enrolled at community colleges. The majority (70 percent) received funds from the Reconnect Grant.

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[101] A student who has exhausted lifetime Pell eligibility may not regain eligibility. A student who lost Pell for failing to maintain SAP, however, may regain Pell eligibility.

Reconnect students are required to maintain continuous part-time enrollment (i.e., at least 6 credit hours in each fall and spring semester). Students are not required to enroll in the summer semester but may do so and receive the Reconnect Grant. Students who were enrolled as Reconnect students continuously from fall 2018 to fall 2020 would have at least five terms enrolled as Reconnect students (seven terms if they enrolled in the summer 2019 and summer 2020 terms). Most students received Reconnect for at least two terms (e.g., they enrolled as Reconnect students in fall 2019 and continued in the program in spring 2019). A minority (one out of six) of Reconnect students started in fall 2020.

Exhibit 4.17: Number of terms students received the Reconnect Grant | fall 2018 to fall 2020

Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Total spending on Reconnect awards between fall 2018 and fall 2020 was highest in the fall and spring semesters, as shown in Exhibit 4.18. For example, in fall 2019, total spending on Reconnect awards at community colleges was $13.5 million. Total spending on Reconnect awards was lowest in the summer semesters over this time period (e.g., total spending on Reconnect awards was $3.8 million in summer 2020). The average award per student followed the same pattern, with the highest averages seen in the fall/spring semesters and the lowest in the summer semesters ($1,436 and $1,186, respectively).

Exhibit 4.18: Average Reconnect grants compared to total Reconnect funds awarded at community colleges, by term
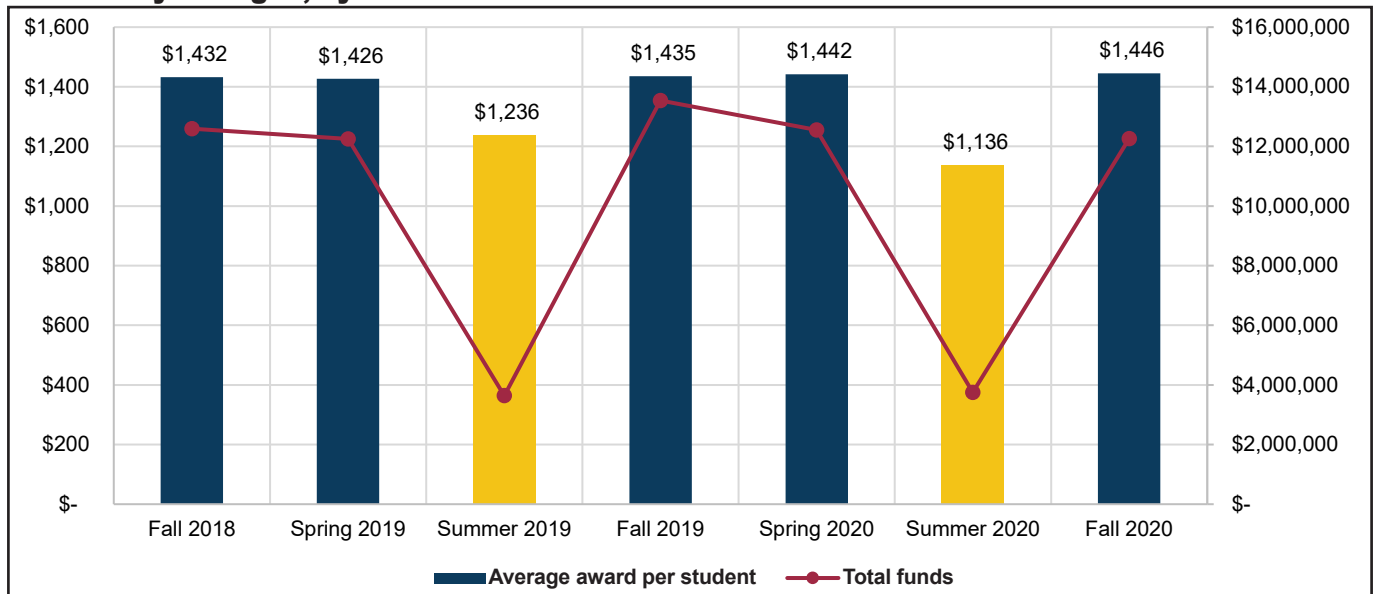
Note: (1) This analysis takes into consideration only those Reconnect students receiving more than $0 from the Reconnect Grant. (2) The averages presented in Exhibit 4.18 are calculated by term and as such may differ slightly from aggravated averages reported for entire academic years.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Students with higher incomes received more Reconnect funds

OREA's analysis compared students' incomes to the total amount of Reconnect dollars they received over the course of their enrollment. Analysts plotted students' average adjusted gross income (AGI) against their total Reconnect dollars received. AGI represents a student's (or a student's family's) wages, salaries, interest, dividends, etc., minus certain deductions from income as reported on a federal income tax return. Analysis showed a relationship between average income and the total Reconnect dollars a student received. A positive percent change (increase) in income led to a positive percent increase in total Reconnect dollars.

Students with higher incomes had more terms enrolled as Reconnect students, which would likely increase the total Reconnect dollars they received. In addition, students with lower incomes are more likely to receive federal Pell Grants, which have income stipulations. The Pell Grant is applied before Reconnect and would lessen the amount of Reconnect funds needed to cover tuition and mandatory fees. (See section 1 for more information on the Pell Grant.)

State expenditures totaled $71 million from fall 2018 to fall 2020

The state awarded $70.6 million in Reconnect scholarships for 32,236 students at community colleges between fall 2018, the program's inception, and fall 2020.[102] This equates to $2,189 per student. During this time period, the state also spent $13.7 million on these Reconnect students in other state-funded scholarships, including TSAA and HOPE.[103] This equates to $2,615 per student.

### *The majority of Reconnect students (70 percent) received funds from the grant*

Reconnect is a last-dollar scholarship that kicks in only after other sources of gift aid are applied. Therefore, the more funding a Reconnect student receives from other state scholarships, the less funding the student receives from the Reconnect Grant. A student may receive no funding from Reconnect but still be considered a Reconnect student. Of the 32,236 Reconnect students at community colleges from fall 2018 to fall 2020, 22,497 (69.8 percent) received funding. This equates to $3,137 per student. During this time period, the state also spent $4.7 million on those 22,497 students who received funds from Reconnect grants in other state-funded scholarships, including TSAA and HOPE.[104] This equates to $3,345 per student for state-funded scholarships over this time period.

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[102] OREA identified 32,236 students who were enrolled at community colleges and received $0 or more in Reconnect grant funds. A student may receive no funding from the Reconnect Grant but still be considered a Reconnect student, though administrators encourage students who receive partial or no funding to maintain their eligibility for Reconnect as a backup plan in case they receive less funding in the future from gift aid, such as the Pell Grant. See page 23.

[103] The Tennessee Student Assistance Award (TSAA) is a financial assistance program administered by the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC) for undergraduates with financial need. The HOPE Scholarship is a lottery-funded, merit-based scholarship for postsecondary education.

[104] This includes state funds spent even if a student transferred from a community college to another institution.

Exhibit 4.19: State funds spent between fall 2018 and fall 2020 on state scholarships for Reconnect students at community colleges | cohorts 1, 2, and 3
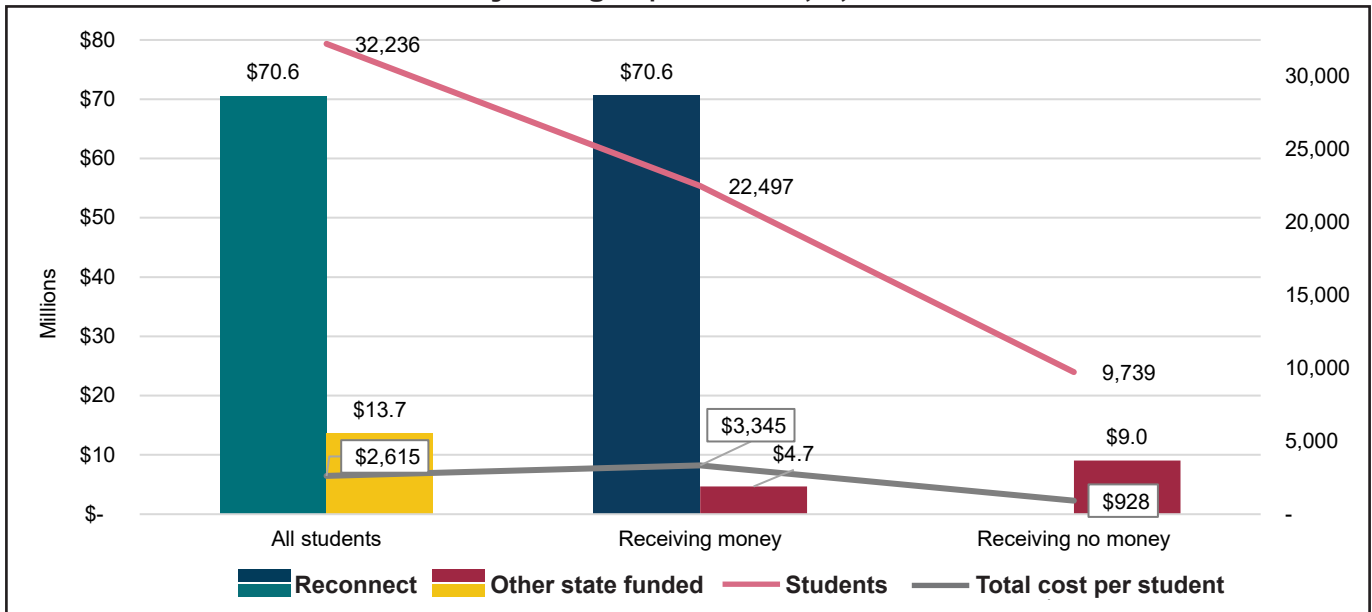
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

In comparison, during this time period the state spent $66.1 million on the Promise program for 49,437 students who were enrolled in community colleges from fall 2018 to fall 2020, 28,463 (57.6 percent) of whom received Promise funds. Proportionally fewer Promise students received funding from the Promise scholarship than Reconnect students from the Reconnect Grant (about six out of 10 students, compared to seven out of 10 students, respectively). Tennessee Promise allows recent high school graduates to earn an associate degree free of tuition and mandatory fees and is also included in the state's Drive to 55 programs to encourage college access and completion. (See section 5 for more information on the Drive to 55.)

Exhibit 4.20: State funds spent between fall 2018 and fall 2020 on state scholarships for Promise students at community colleges
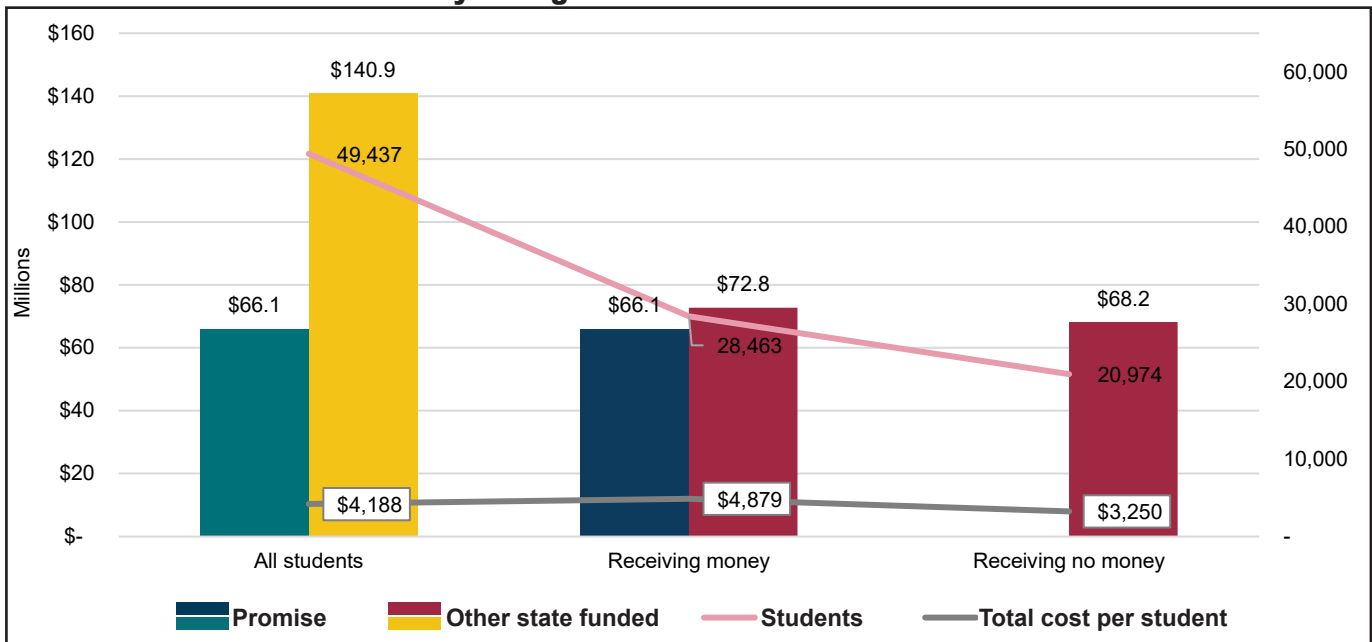
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

OREA compared Reconnect Grant expenditures to Promise scholarship expenditures based on data provided by THEC. From fall 2018 to fall 2020, the Tennessee Reconnect program was 7 percent more expensive than the Tennessee Promise program at community colleges. When accounting for students' total state gift aid, however, Promise students received 60 percent more on average in total state funds than did Reconnect students.

Both Reconnect and Promise are awarded on a last-dollar basis after other gift aid has been applied to the student's tuition and mandatory fee bill. It is likely that Reconnect students receive more program funding than Promise students because Reconnect students are less likely to be eligible for other gift aid that would cover some or all of the cost of their tuition and mandatory fees. Promise students are eligible for the HOPE scholarship, for example, which is awarded to entering freshmen at certain institutions, including community colleges. Reconnect students, by contrast, are often not eligible for HOPE, since the majority of students (83 percent) are not first-time freshmen. (Only 13 percent of Reconnect students were under the age of 24 at enrollment in the program.[105]) For example, 95 community college Reconnect students received HOPE funds in fall 2018 as compared to 12,579 community college Promise students. In fall 2020, 33 Reconnect students at community colleges received HOPE funds as compared to 13,435 Promise students. In 2020-21, HOPE scholarships represented the largest portion of TELS expenditures and the highest expenditure per student. HOPE scholarships are awarded at higher amounts compared to other scholarships (i.e., awards range from $2,625 to $9,000 per year based on need, merit, and institution). Differences in aid amounts between the two programs may also reflect the difference in required enrollment status, that is, Promise students are required to enroll full-time (12 credits or more), while Reconnect students are only required to enroll at least part-time (6 credits or more).

Costs per completion metrics

OREA analyzed state dollars spent on Reconnect grants from fall 2018 to summer 2020 by credit hours and credentials earned using data provided by THEC. Completion data was not available for fall 2020 at the time of publication; therefore, state funds in this section are totaled only to summer 2020. (See page 7 for more information.)
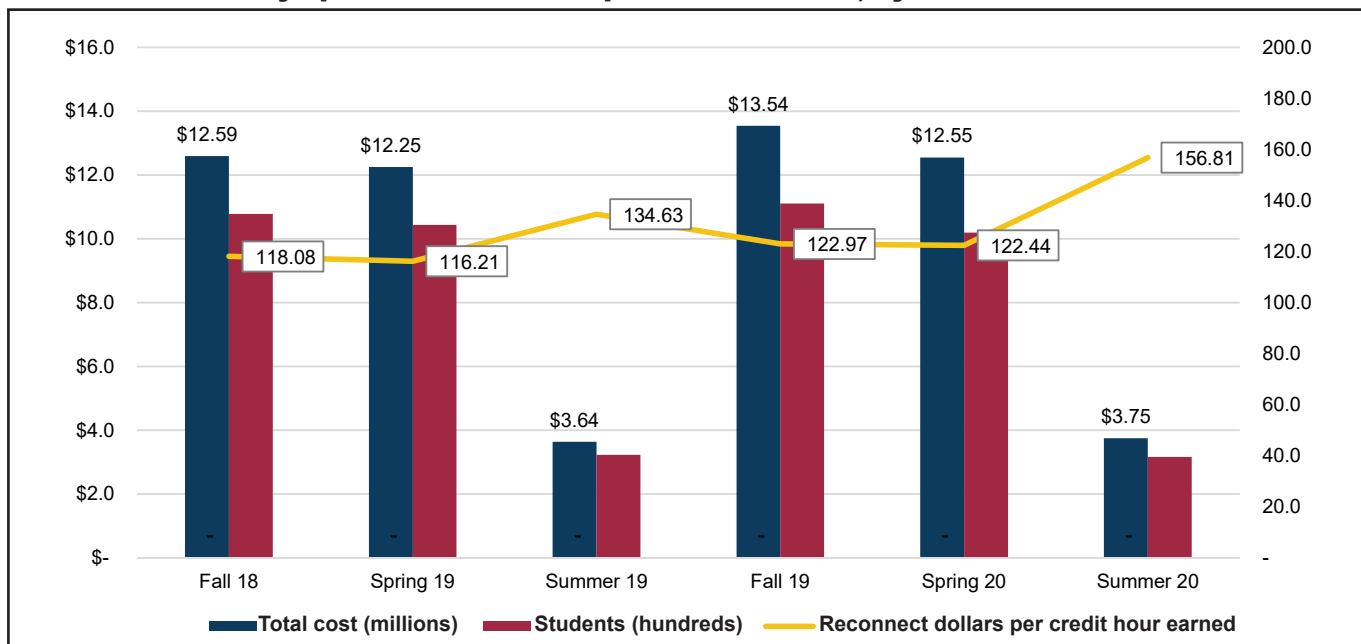
Reconnect cost per credit earned

To determine the cost of Reconnect per credit hour earned, the total state dollars spent on Tennessee Reconnect was divided by the number of total hours completed by all Reconnect students, including those receiving no funds from the grant, per semester.[106] For fall and spring semesters, the state spent an average of $120 per credit hour earned. An associate degree typically requires 60 hours of credit, which amounts to $7,195 in state funds if a student enrolls in fall and spring terms, which are required for continuous enrollment. (See pages 11-12 for more information on requirements to maintain Reconnect Grant eligibility.) The cost per credit hour was higher in the summer semesters compared to the fall and spring semesters. This is due to the relationship between credit hours and total costs. During the summer semesters, Reconnect students attempted and earned fewer credit hours, on average, but the average award remained high enough to push the cost per credit hour above that for the fall and spring semesters. (For example, average credit hours earned decreased 23 percent from spring 2019 to summer 2019, but the average award decreased only 13 percent.)

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[105] Reconnect students may be considered independent if they are under 24 by reaching a qualifying life event like having a child or being married.
[106] Some Reconnect students did not receive funding from the grant but accumulated credit hours. They are included in calculations of state dollars spent per credit hour earned.

Exhibit 4.21: Money spent on Reconnect per credit earned, by semester

Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Reconnect cost per credential earned

While the time period for the first Reconnect students to earn a credential has not yet expired, some students have already earned credentials, partly because many students (78 percent) entered the program with college credit hours.
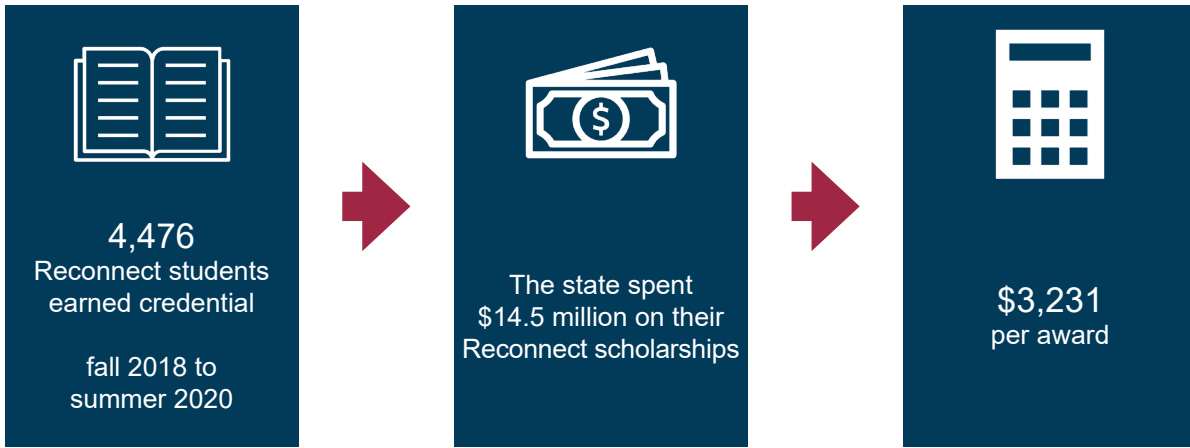
From fall 2018 to summer 2020, slightly more than half (57 percent) of the 9,635 independent students who earned a credential at a community college received the Reconnect Grant at some point. Most of these students (82 percent) maintained the Reconnect scholarship at the completion of their credential. The state spent $14.5 million on Reconnect scholarships at community colleges for these students from fall 2018 to summer 2020, or $3,231 per credential.

Taking into account other scholarships – including those earned at other institutions, such as a Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) – the state spent $16.2 million during this period on these Reconnect students, or $3,628 per credential. This figure does not account for past state spending on these students, however. Many Reconnect students had previous college credit when first enrolled as a Reconnect student and previous state scholarships before becoming Reconnect students. See Exhibit 3.1 on page 48.

Comparably, the state spent $4.8 million during this period on the 3,712 independent students who earned an award at a community college from fall 2018 to summer 2020 and did not receive the Reconnect Grant during this time, or $1,300 per award, 64 percent less in state funds. These students, while potentially eligible for the grant, received no money from Reconnect during this period.[107] Therefore, on average, they received less than Reconnect students in overall state funding but 69 percent more in other scholarships (i.e., TSAA, TELS scholarships).

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[107] Not all independent students may be eligible for the grant. Students must be a Tennessee resident for one year among other requirements. See Section X.

Exhibit 4.22: Reconnect money spent by number of credentials | fall 2018 to summer 2020

4,476
Reconnect students
earned credential

fall 2018 to
summer 2020

➤

The state spent
$14.5 million on their
Reconnect scholarships

➤

$3,231
per award

Note: Exhibit 4.22 differs from Exhibit 4.8 by four students. These Reconnect students were enrolled in multiple systems but earned degrees at community colleges. Only students who were exclusively at community colleges are included in Exhibit 4.22, which totals Reconnect funds at community colleges.
Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission data.

Section 5: The Drive to 55

Section 1			Section 2: Access		Section 3: Progression Credit accumulation		Section 4: Completion Credential attainment and enrollment status		Section 5
	Cohort	Semester that Reconnect student entered program	Application rate	Enrollment rate	End of 1st academic year	End of 2nd academic year	1 year after enrollment	2 years after enrollment	
How Tennessee Reconnect works	1	Fall 18-Summer 19	yes	yes	Summer 19	Summer 20	Fall 19, Spring/ Summer 20	Fall 20, Spring/ Summer 21	Tennessee and the Drive to 55: Where are we now?
	2	Fall 19-Summer 20	yes	yes	Summer 20	Summer 21	Fall 20, Spring/ Summer 21	Fall 21, Spring/ Summer 22	
	3	Fall 20-Summer 21	yes	yes	Summer 21	Summer 22	Fall 21, Spring/ Summer 22	Fall 22, Spring/ Summer 23	
		Included in this report			Not included in this report				

The Tennessee Reconnect Grant is one initiative in the state's Drive to 55 effort 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.).[108]

Reconnect students, who are generally age 25 or older, are included in the state's attainment rate beginning in 2019, the first year after the program's implementation (as shown in the red box in Exhibit 5.1).[109] Reconnect students are counted in the same year they earn a credential.[110] Some Reconnect 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.[111]

By contrast, students who participate in Tennessee Promise (another Drive to 55 initiative) are required to enroll in college the semester immediately following high school graduation. Promise students generally turn 18 during their senior year of high school and are not included in the attainment rate until they reach the age of 25, which is six or seven years after graduating from high school. The first cohort of Promise students graduated from high school in 2015 and will not be included in attainment rates until 2021 and 2022 (as shown in the blue box of Exhibit 5.1).

Tennessee's attainment rate rose from 37.8 percent in 2013 to 46.8 percent in 2019, the most recent attainment rate reported.[112] Over this period, the average annual growth was 1.5 percentage points, surpassing the minimum average annual growth necessary to stay on track to reach the 55 percent goal (1.43 percentage points). The second highest annual increase occurred between 2018 and 2019 (1.6 percentage points), the first year Reconnect students were included in the attainment rate.

[108] The attainment rate is measured for residents over the age of 24 because younger Tennesseans are more likely to be working toward a credential and most are still dependents of their parents.
[109] Reconnect students, as referenced here, include students who participated in the Tennessee Reconnect Grant program, which began fall 2018, though there were earlier programs also using the name Reconnect. TCAT Reconnect began in fall 2015 and is still operating. The current Reconnect Grant program replaced the Community College Reconnect Grant, which began in fall 2016. Students who have participated in TCAT Reconnect or the Community College Reconnect Grant are reflected in the state's attainment rate prior to 2019.
[110] In the first three years of the program, the average age of a Reconnect student was 32.
[111] Most Reconnect students enrolled with at least 12 credit hours of previously earned credits, and 46 percent from cohort 1 enrolled with 30 or more credit hours, meaning they were over halfway to completing an associate degree.
[112] The Lumina Foundation calculates annual attainment rates by state. As of publication, the 2019 rate is the most recent attainment rate reported.

Exhibit 5.1: 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)
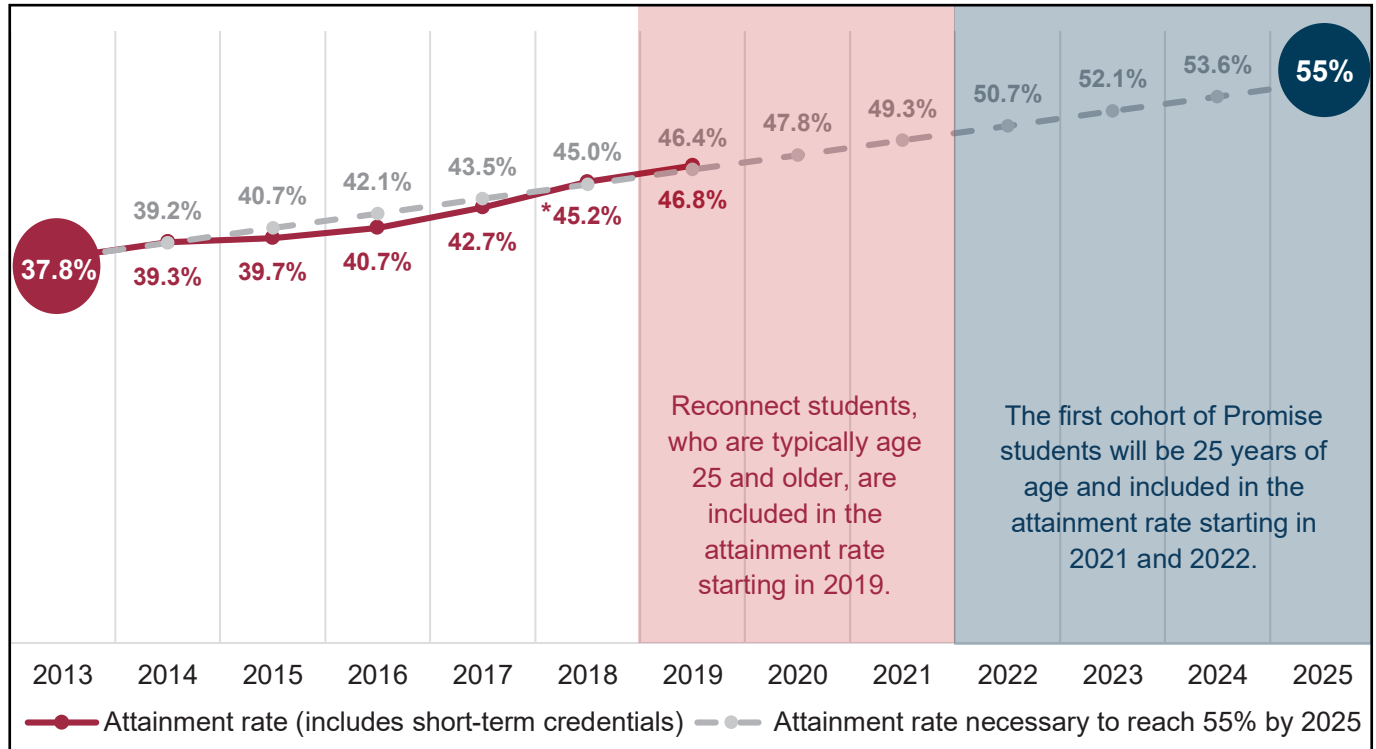
Notes: (1) *The increase in 2018 was due in part to a change made to the attainment rate calculation. In that year, the Lumina Foundation began including industry-recognized certifications. (2) Reconnect students will be included in the attainment rate earlier than Promise students because Reconnect students are often already over the age of 25 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 most significant increase (2.5 percentage points from 2017 to 2018) was due in part to changes made to the attainment rate calculation in 2018, however. The Lumina Foundation, which tracks Tennessee's attainment data, began including industry-recognized certifications with the 2018 calculation of state attainment rates. Prior to 2018, the rate calculation was limited to technical certificates and diplomas and associate degrees or higher (e.g., bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, etc.).

Industry-recognized certifications are typically awarded based on assessments of knowledge and skill, have ongoing maintenance requirements, and are awarded by third-party organizations.[113] In contrast, certificates, diplomas, and degrees recognize the completion of an academic program of study and are awarded for life by an educational program or institution.

Tennessee's attainment rate lags behind the U.S. and Southeastern average

The Drive to 55 is part of a nationwide initiative led by the Lumina Foundation, a private foundation with the goal to increase the number of Americans with high-quality postsecondary credentials to 60 percent nationwide by the year 2025. Most states, including Tennessee, have set 2025 attainment goals between 55 and 80 percent.

During his 2014 State of the State Address, former Governor Bill Haslam said Tennessee's progress toward the Drive to 55 goal was vital for the state to be regionally competitive in terms of workforce readiness.

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[113] For example, the American Welding Society administers tests for individuals to become a Certified Welder (CW). The CW test assesses welders on procedures used in the structural steel, petroleum pipelines, sheet metal, and chemical refinery welding industries.

This isn't just about higher education – it's about better jobs for more Tennesseans. It's about building a stronger economy. We don't have a choice if we want to be the number one state in the Southeast for high-quality jobs.

As shown in Exhibit 5.2, Tennessee's attainment rate lags behind the U.S. and Southeast averages but has increased at a faster rate from 2014 to 2019. From 2014 to 2019, Tennessee's statewide attainment rate increased by 7.5 percentage points, compared to smaller increases nationally (6.6 percentage points) and in the Southeast (6.8 percentage points).

In 2014, Tennessee's attainment rate of 39.3 percent was 2.4 percentage points below the Southeast average and 6 percentage points below the U.S. average. By 2019, Tennessee's attainment rate was 46.8 percent, which was 5.1 percentage points lower than the U.S. average and 1.6 percentage points lower than the average of Southeastern states.

Exhibit 5.2: Tennessee's attainment rate is lower than the U.S. and Southeastern averages, but its attainment rate is increasing at a faster pace
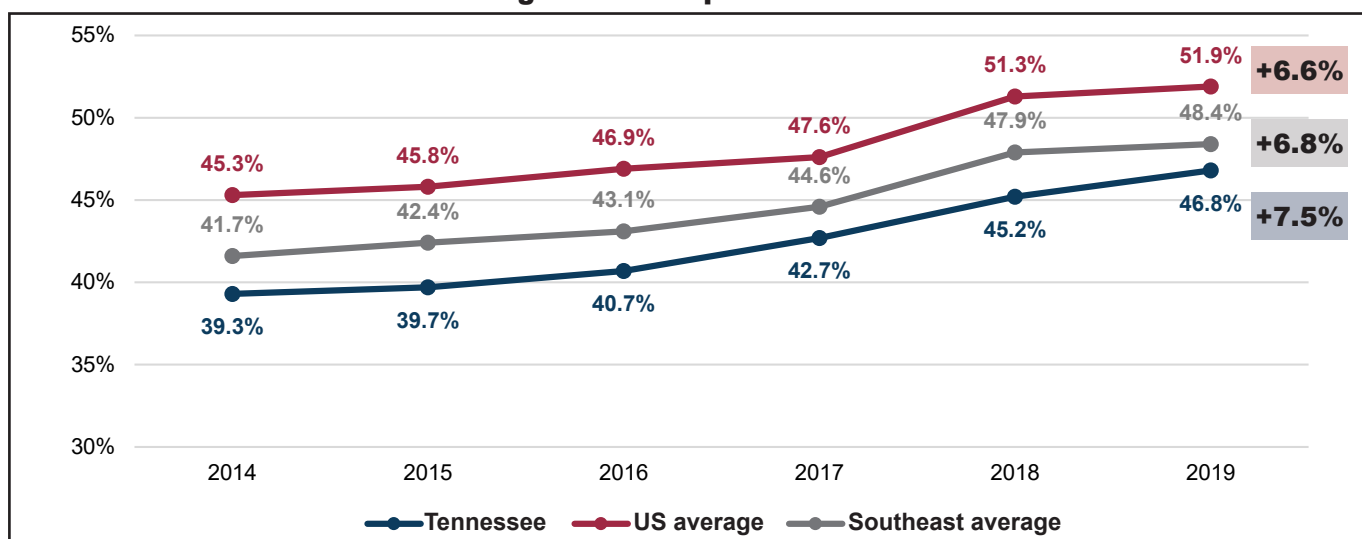
Notes: (1) Southeastern states include Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. (2) Technical certificates and diplomas, associate degrees, and higher are included in all years represented in the exhibit. (3) *Industry-recognized certifications are included starting in 2018.
Source: OREA analysis of data from the Lumina Foundation.

The number of Tennesseans obtaining postsecondary degrees has increased at a faster pace since the Drive to 55 was announced in 2013

The number of Tennesseans whose highest level of education is a high school diploma or some college, but no degree, is decreasing, while the number of Tennesseans with an associate degree or higher is increasing.[114] Additionally, the largest changes in these metrics occurred in the years following the announcement of the Drive to 55, between 2013 and 2019. See Exhibit 5.3.

From 2009 to 2019, the number of Tennesseans whose highest level of education was a high school diploma decreased by 1.5 percent, with the greatest decrease occurring from 2013 to 2019 (a 1.3 percent decrease occurred from 2013 to 2019, compared to a 0.2 percent decrease from 2009 to 2013). Also decreasing is the number of Tennesseans who have accrued some college credits but have not completed a degree. From 2009 to 2019, the number of such Tennesseans decreased by 2.7 percent. Prior to the Drive to 55's announcement in 2013, the number of Tennesseans who had some college but no degree *increased* by 0.8 percent (from 2009 to 2013). However, from 2013 to 2019, the number *decreased* by 3.5 percent.

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[114] The data analyzed in this subsection does not include short-term credentials such as technical certificates and diplomas or industry-recognized certifications.
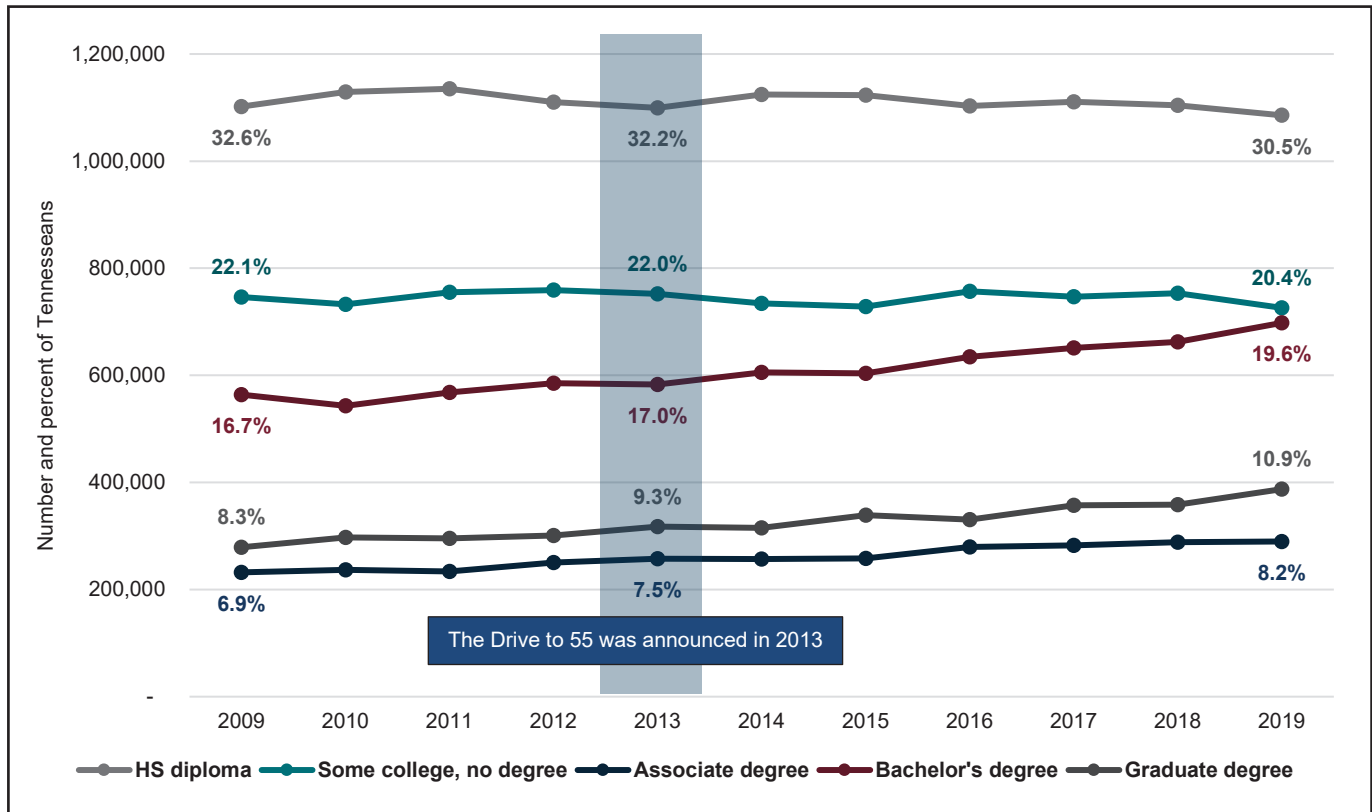
Exhibit 5.3: The number of Tennesseans with a postsecondary degree has increased faster since the Drive to 55 was announced in 2013

Highest level of education	2009	2013 *Drive to 55 announced*	2019 *Reconnect students began graduating*	Percent change		
				2009 to 2019	2013 to 2019	2009 to 2013
HS diploma	1,101,939	1,099,528	1,085,535	-1.5%	-1.3%	-0.2%
Some college, no degree	746,220	752,337	726,027	-2.7%	-3.5%	0.8%
Associate degree	232,132	257,289	289,769	24.8%	12.6%	10.8%
Bachelor's degree	564,064	582,671	697,952	23.7%	19.8%	3.3%
Graduate degree	278,962	317,495	387,506	38.9%	22.1%	13.8%
Total population	3,376,933	3,419,845	3,554,997	5.3%	4.0%	1.3%

Source: OREA analysis of data from the Lumina Foundation.

The number of Tennesseans with college degrees increased from 2009 to 2019, with the largest percentage increase occurring for graduate degrees (38.9 percent), followed by associate degrees (24.8 percent) and bachelor's degrees (23.7 percent). The increase in associate degree attainment can be attributed partly to Reconnect students who started graduating in 2019.[115] The largest increases in attainment of college degrees occurred from 2013 to 2019 for all three degree types, compared to smaller increases from 2009 to 2013. Notably, the number of Tennesseans with a bachelor's degree increased by 19.8 percent from 2013 to 2019, compared to a 3.3 percent increase from 2009 to 2013.

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[115] In 2019, 289,769 Tennesseans reported having an associate degree, an increase of 1,126 associate degrees from 2018.

Tennessee's attainment rate is not increasing at the same rate for all races/ethnicities or counties

According to a 2021 report by the Lumina Foundation, Tennessee must increase educational attainment for all Tennesseans, including those from counties and races/ethnicities where attainment gaps exist. The report stated that closing the gaps in attainment rates is crucial because earning a postsecondary credential is key to economic opportunity.

Exhibit 5.4 shows the 10 counties with the largest increase in attainment rate between 2009 and 2019. Notably, Moore County in southern Middle Tennessee increased its attainment rate by 19.7 percentage points (from 16.1 to 35.8 percent) in 10 years, despite a slight decrease in population over the same time (0.3 percent decrease). (The main campus of Motlow State Community College is in Moore County.) In Southwest Tennessee, Decatur County also experienced a population decline (5.8 percent decrease) while increasing its attainment rate by 12.7 percentage points, the second highest increase among Tennessee's 95 counties.

Exhibit 5.4: Tennessee counties with largest increased attainment rates (excluding short-term credentials) | 2009 to 2019

	Population	Attainment rate	Population	Attainment rate	Population percent change	Attainment rate change
	2009	2009	2019	2019	2009 to 2019	2009 to 2019
Moore	3,294	16.1%	3,283	35.8%	-0.3%	19.7%
Decatur	5,986	13.5%	5,640	26.2%	-5.8%	12.7%
DeKalb	10,304	13.5%	10,526	24.5%	2.2%	11.0%
Wilson	59,502	33.5%	72,795	44.2%	22.3%	10.7%
Fentress	9,502	14.9%	9,191	25.1%	-3.3%	10.2%
Williamson	91,322	59.5%	117,654	69.6%	28.8%	10.1%
Hardin	13,929	14.6%	12,789	24.4%	-8.2%	9.8%
Maury	44,042	26.3%	49,310	35.5%	12.0%	9.2%
Claiborne	17,035	18.1%	16,570	26.9%	-2.7%	8.9%
Robertson	34,359	20.5%	37,661	29.4%	9.6%	8.9%
Trousdale	4,136	14.1%	5,771	23.0%	39.5%	8.8%

Notes: (1) Associate degrees and higher are included in the exhibit. Short-term credentials are not included. (2) Population figures are based on adults ages 25-64. Source: OREA analysis of data from the Lumina Foundation.

By contrast, Exhibit 5.5 shows the 10 counties with the lowest growth in attainment rate from 2009 to 2019. Most counties in the exhibit experienced population decreases during this time. Haywood County, in southwest Tennessee, experienced a 5.4 percentage point decrease in its attainment rate from 2009 to 2019, while its population decreased by 8.2 percent. Sequatchie County experienced a 7.9 percent increase in population while its attainment rate decreased by 2.3 percentage points from 2009 to 2019.

Exhibit 5.5: Tennessee counties with decreased or smallest increased attainment rates (excluding short-term credentials) | 2009 to 2019

	Population	Attainment rate	Population	Attainment rate	Population percent change	Attainment rate change
	2009	2009	2019	2019	2009 to 2019	2009 to 2019
Haywood	9,851	19.4%	9,044	14.0%	-8.2%	-5.4%
Sequatchie	7,204	25.1%	7,772	22.7%	7.9%	-2.3%
Benton	8,582	19.8%	7,953	18.1%	-7.3%	-1.7%
Scott	11,890	16.3%	11,328	16.4%	-4.7%	0.1%
Hardeman	15,391	15.1%	13,669	15.5%	-11.2%	0.4%
Van Buren	2,858	11.4%	2,985	11.8%	4.4%	0.4%
Madison	50,014	33.0%	49,062	34.1%	-1.9%	1.1%
Macon	11,436	15.8%	12,300	17.1%	7.6%	1.3%
Wayne	9,257	14.6%	9,231	16.0%	-0.3%	1.4%
Coffee	26,830	26.6%	28,132	28.2%	4.9%	1.6%

Notes: (1) Associate degrees and higher are included in the exhibit. Short-term credentials are not included. (2) Population figures are based on adults ages 25-64.
Source: OREA analysis of data from the Lumina Foundation.

Exhibit 5.6 shows the attainment rate (excluding short-term certificates) for Black, Hispanic, and White Tennesseans from 2013 to 2019. In 2019, the attainment rate for White Tennesseans (39.5 percent) is slightly above the state average (38.7 percent), while the attainment rate for Black (29.2 percent) and Hispanic Tennesseans (21.2 percent) is lower than the state average. The attainment rate for White and Hispanic Tennesseans increased at about the same pace as the state rate. From 2013 to 2019, the state attainment rate increased by 4.8 percentage points, while the attainment rate for Hispanic Tennesseans increased by 4.5 percentage points and the attainment rate for White Tennesseans increased by 4.4 percentage points. The attainment rate for Black Tennesseans increased by 3.6 percentage points over the same period.

Exhibit 5.6: Tennessee's attainment rate is not increasing at the same rate for all races/ethnicities
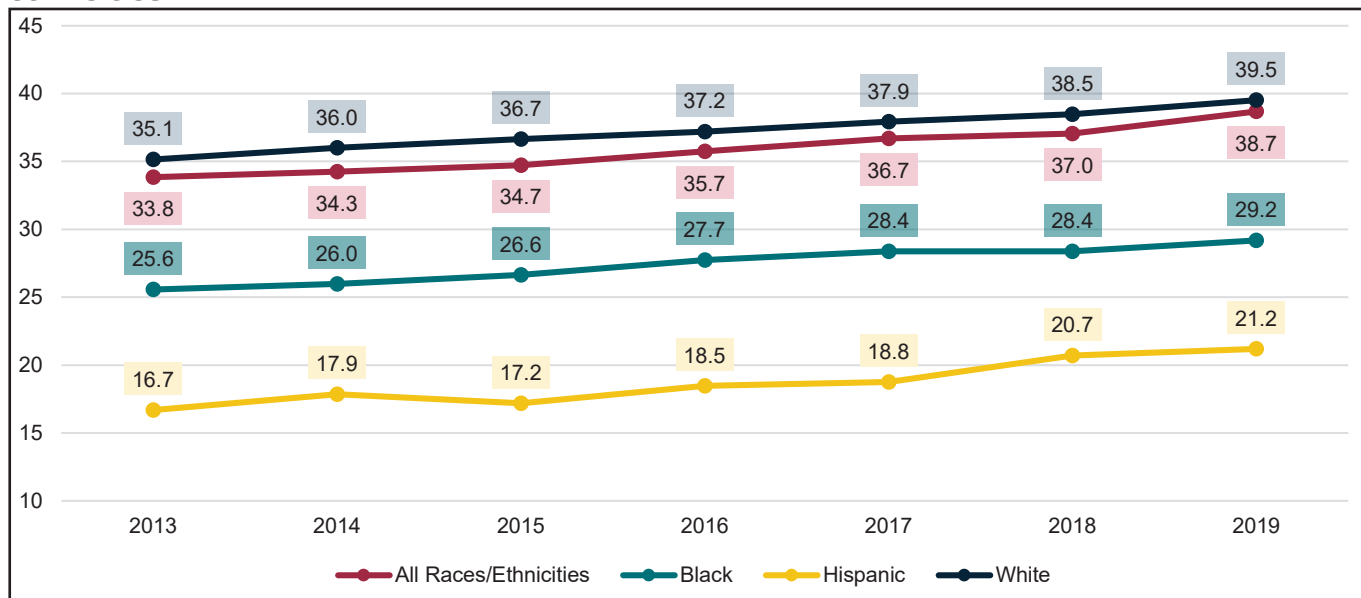
Notes: (1) Adults ages 25-64 with associate degrees or higher are included in the exhibit. Short-term credentials are not included. (2) Other racial and ethnic subgroups contribute to the average for all races/ethnicities but are not included in this exhibit.
Source: OREA analysis of data from the Lumina Foundation.

In the first three years of the program, Black and Hispanic students applied for and became Reconnect students at disproportionately higher rates than White students but earned associate degrees at below-average rates. After one year, 23.7 percent of Reconnect students 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, and Hispanic students completed associate degrees 1.3 percentage points below the average. By comparison, White students had an associate degree attainment rate 2.8 percentage points higher than the average.

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.[116] 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.[117]

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, fall 2020 enrollment was likely impacted by COVID-19.

The reduction in cohort size may also be due to a decline in statewide marketing. 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. The state launched a marketing campaign beginning in 2018 before the Reconnect program was rolled out. The funding for this campaign came directly from the state, rather than from the existing budgets of TBR or the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC). The funds were then administered by THEC.

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. Thirty-three administrators across 12 community colleges responded that increased marketing and outreach efforts would increase enrollment.

Community colleges have their own marketing campaigns, but resources vary. All 13 institutions host Reconnect information sessions on campus and virtually. In addition, all 13 institutions promote the Reconnect program to parents who attend new student orientations and Promise student meetings with their children. However, during an interview with OREA, TBR noted that the state's community colleges would welcome more financial support from the state for marketing purposes.

In 2020, THEC and the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development launched a partnership called "Reconnect the Workforce." This initiative was intended to help Tennesseans receiving unemployment benefits use the Tennessee Reconnect Grant. Under this program, unemployment claimants could fulfill their work search requirements by enrolling in college full-time.[118] Between March and December of 2021, emails to over 678,000 unemployment claimants were sent to spread awareness of the program. During this time, nearly 3,000 claimants applied for Reconnect.[119]

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.

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[116] Of 1,868,063 Tennesseans between the ages of 25 and 64 who do not have an associate degree, or higher, 91,180 have applied for the Reconnect Grant. Sources: American Community Survey five-year estimates from 2018 and THEC application data.

[117] These figures include first-time applicants and do not include Reconnect students who are re-filing the annual application, an ongoing requirement to maintain eligibility.

[118] Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Reconnect the Workforce, https://www.tn.gov/workforce/reconnect.html.
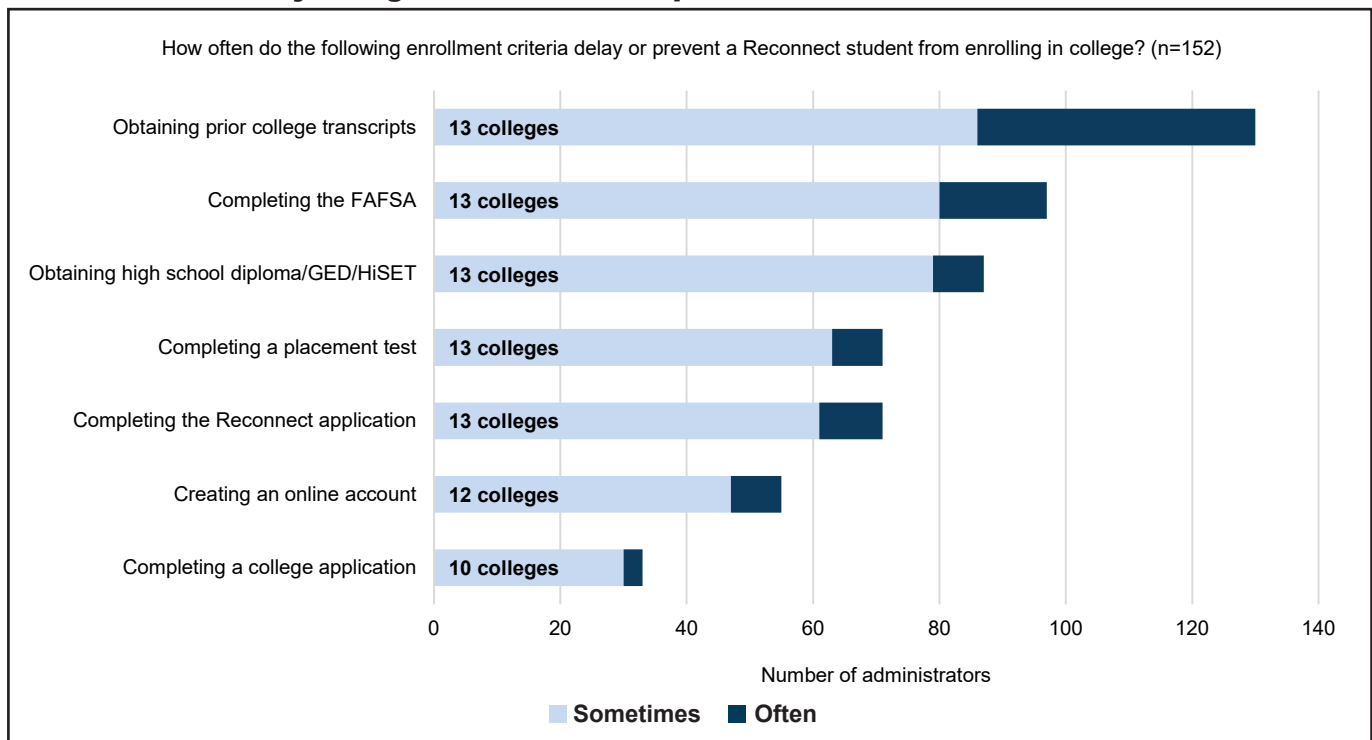
[119] According to an OREA interview with Jessica Gibson, THEC Senior Director for Adult Learner Initiatives.

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.[120] 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.

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).

Exhibit 1: Community college administrators reported barriers for Reconnect enrollment

How often do the following enrollment criteria delay or prevent a Reconnect student from enrolling in college? (n=152)

Criteria	
Obtaining prior college transcripts	13 colleges
Completing the FAFSA	13 colleges
Obtaining high school diploma/GED/HiSET	13 colleges
Completing a placement test	13 colleges
Completing the Reconnect application	13 colleges
Creating an online account	12 colleges
Completing a college application	10 colleges

Number of administrators — Sometimes ▪ Often

Source: OREA survey of community college administrators, November 2020.

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[120] From fall 2018 to fall 2020, 8,965 out of 58,944 Reconnect applicants who did not become Reconnect students still enrolled in college, but not as part of the Reconnect program. This figure is not exclusive to community colleges and includes students who enroll in other postsecondary institutions, some of which are not eligible for the Reconnect Grant.

Obtaining college transcripts

Reconnect applicants are required to obtain all prior college transcripts because institutions must certify that an applicant has not previously earned an associate degree. On OREA's survey of community college administrators, 86 percent of administrators (n=130) representing all 13 community colleges stated that obtaining prior college transcripts is sometimes or often a barrier that delays or prevents a Reconnect student from enrolling in college.

Of the 130 community college administrators who said that obtaining college transcripts is sometimes or often an issue, 29 said transcripts are challenging to acquire when the applicant owes a balance to the previous institution. Typically, colleges will not release transcripts if a balance is owed. Sixteen administrators also noted that transcripts can be difficult to obtain from institutions that have permanently closed. *TCA* 49-7-2016 requires closing postsecondary institutions to transfer student transcripts to the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, though some exceptions exist.

Colleges may waive the requirement to obtain previous transcripts under certain circumstances. Students must sign a statement attesting to never previously completing an associate degree or higher. Doing so allows the student to enroll in college and receive the Reconnect Grant, but the student must forgo access to any previously earned credits that could be applied toward a credential.

Other barriers to program enrollment

According to OREA's survey of community college administrators, 64 percent (n=97, representing all 13 community colleges) indicated completing the FAFSA is sometimes or often a barrier to enrollment. Over the first three application cycles, 2,000 Reconnect applicants had an incomplete FAFSA, representing 2 percent of applicants from fall 2018 to fall 2020.
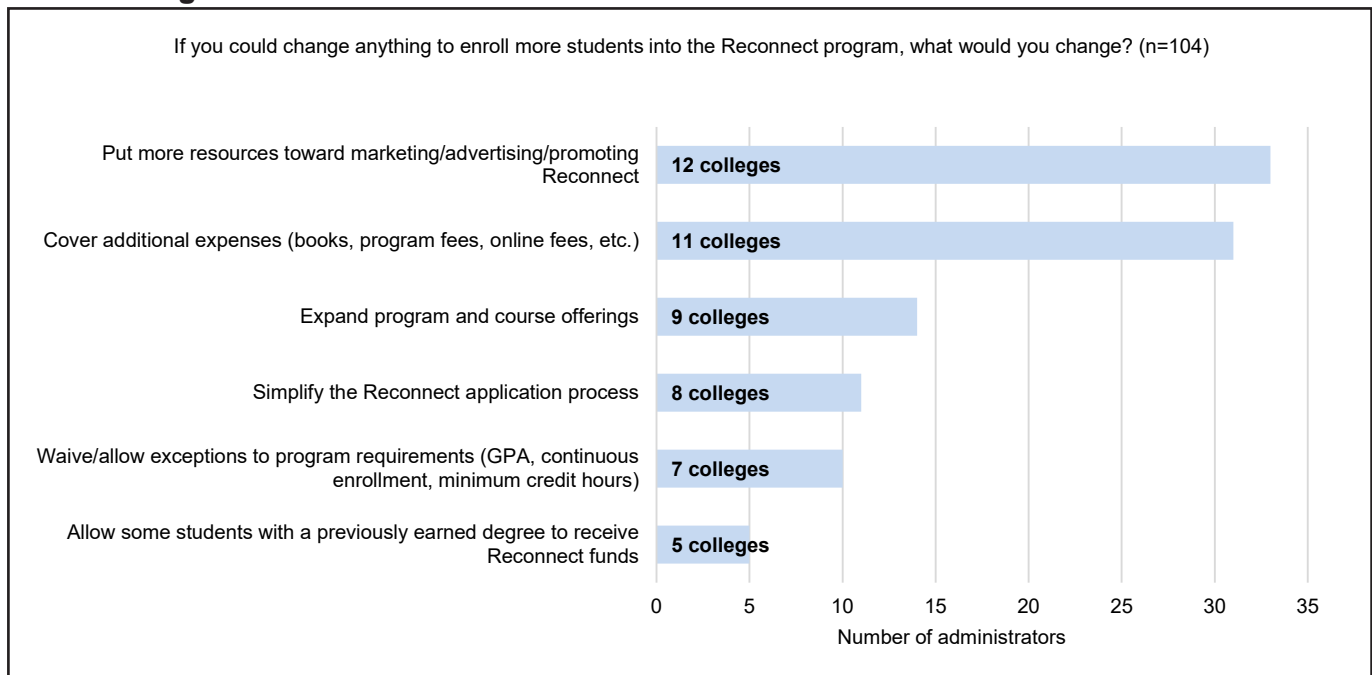
On the survey, 57 percent of administrators said that obtaining proof of high school graduation or equivalency (i.e., GED or HiSET exam) was a problem sometimes or often (n=87, representing all 13 community colleges).

Community colleges shared their best practices and suggestions to enroll more Reconnect students

Motlow State has consistently had the highest proportion of Reconnect students since the program's implementation. From fall 2018 to fall 2020, 71 percent of Motlow's independent students were Reconnect students, compared to 54 percent across all community colleges. When asked by OREA to share practices that have been effective at enrolling eligible independent students into the Reconnect program, five administrators from Motlow cited the use of mentors known as Success or Completion Coaches. These coaches help students plan for and navigate the college experience. To prepare for the implementation of Reconnect, Motlow also created a new position called the Director of Adult Initiatives. The director recruits adult students and guides them through the enrollment process.

OREA's 2020 survey asked community college administrators what they would suggest to enroll more students into the Reconnect program. The most frequently cited suggestion (cited by 33 respondents at 12 community colleges) was to increase resources for marketing, advertising, and promotion of the program. The second highest response (31 respondents at 11 community colleges) said that they would like the program to cover additional expenses (e.g., books, program fees, etc.) aside from tuition and mandatory fees. Some administrators noted that Reconnect applicants are under the impression that they can attend college at no cost to them. Such applicants may choose not to enroll when they realize the Reconnect Grant does not pay for textbooks or other program-specific fees.

Exhibit 2: Community college administrators suggest more resources for program promotion and covering textbooks and fees to increase the number of Reconnect students

If you could change anything to enroll more students into the Reconnect program, what would you change? (n=104)

Response	
Put more resources toward marketing/advertising/promoting Reconnect	**12 colleges**
Cover additional expenses (books, program fees, online fees, etc.)	**11 colleges**
Expand program and course offerings	**9 colleges**
Simplify the Reconnect application process	**8 colleges**
Waive/allow exceptions to program requirements (GPA, continuous enrollment, minimum credit hours)	**7 colleges**
Allow some students with a previously earned degree to receive Reconnect funds	**5 colleges**

Number of 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.

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.
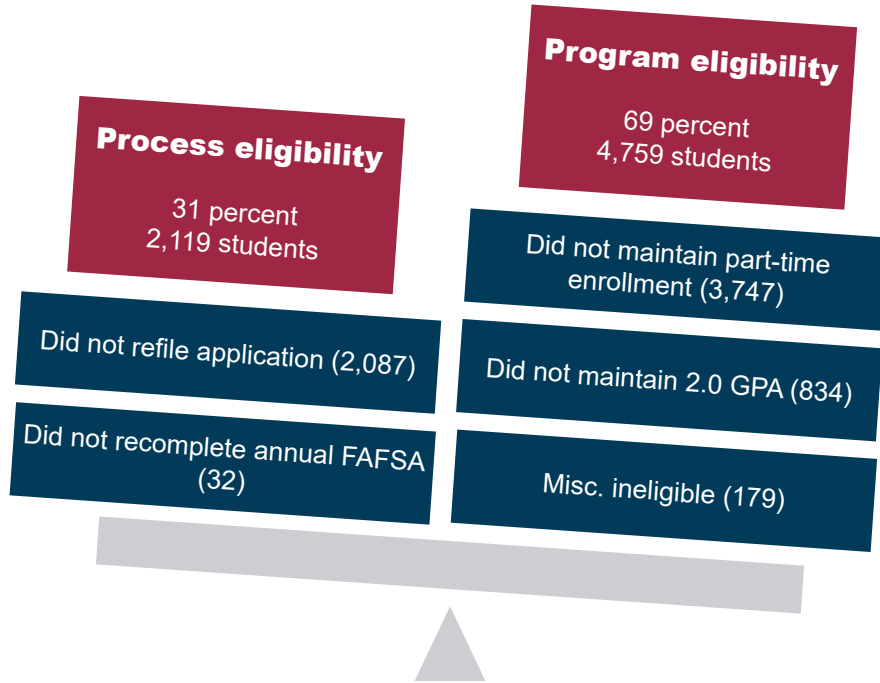
To maintain grant eligibility while enrolled in college, Reconnect students are required to refile the FAFSA and complete the Reconnect application annually, maintain a minimum 2.0 Reconnect GPA (which includes only grades from courses taken as part of the Reconnect program), and remain enrolled at least 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.

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 3: 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

About a quarter of Reconnect students (6,878) lost eligibility in the first two years of the program due to not meeting program requirements (e.g., maintaining a 2.0 GPA) or not completing other eligibility requirements (e.g., refiling the application).

Most students (54 percent) lost eligibility due to not meeting the part-time requirement.

Process eligibility

31 percent
2,119 students

Did not refile application (2,087)

Did not recomplete annual FAFSA (32)

Program eligibility

69 percent
4,759 students

Did not maintain part-time enrollment (3,747)

Did not maintain 2.0 GPA (834)
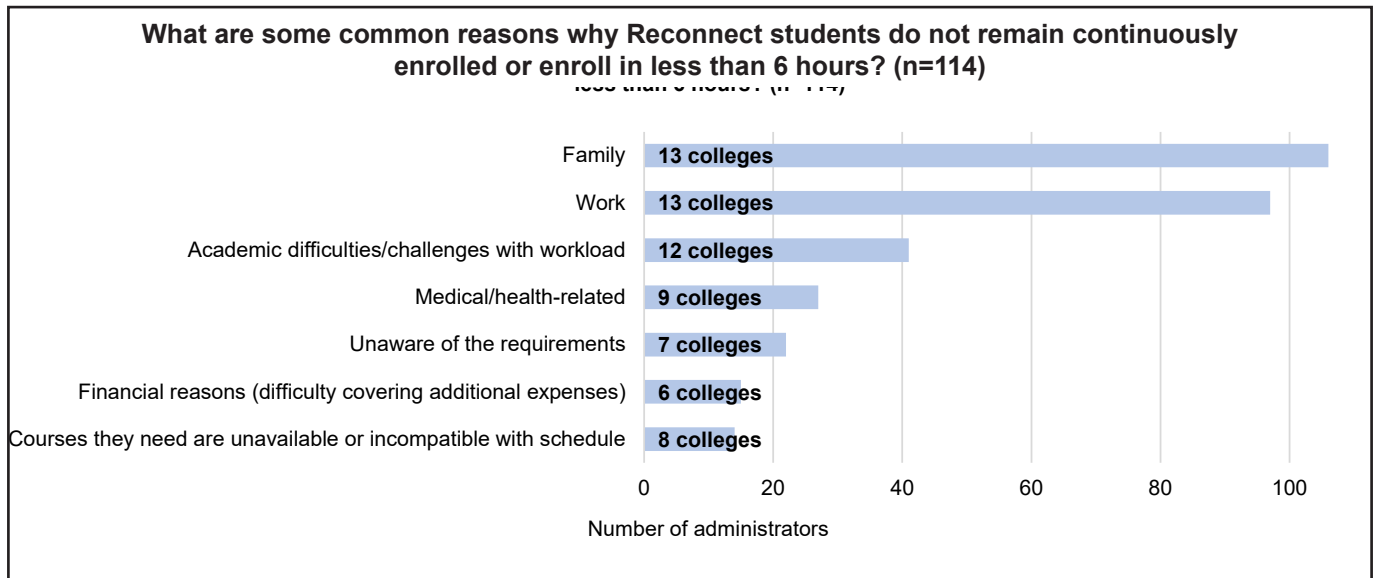
Misc. ineligible (179)

Source: OREA analysis of Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) data provided by community colleges.
Note: (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 "misc. ineligible" represents students who are ineligible for reasons not covered by other indicators, according to THEC.

Of the 3,747 Reconnect students who lost the grant because they did not maintain part-time enrollment, 67 percent (2,524 students) earned zero credit hours in the semester they lost eligibility, which means they began the semester enrolled in the required number of credit hours but either dropped out of school or failed their courses. The remaining 33 percent (1,224 students) continued attending class but dropped below part-time status during the semester.

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. (These were indicated by about 100 respondents representing all 13 community colleges.) See Exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4: Work and family responsibilities impact Reconnect students' ability to remain enrolled part-time, according to community college administrators

What are some common reasons why Reconnect students do not remain continuously enrolled or enroll in less than 6 hours? (n=114)

Category	
Family	**13 colleges**
Work	**13 colleges**
Academic difficulties/challenges with workload	**12 colleges**
Medical/health-related	**9 colleges**
Unaware of the requirements	**7 colleges**
Financial reasons (difficulty covering additional expenses)	**6 colleges**
Courses they need are unavailable or incompatible with schedule	**8 colleges**

Number of 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.

Under program rules, Reconnect students can apply for a leave of absence, which would exempt them from continuous and/or part-time enrollment provided that all other requirements have been met. Students seeking a leave of absence may submit a request for reasons including, but not limited to, illness of the student, illness or death of an immediate family member, extreme financial hardship, fulfillment of a religious commitment, or fulfillment of military service. Some of the 3,747 Reconnect students who lost grant eligibility due to failing to maintain continuous part-time enrollment may have requested or were eligible to request a leave of absence.

A lack of academic preparedness was also a frequently cited reason why students lost their Reconnect program eligibility. Forty-one administrators from 12 community colleges stated that academic difficulties or challenges with the workload required for college-level courses are common reasons why students drop out or enroll in less than 6 credit hours.

On OREA's 2020 survey, 15 administrators at seven community colleges noted that academic preparation is especially challenging for students returning to college after a long absence. About half of all Reconnect students in the first three cohorts returned to college after spending some time unenrolled. Most Reconnect students in cohorts 1 through 3 who were not already enrolled or first-time freshmen said that they attended college more than three years ago, with 24 percent having attended more than 10 years ago.

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. See Exhibit 5.

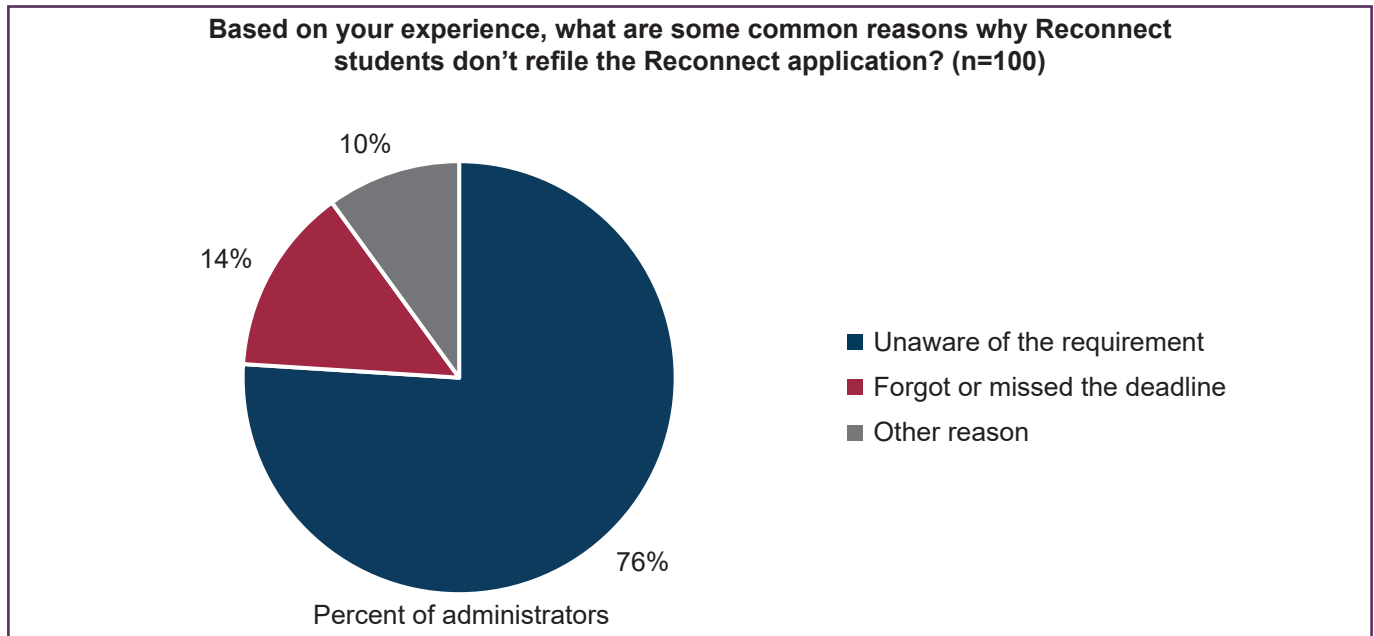**New reapplication process effective spring 2022**

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.

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.[121] 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.

Exhibit 5: Approximately three-quarters of community college administrators said that Reconnect students do not refile the application because they are unaware of the requirement

Based on your experience, what are some common reasons why Reconnect students don't refile the Reconnect application? (n=100)

- Unaware of the requirement
- Forgot or missed the deadline
- Other reason

Percent of administrators

Source: OREA survey of community college administrators, November 2020.

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.

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[121] *TCA* 49-4-944(d)(6) requires Reconnect students to participate in a college success program, as created by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, to maintain grant eligibility. The Reconnect Grant application, which is required for initial program eligibility and annually thereafter, asks a series of questions that generate a personalized Reconnect Success Plan. This fulfills the student's statutory requirement to participate in a college success program.

It is possible that some Reconnect students chose to stop maintaining the program requirements because they were not receiving grant funds.[122] 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.

Community college administrators suggest additional advisors and financial assistance could help more Reconnect students remain in the program
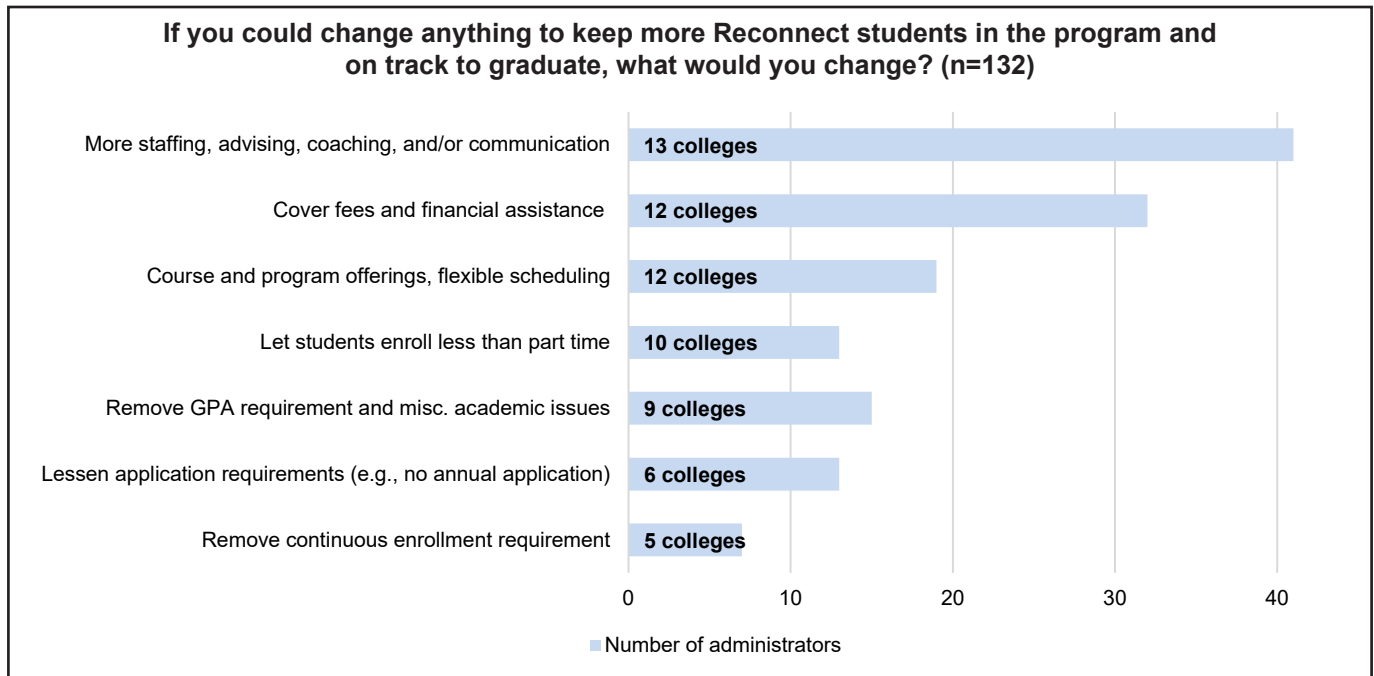
According to OREA's 2020 survey, administrators from all 13 community colleges indicated that more staffing, advising, coaching, or communication could keep more Reconnect students in the program and on track to graduate. All 13 community colleges have Success Coaches who provide students with one-on-one advisement, encouragement, and guidance.[123] Additionally, Reconnect students may work with a Reconnect Navigator. Navigators are based in regions across the state and 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. About 5,600 (21 percent) of Reconnect students from cohorts 1 and 2 worked with a Navigator.

Administrators at the majority of community colleges (12 out of 13) also indicated that covering program-specific fees and providing financial assistance may increase students' persistence and completion. Reconnect students pay, on average, $400 per semester for textbooks, supplies, and special fees that are not covered by the grant.

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[122] The Reconnect Grant is awarded on a last-dollar basis and is applied to a student's tuition and mandatory fees after other sources of gift aid (e.g., the federal Pell Grant) have been applied. About 30 percent of Reconnect students received no funding from the Reconnect grant because their tuition and fees were covered entirely by other sources of gift aid.

[123] Specific job titles vary by institution. Some colleges refer to these staff members as Completion or Academic Coaches, or other slight variations of the term "Success Coach."

Exhibit 6: More student advisors and additional financial assistance would increase the number of Reconnect students who remain enrolled, according to community college administrators

If you could change anything to keep more Reconnect students in the program and on track to graduate, what would you change? (n=132)

Category	Number of administrators	Colleges
More staffing, advising, coaching, and/or communication	~41	13 colleges
Cover fees and financial assistance	~32	12 colleges
Course and program offerings, flexible scheduling	~19	12 colleges
Let students enroll less than part time	~13	10 colleges
Remove GPA requirement and misc. academic issues	~15	9 colleges
Lessen application requirements (e.g., no annual application)	~13	6 colleges
Remove continuous enrollment requirement	~7	5 colleges

■ Number of 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.

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.
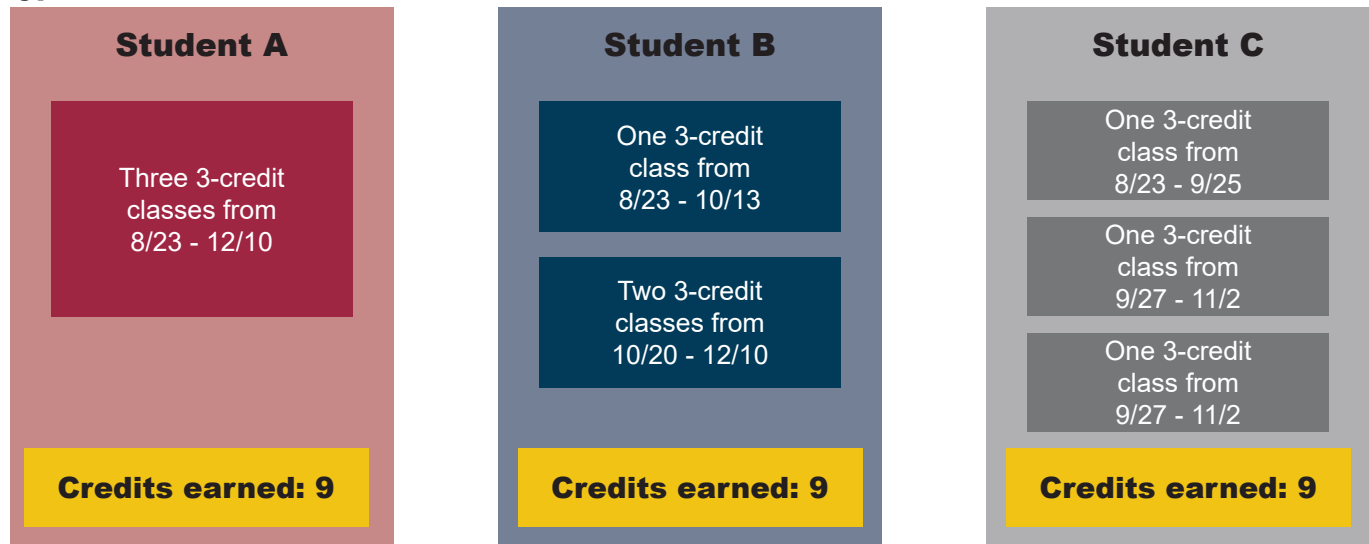
Some community colleges offer mini terms within the semester

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. Flexible scheduling helps students more easily balance work and family obligations with their class schedule.

Under program rules, Reconnect students are required to enroll at least part-time, which typically means they must enroll in at least two courses per semester. 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 7.) This format also gives students greater schedule flexibility. 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.

Eleven community colleges currently offer seven-week courses, which split the semester into two halves. As shown in Exhibit 7, the seven-week format allows students to take one accelerated course in the first half of the term and another accelerated course in the second half. Six community colleges also offer five-week courses, which split a typical semester into thirds. Administrators from three community colleges, when asked how to keep more Reconnect students enrolled and on track to graduate, suggested accelerated programs that help adults complete programs faster.

Exhibit 7: Sample course load for students enrolled in 14-, seven-, and five-week courses | typical fall semester

Student A	Student B	Student C
Three 3-credit classes from 8/23 - 12/10	One 3-credit class from 8/23 - 10/13	One 3-credit class from 8/23 - 9/25
	Two 3-credit classes from 10/20 - 12/10	One 3-credit class from 9/27 - 11/2
		One 3-credit class from 9/27 - 11/2
Credits earned: 9	Credits earned: 9	Credits earned: 9

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.

Of Reconnect students who enrolled through fall 2020, 86 percent have been Pell-eligible at some point in their higher education career. This, however, does not mean that these Reconnect students are currently eligible and receive Pell Grants in place of Reconnect funds. Some students may be ineligible for the Pell Grant because they no longer meet the income criteria to qualify, some may have previously exhausted their lifetime Pell Grant award amount (i.e., the equivalent of six years), and others may have failed to meet satisfactory academic progress (SAP).

Through fall 2020, there were 4,397 Reconnect students (about 13.6 percent) with an expected family contribution (EFC) of $0 who received enough Reconnect funds to fully cover tuition and fees. A student's EFC is calculated annually based on information provided on the FAFSA using a formula that considers family income, family size, and the number of family members attending college. While these students' incomes were low enough to qualify for a full Pell Grant, they were likely ineligible to receive federal aid. 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.[124]

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[124] U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 2019, one-year estimate.

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.

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. 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.

Cost of textbooks, fees, and supplies

On average, Reconnect students spend about $400 per semester on books, non-mandatory fees, and supplies that are not covered by the Reconnect Grant. During interviews with OREA, community college administrators shared anecdotally that the cost of books and fees can be a barrier to enrollment or success for Reconnect students. Some students may attempt their coursework without textbooks or forgo enrollment altogether, according to community college administrators interviewed.

Several community colleges have established book scholarships or no-cost book loan programs (i.e., a student may borrow the textbook at no cost). These book scholarships and no-cost book loan programs are available to students on a first-come, first-served basis and demand may exceed supply.

Multiple administrators specifically mentioned fees for online courses and fees for nursing programs as barriers for some students.

Family obligations

Of Reconnect students who applied for the program through fall 2020, 58 percent (18,512) reported having dependents. Reconnect students with dependents were 9 percentage points more likely to want to enroll in online classes and 7 percentage points less likely to indicate that they were available for class anytime. Community college administrators and Navigators cited caring for children or aging parents as a reason Reconnect students are unable to meet program requirements and lose eligibility. Further, 53 percent of administrators indicated the number of students on their campuses who need childcare has increased since the implementation of the Reconnect program.

Work obligations

Most Reconnect students in cohorts 1 through 3 (58 percent) indicated plans to work full-time while enrolled. Work obligations were cited frequently as reasons students lost their program eligibility; 29 administrators (at 12 colleges) cited work as a reason for students not maintaining a 2.0 Reconnect GPA, and 97 administrators (at 13 colleges) cited work as a reason for their not meeting the minimum credit hour requirement. Many administrators noted that students who miss class to attend work often do so for financial reasons. As one survey respondent noted, "Students have to make a living, so when work requires them to be there, they have to make a choice between work and school. They choose work."

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.[125]

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.

Future analysis may investigate Navigator effect on student completion by similar credit hour groupings, as was done in Exhibit 8.

> 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.

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 Coaches earn an average annual salary of $46,333, accounting for at least $1.9 million in funding each year.[126]

While Navigators serve many of the same functions as Success Coaches, data suggests that Navigators have limited interaction with community college staff. Seventy-five percent of administrators (n=218) across all 13 community colleges stated that they do not interact with their regional Navigators. Further, 93 percent of administrators (from all 13 colleges, n=163) had not discussed Navigator experiences with their students.

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.

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[125] Based on contracts for Navigator positions from 2018 through 2026. This does not include the salary and benefits for THEC staff who work with the Navigate Reconnect program.
[126] This figure only considers salary. Benefits (such as health insurance or retirement) are not taken into account.

Institutions believe that an increase in staff serving in a coaching or advisory capacity could benefit Reconnect students. According to OREA's survey, nearly a third of community college administrators from all 13 colleges said more staffing, coaching, and advising would help more Reconnect students stay enrolled in the program. However, due to limited communication between Navigators and Success Coaches, some administrators may be unaware of the full scope of support services already offered to Reconnect students. Better coordination across these institutional and regional positions could help ensure that efforts and resources are not duplicated.

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: (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. Twenty-seven percent of Reconnect students who enrolled in fall 2018 earned an associate degree at a community college through summer 2020. By contrast, 25 percent of other independent students earned a credential within that time frame.

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 8.

Exhibit 8: One-year outcomes by credit hours when first enrolled in the program | 2018-19

Cumulative hours in student's first semester in cohort	Not continuously enrolled one year after	Continuously enrolled in a postsecondary institution one year after	Earned associate degree in one year
30-59.9 hours			
Reconnect	1,792 (36.3%)	1,983 (40.2%)	1,162 (23.5%)
Non-Reconnect	1,328 (45.7%)	725 (25.0%)	853 (29.4%)
60 and above hours			
Reconnect	927 (30.8%)	898 (29.8%)	1,187 (39.4%)
Non-Reconnect	736 (37.1%)	428 (21.6%)	822 (41.4%)

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, and Hispanic students completed associate degrees 1.3 percentage points below the average. By comparison, White students had an associate degree attainment rate 2.8 percentage points higher than the average.

Degree completion is not the only program milestone that reflects a variance by race/ethnicity. Black and Hispanic adults applied for the Reconnect grant at disproportionately higher rates than White adults: slightly over 2 percent of all eligible White adults statewide applied as compared to 5 percent for Black adults and 4 percent for Hispanic adults. However, Black and Hispanic applicants became Reconnect students at lower rates than White students. Compared to 49 percent of White applicants, 34 percent of Black applicants and 47 percent of Hispanic applicants became Reconnect students.

Community colleges shared best practices for encouraging persistence and degree completion, which include using designated adult student coordinators and providing nonacademic support services

In the first two years of the program, four institutions had above average associate degree attainment per Reconnect student: Dyersburg State, Columbia State, Chattanooga State, and Pellissippi State.[127] Three of these institutions have a designated adult student coordinator who serves as a "one-stop shop" for Reconnect students. Chattanooga State has an adult learner club, "CADRE," through which Reconnect students can connect with and support other students. Chattanooga State also promotes both the program and adult persistence through "Tennessee Reconnect Tuesday Student of the Week" in which the adult student coordinator selects a Reconnect student to feature on social media and on campus announcements. More staffing, advising, and coaching specifically to Reconnect students may increase completion rates, and, on OREA's November 2020 survey, administrators from all 13 community colleges indicated that more supports would increase the number of Reconnect students who remain in the program and on track to graduate.

Adult students may face different and greater external barriers (like family and work obligations) than traditional students and may benefit from wraparound assistance. The average Reconnect student is a 32-year-old female who plans to work full-time and cares for dependents. Chattanooga State is one of the only community colleges to offer evening, onsite childcare. This service is available to all students and financial assistance is available for those who qualify. Pellissippi created a campus-wide office to centralize support services for nonacademic issues, such as housing, social services, food insecurity, and public benefits. Pellissippi also adjusted traditional practices to accommodate different schedules, such as offering after-hours advising and testing.

Three of these institutions indicated previous experience serving adult students, with two institutions serving an above-average number of students in Tennessee Reconnect's predecessor, the Community College Reconnect Grant (2016-2018). This suggests that completion at other institutions that did not participate in the Community College Reconnect Grant may improve as administrators gain more experience with adult student needs in the Reconnect program.

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. It is not a degree designed to transfer to a four-year university. AAS degrees provide more hands-on experience, with extra program components like laboratory or clinical training.

As shown in Exhibit 9, there were 4,480 Reconnect students from fall 2018 to summer 2020 who earned a credential at a community college during those six semesters, 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

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[127] OREA did not identify a completion pattern by geographic region; in other words, there was not one region of the state that produced the most associate degrees per Reconnect students enrolled.

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 9: 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%)
	3,712	**4,480**

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 (i.e., a student graduating with a high-need degree may more easily find post-college employment than other students). 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, most of the credentials earned by all independent students (including Reconnect students) were not in high-need fields (about two out of three students). Reconnect students earned a higher proportion of high-need credentials, however (8 percentage points greater). See Exhibit 10.

Exhibit 10: 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%)
	3,694	**4,447**

Note: The total numbers in Exhibit 10 differ from Exhibit 9 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, but prospective students may not be aware that they can request this information.

Of the 4,480 Reconnect students who earned a credential by summer 2020, 13 percent (n=578) earned a nursing degree.[128] 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.

Additionally, nursing graduates were more likely to live in rural areas. About half (55 percent) of Reconnect nursing graduates were from rural counties, compared to 39 percent of all Reconnect students.

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.).[129] Other Drive to 55 programs include Tennessee Promise, which is geared toward recent high school graduates, and TCAT Reconnect, which, similar to Tennessee Reconnect, is available to eligible adult students.
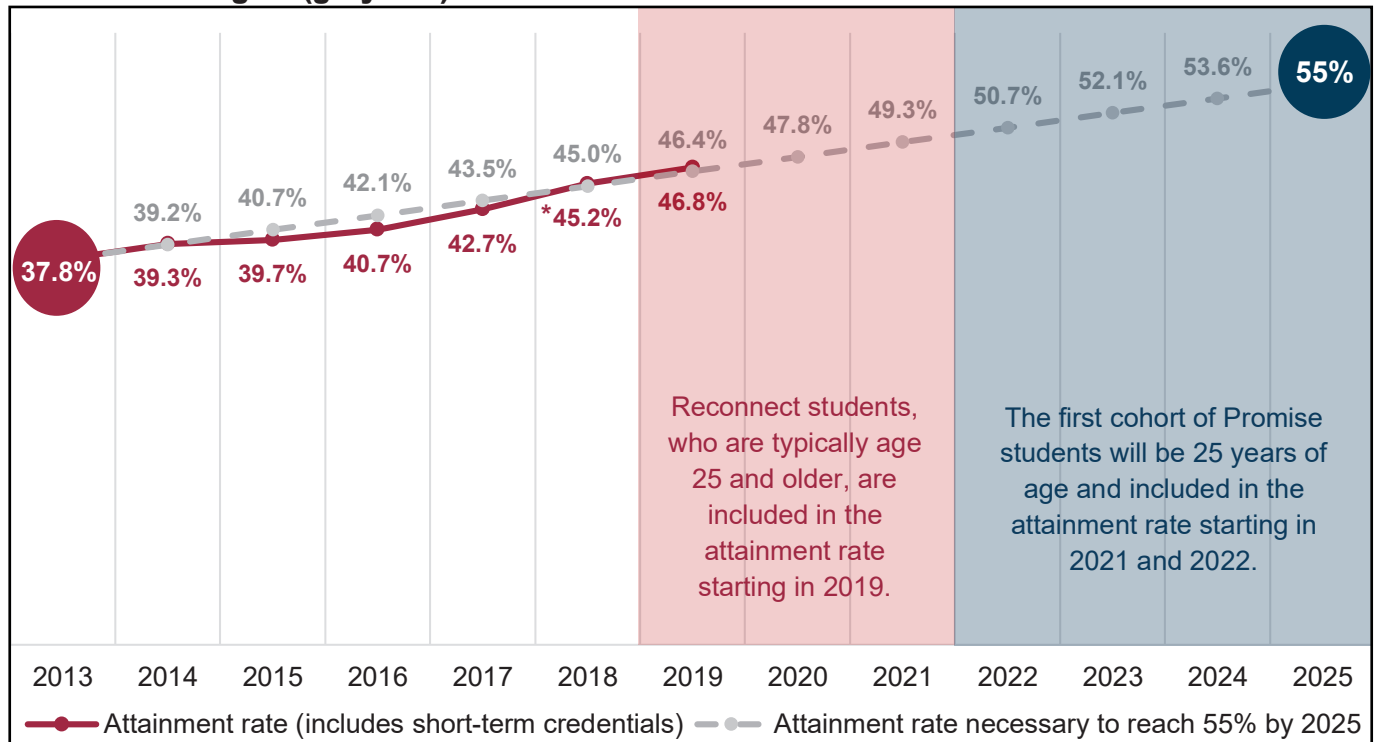
Based on the most current data available, Tennessee's attainment rate is 46.8 percent, which is 0.4 percentage points higher than the projected rate necessary to meet the Drive to 55. See Exhibit 11. Since 2013, the most significant increase in Tennessee's attainment rate occurred between 2017 and 2018 (2.5 percentage point increase). This is due in part to a change made to the attainment rate calculation. The Lumina Foundation, which tracks Tennessee's attainment data, began including industry-recognized certifications with the 2018 calculation of state attainment rates. Prior to 2018, the rate calculation was limited to technical certificates and diplomas, and associate degrees or higher (e.g., bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, etc.).[130] 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.

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[128] Based on CIP code 51.38 (Registered Nursing, Nursing Administration, Nursing Research and Clinical Nursing).

[129] The attainment rate is measured for residents over the age of 24 because younger Tennesseans are more likely to be working toward a credential and most are still dependents of their parents.

[130] Industry-recognized certifications are typically awarded based on assessments of knowledge and skill, have ongoing maintenance requirements, and are awarded by third-party organizations. For example, the American Welding Society administers tests for individuals to become a Certified Welder (CW). The CW test assesses welders on procedures used in the structural steel, petroleum pipelines, sheet metal, and chemical refinery welding industries. In contrast, certificates, diplomas, and degrees recognize the completion of an academic program of study and are awarded for life by an educational program or institution.

Exhibit 11: 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)

Attainment rate (includes short-term credentials) · Attainment rate necessary to reach 55% by 2025

Gray line (Attainment rate necessary to reach 55% by 2025): 2013: 37.8%, 2014: 39.2%, 2015: 40.7%, 2016: 42.1%, 2017: 43.5%, 2018: 45.0%, 2019: 46.4%, 2020: 47.8%, 2021: 49.3%, 2022: 50.7%, 2023: 52.1%, 2024: 53.6%, 2025: 55%

Red line (Attainment rate): 2014: 39.3%, 2015: 39.7%, 2016: 40.7%, 2017: 42.7%, 2018: *45.2%, 2019: 46.8%

Reconnect students, who are typically age 25 and older, are included in the attainment rate starting in 2019.

The first cohort of Promise students will be 25 years of age and included in the attainment rate starting in 2021 and 2022.

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 11.[131] 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 11. (Promise students generally turn 18 during their senior year of high school and are not included in the attainment rate until they reach the age of 25, which typically occurs six or seven years after graduating from high school.)

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 by 2025. The number of adults applying for the Reconnect Grant, participating in the program, and remaining enrolled and on track to graduate have decreased since the program began in 2018.[132] 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.[133] Future increases to the state's attainment rate will be impacted by these trends.

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[131] Reconnect students, who are generally over the age of 24, are counted in the attainment rate the same year they earn a credential. Some Reconnect 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.
[132] The first Reconnect cohort included 41,830 applicants, while the second cohort included 26,560 applicants. As of fall 2020, the third cohort included 22,790 applicants. This represents a 45 percent decrease from 2018 to 2020. In the first application cycle, 41 percent of applicants enrolled. Twenty-nine percent of applicants in cohort two enrolled in the program. In fall 2020, 24 percent of applicants enrolled in the program. In the first two years of the program, one in four Reconnect students (26 percent) lost grant eligibility because they did not maintain one or more program requirements.
[133] Tennessee's college-going rate (CGR) decreased 6.9 percentage points from 2017 to 2020. The greatest decline in CGR was from 2019 to 2020 (4.9 percentage point decline) and can be partially attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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.[134]

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.

Community colleges could provide targeted supports for students who have earned 30 or more credit hours.

Associate degrees typically require 60 credit hours. Almost half of Reconnect students in cohort 1 (46 percent) entered the program with 30 or more hours of previously earned credit. Even though these students could be at least halfway through their program at the time of their enrollment, they received associate degrees at a lower rate than their peers.

Targeted supports to this specific group of students could encourage completion. Research suggests that outreach to ensure students or applicants near degree completion (e.g., students with 30 or more hours of previously earned credit) finish their degrees could increase institutions' graduation rates. The University

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[134] Since its inception, the Tennessee Promise Endowment Fund has received revenue annually from excess lottery funds and interest accrued from the endowment's investments. The endowment was established in 2014 with excess lottery reserves with the intention that it become self-sustaining (i.e., its annual investment earnings would be enough to cover the cost of scholarships each year), at which point Promise scholarships would no longer be funded by net lottery proceeds.

of Texas at Arlington, for example, sent personalized emails to 294 students who were within 2 credits of completing a degree program; these students were encouraged to register for graduation or enroll in summer courses. By the summer, 293 of the 294 students either graduated or were enrolled.[135] Community college advisors could take a similar approach by sending personalized emails, texts, or calls to Reconnect students or applicants who are 50 percent or more through their degree program.

THEC should continue efforts and work with TBR to promote the use of Prior Learning Assessments (PLAs).

Prior Learning Assessments (or PLAs) enable students to earn college credit for skills, knowledge, and previous experience and could help decrease the time it takes for Reconnect students to earn credentials. Roughly half of all Reconnect students in the first three cohorts returned to college after spending some time unenrolled; the remaining students were either first-time students or already enrolled. (A typical Reconnect student plans to work full-time and has earned at least 12 college credits prior to enrollment in the program.)

Although Reconnect students often enroll with skills, knowledge, and previous experience that might qualify for PLA credits, community college administrators told OREA during interviews that PLA credits are rarely awarded, and that students rarely take advantage of PLA credits. The PLA process typically involves students putting together a portfolio and submitting it for a faculty committee to review. PLA credit may also be earned by taking an exam or be awarded for workplace training. Multiple administrators noted that the review process is time-intensive, which may deter staff from promoting PLAs. In addition, many students do not take advantage of PLA credits because the PLA process requires students to provide evidence of their previous experience. Compiling a portfolio of evidence can be confusing and time-consuming for students.[136]

While few students take advantage of PLAs, institutions in Tennessee are required to assess prior learning for all veteran students. According to state law,[137] public higher education institutions must evaluate all prior learning related to military experience with the goal of "maximizing academic credit" for veterans.[138] THEC provides institutions with a standardized guide for evaluating military experience.[139] Additionally, Tennessee's 2015-2025 master plan for higher education recommends a "better and more widespread practice" of PLAs for the benefit of students, institutions, and the state.[140]

PLA credits have the potential to accelerate student completion. A 2020 study by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning found that students who used PLAs completed degrees at nearly twice the rate of those who did not.[141] Additionally, the use of PLAs decreases the amount of time a student must remain enrolled to earn a credential. This could translate into reduced Reconnect Grant expenditures as well as cost savings for students (i.e., they would pay for fewer books, fees, and supplies).

THEC should continue efforts and work with TBR to encourage the use of PLAs by institutions and students. In North Carolina, the state developed online resources to guide students through the process of obtaining PLA credit. The state also provided funding to train institutions on how to evaluate prior learning.[142]

[135] National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, Report: Many College Dropouts are More than Halfway to a Degree, May 10, 2018, https://www.nasfaa.org/news-item/15119/Report_Many_College_Dropouts_Are_More_Than_Halfway_to_a_Degree.

[136] New America, Prior Learning Assessment is Available, but Students are Not Using It, March 17, 2021, https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/low-takeup-of-prior-learning-assessment/.

[137] TCA 49-7-1310.

[138] Mike Krause, Executive Director, Tennessee Higher Education Commission, "Commission guidance regarding Public Chapter 31: evaluation of military experiences for academic credit," memo to Boards of Locally Governed Institutions, Tennessee Board of Regents, and University of Tennessee System Leaders, Nov. 1, 2017, https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/aa/veterans/pla/Guidance%20Veteran%20PLA%2011.1.2017%20(2).pdf.

[139] Tennessee Higher Education Commission, Guide for Evaluating Military Experiences for Academic Credit, March 2018, https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/aa/veterans/pla/Evaluation%20Guide.pdf.

[140] Tennessee Higher Education Commission, The Master Plan for Tennessee Postsecondary Education, 2015-2025, https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/learn-about/ccta/leg-reports/2015/MasterPlan2025.pdf.

[141] Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, The PLA Boost: Results from a 72-Institution Targeted Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes, Revised Dec. 2020, https://www.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PLA-Boost-Report-CAEL-WICHE-Revised-Dec-2020.pdf.

[142] Mathematica, How States and Institutions Can Work Together to Serve Adult Learners: Lessons from Adult Promise, June 30, 2021, https://www.mathematica.org/publications/how-states-and-institutions-can-work-together-to-serve-adult-learners-lessons-from-adult-promise.

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.

Community colleges should employ Reconnect success plan information.

Students' answers to certain questions on the Reconnect application are used to generate a personalized Reconnect Success Plan. The Success Plan connects the student to college and community resources intended to help them overcome barriers to college success. Community colleges can also use the information collected on the annual Reconnect application to support their Reconnect students' specific needs.

However, few community college administrators know they have access to Reconnect application information. According to OREA's 2020 survey, 16 of 153 administrators (10 percent) at 10 community colleges stated they were aware of their access to the information collected from their students' Reconnect applications. Of these 16 administrators, almost all (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.

The Tennessee General Assembly and THEC could consider adjusting the Reconnect program eligibility requirements.

To maintain grant eligibility while enrolled in college, Reconnect students are required to refile the FAFSA and complete an annual application, maintain a 2.0 Reconnect GPA, 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.

Ideally, as the program progresses, community college administrators will increase efforts to utilize the data generated by annual Reconnect applications. However, THEC could consider removing the annual Reconnect application requirement as an alternative. Nearly a third of Reconnect students (30 percent) lost eligibility because they failed to refile the annual application. Most administrators (76 percent) stated that the most common reason students fail to refile the application is that they are unaware of the recurring requirement. Students' answers to certain questions on the Reconnect application are used to generate a personalized Reconnect Success Plan, which connects the student to college and community resources intended to help them overcome barriers to college success.[143] According to THEC, students are required to refile the application annually so that the information can be used to update their Reconnect Success Plan. Requiring only an initial application prior to program enrollment would reduce the number of students who lose program eligibility for this reason.

> **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.

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[143] *TCA* 49-4-944(d)(6) requires Reconnect students to participate in a college success program, as created by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, to maintain grant eligibility. The Reconnect Grant application, which is required for initial program eligibility and annually thereafter, asks a series of questions that generate a personalized Reconnect Success Plan. This fulfills the student's statutory requirement to participate in a college success program.

The Tennessee General Assembly (TGA) could consider changing the requirement that students be continuously enrolled in at least 6 credit hours per term. Of the 6,878 students who lost Reconnect eligibility through summer 2020, most (54 percent, 3,747 students) became ineligible because they did not maintain enrollment in the minimum required credit hours. Further, fewer than half of Reconnect students who lost the grant remained enrolled at least part-time the semester after they lost eligibility (2,649 students, 39 percent). These students decided to continue pursuing their credential even though they were no longer participating in the Reconnect program. To allow more students to stay enrolled in the program, which increases their likelihood of earning a credential, the TGA could allow for flexible "stop outs," or temporary withdrawal from enrollment. In other words, instead of requiring students to stay continuously enrolled, students could instead receive the grant for a maximum number of semesters at part-time status. This could be implemented with or without a time limit.

Further, the TGA could allow Reconnect students who lost eligibility due to GPA to regain the scholarship one time. Students receiving the HOPE scholarship are currently allowed to do this. More than 800 Reconnect students in cohorts 1 and 2 lost their grant eligibility because they did not maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA. Fifteen administrators at nine community colleges suggested modifying the GPA requirement to allow students to appeal their GPA a single time.

Community colleges should follow the best practices of other institutions.

During surveys and interviews with OREA, community college administrators shared their best practices for enrolling and retaining Reconnect students.

Designate a Reconnect point of contact for students

One strategy that institutions could consider is to designate a point of contact for Reconnect students. Following the implementation of the Reconnect program, Motlow State created a new position called the Director of Adult Initiatives. The director recruits adult students and guides them through the enrollment process.

Consider webpage revisions

Several administrators noted that Reconnect students have trouble navigating their institutions' Reconnect webpages. Community colleges should evaluate the extent to which their Reconnect webpages convey all the relevant information concisely and accurately and then make any needed revisions. All 13 community colleges have a webpage that clearly lays out initial eligibility requirements for the Reconnect Grant. However, three of the webpages do not provide information on how to maintain eligibility. In addition, five of the 13 webpages do not provide detail on what the grant covers (and does not cover). Roane, Columbia, and Dyersburg State provide the name and contact information of someone students can contact with questions, while the remaining institutions provide either a phone number or anonymous email address (e.g., reconnect@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu). Only two of the state's 13 community colleges acknowledge on their webpages the services provided by Reconnect Navigators.

Increase use of accelerated mini terms

Some community colleges have started offering courses in accelerated mini terms within the semester. While the standard length of a semester-long course at a community college is 15 weeks, 11 community colleges currently offer seven-week courses, and six also offer five-week courses. This format allows students to schedule their classes around work and family obligations at times that are more convenient to them. For example, a student can take courses during the first half of a 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.

Host events where students can refile their Reconnect application

In interviews with OREA, three community college administrators mentioned that their institutions had previously hosted events where students could complete their FAFSAs and receive on-the-spot assistance, sometimes known as "FAFSA Frenzies." Given that more students lost program eligibility due to incomplete Reconnect applications compared to incomplete FAFSAs, institutions could consider expanding their FAFSA completion strategies to incorporate the Reconnect application. For example, if THEC decides to keep the annual Reconnect application requirement, institutions could hold similar events where administrators walk students through refiling their Reconnect applications. These events could be combined with FAFSA completion events, as was done by Dyersburg State.

TBR should continue to pilot initiatives, such as the Nudge to Reconnect program.

TBR's Nudge to Reconnect pilot program launched in spring 2020. The program increased both retention rates and persistence rates of Reconnect students at Nashville State and Pellissippi State. Given the pilot's initial success, the program should be expanded to other community colleges.

THEC should evaluate the effectiveness of Reconnect Navigators.

Navigate Reconnect staff, called "Navigators," based in regions across the state, 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 through graduation. THEC has allocated about $1.2 million annually for Navigator salaries and benefits over a period of eight years.[144]

Approximately 5,600 Reconnect students from cohorts 1 and 2 (21 percent) worked with a Navigator. (Doing so is optional and not required under program rules.) 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. Of the Reconnect 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.

Currently, THEC collects data on the frequency of interactions between students and Navigators, but the data is not integrated within THEC's main student information system. This prevented OREA from conducting a robust evaluation of Navigator effectiveness. THEC should conduct a thorough analysis of Navigator impact on all students, including those participating in the Reconnect Grant program. This information could be included in the agency's annual Tennessee Reconnect report. THEC could also collect survey or focus group data from adult students on their experience with Navigators.[145] This information could be used to identify best practices and areas for improvement.

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.

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[144] Based on contracts from 2018 through 2026.

[145] California, Oregon, and Oklahoma have used adult student focus groups. Mathematica, *From Outreach to Enrollment: Strategies to Engage Adults in Education Beyond High School*, May 12, 2021, https://www.mathematica.org/publications/from-outreach-to-enrollment-strategies-to-engage-adults-in-education-beyond-high-school.

THEC and TBR should work together to determine the most common reasons some Reconnect applicants do not enroll in the program.

In the first three years of the program, most Reconnect applicants (65 percent) did not ultimately enroll in the program. While some of these applicants were ineligible (due to their dependency status, residency status, or some other factor), it remains unclear why the remaining students chose not to enroll in the program. THEC should analyze the available data, and potentially collect additional information, to determine the most common reasons applicants do not join the program. THEC's analysis could then be used by TBR and community colleges to address the most common reasons some applicants do not enroll in the program.

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.

The Reconnect Grant covers tuition and mandatory fees, but it does not cover textbooks or other fees. Reconnect students pay, on average, $400 per semester for textbooks, supplies, and program-specific fees that are not covered by the grant.

Program-specific fees vary significantly by program. The average estimated cost for textbooks, fees, and supplies that are required to complete a nursing degree at a Tennessee community college is $4,536.15. Such expenses are not covered by the Reconnect Grant and may prevent some students from enrolling in college.

On OREA's fall 2020 survey, community college administrators were asked what they would change to enroll more students into the Reconnect program. The second most frequently cited response (34 respondents at 12 community colleges) was for the program to cover additional expenses aside from tuition and mandatory fees (e.g., books, program fees, etc.). Administrators at most community colleges (12 out of 13) also indicated that providing financial assistance may increase persistence and completion.

The General Assembly may consider covering the cost of textbooks and other fees for all Reconnect students or for certain subsets of students. For example, the Reconnect Grant could cover these expenses for low-income students. Sixty-two percent of Reconnect students made less than $40,000 per year, and 28 percent made less than $20,000 per year. The grant could also cover these expenses for those enrolled in high-demand programs. Covering these fees for a subset of high-need degrees could incentivize students to enroll in high-demand programs. Between fall 2018 and summer 2020, most of the credentials (64 percent) earned by independent students (including Reconnect students) were not in high-need fields.

OREA was unable to accurately estimate how much these initiatives might cost, because the cost is expected to grow as more cohorts of Reconnect students become simultaneously enrolled and due to other factors that are difficult to predict, such as the variation among program-specific costs. THEC and TBR could work together to determine the logistics and annual costs of covering textbooks and other program-specific fees while taking into consideration the number of students entering and exiting the program, inflation, variation in books and fees across academic programs, and the increased use of open educational resources.

All 13 community colleges should provide more transparent information about program costs and available sources of financial aid.

The Reconnect Grant is marketed as a program that allows eligible students to attend college tuition-free. However, on OREA's survey and in interviews, multiple administrators noted that applicants often misinterpret this to mean that the grant will cover all college-related expenses.

Program costs

Community colleges should be more transparent about program-specific costs that are not covered by the grant, especially for high-cost programs like nursing. During interviews and on OREA's November 2020 survey, community college administrators frequently cited the high cost of nursing program fees. According to one administrator, nursing fees are often a "big shock" to Reconnect applicants. The average estimated cost for textbooks, fees, and supplies that are required to complete an AASN degree program at a Tennessee community college is $4,536.15. Such expenses are not covered by the Reconnect Grant. Multiple survey respondents noted that some applicants decide not to enroll because they are surprised to find the Reconnect Grant does not cover such expenses.

While all 13 community colleges offer an AASN degree, not all community colleges publish an estimate for the cost of textbooks, fees, and supplies for the AASN program on their websites. OREA was able to obtain estimates from the community colleges that did not have the information posted on their websites, but prospective students may not be aware that they can request this information.

All community colleges should publish the cost of nursing programs and make efforts to ensure that prospective students are aware of these fees as early as possible. In addition to publishing the cost of nursing programs, community colleges should attempt to be more transparent with publishing the full cost of all programs.

Available financial aid

To help students pay for expenses not covered by the Reconnect Grant, institutions could increase efforts to promote the use of other sources of financial aid. Some states have combined foundation support, employer scholarships, and other private sources to meet students' needs beyond the costs of tuition and mandatory fees.[146] In Maine, for example, the state piloted a foundation-funded scholarship that was intended to cover expenses such as housing, childcare, and transportation. In the state of Washington, United Way provided microgrant funding to cover small expenses that pose barriers to enrollment, such as transcript and application fees and library fines.

To promote transparency and help students take advantage of available funding, all 13 community colleges (or the Navigate Reconnect Regional Directors) should publish a financial aid document for adult students if they do not do so already. In addition to federal, state, and local sources of financial aid, this document could include information about foundation-funded grants, employer scholarships, and other private sources of 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.

THEC or TBR could direct more resources toward promoting the Reconnect program and recruiting applicants.

Statewide marketing campaign

Before the Reconnect program was implemented in fall 2018, the state launched a marketing campaign, and the first application cycle (for cohort 1) included 41,830 applicants. After this initial marketing push, the number of new applicants decreased. In the application cycle for cohort 2, 26,560 new applicants applied. In cohort 3, the

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146 Mathematica, *Supporting adult learners from enrollment to completion: Implementation findings from the Adult Promise Evaluation*, Nov. 6, 2020, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED611288.pdf.

number of new applicants had decreased to 22,790. This decline may be at least partially due to COVID-19. When community college administrators were asked what they would change to enroll more students into the Reconnect program, the most common response was to increase efforts to promote the program. Thirty-three administrators across 12 community colleges responded that increased marketing and outreach efforts would increase enrollment. THEC or TBR could provide funding for another Reconnect marketing campaign to address the decreasing number of new applicants. (Funding for the last marketing campaign came directly from the state and was then administered by THEC.)

Solicit feedback from Reconnect students

Research shows that adult learners respond differently to various recruitment messages. For example, program leaders in Indiana and North Carolina found that certain messages (such as the slogan "finish what you started") were seen as putting too much of the burden to return and succeed on adult learners, rather than the institution. To ensure that students are responding to their marketing messages in a positive way, THEC or TBR should develop and test targeted messages for adult students.[147] This could be done through a series of focus groups or panels.

THEC or TBR could then use the student feedback from these events to develop a marketing toolkit for use by all community colleges. A statewide marketing toolkit would ensure consistent messaging across all institutions. Such a toolkit would also reduce the burden on institutions, as it would provide them with marketing materials that have already been tested for their effectiveness.[148]

Evaluate the effectiveness of various marketing approaches

Community colleges have their own marketing campaigns to promote the Reconnect program. Institutions recruit applicants through various community events, organizations, and information sessions. Institutions also use a variety of outreach methods, such as social media, mail, radio ads, and billboards. However, institutions may lack the capacity to evaluate the effectiveness of these various strategies.

If THEC chooses to keep the annual application requirement, THEC could help community colleges be more effective with their marketing campaigns by adding a question to the annual Reconnect application. The application could prompt students to indicate where they first heard about the program. THEC could then share student responses with institutions to inform future outreach methods.

THEC and TBR should work together to simplify the Reconnect application process.

To enroll in the Reconnect program, a student must complete several forms: the FAFSA, the Reconnect application, a college admission application, and a Navigator intake form (if they choose to work with a Navigator). During interviews with OREA, one Navigator and administrators from two community colleges noted that the process can feel redundant and confusing to students, since many of these forms require identical information. THEC could streamline the application process by combining the Reconnect application and the Navigator intake inform.

TBR could adopt a common application to be used at all 13 community colleges.[149] A common application would save students (particularly those interested in multiple institutions) time, while also making it easier for students to transfer from one community college to another.

[147] Mathematica, *From Outreach to Enrollment: Strategies to Engage Adults in Education Beyond High School*, May 12, 2021, https://www.mathematica.org/publications/from-outreach-to-enrollment-strategies-to-engage-adults-in-education-beyond-high-school.

[148] Mathematica, *From Outreach to Enrollment: Strategies to Engage Adults in Education Beyond High School*, p. 7, May 12, 2021, https://www.mathematica.org/publications/from-outreach-to-enrollment-strategies-to-engage-adults-in-education-beyond-high-school.

[149] Mathematica, *How States and Institutions Can Work Together to Serve Adult Learners: Lessons from Adult Promise*, June 30, 2021, https://www.mathematica.org/publications/how-states-and-institutions-can-work-together-to-serve-adult-learners-lessons-from-adult-promise.

Appendix A: Navigator Intake Form

Tennessee Reconnect Intake Form

IF YOU HAVE ALREADY SUBMITTED AN INTAKE FORM AND NEED ASSISTANCE, PLEASE REACH OUT TO YOUR RECONNECT NAVIGATOR. Please list an email address that belongs to you personally and is one you check often. Be assured that you are completing a secure form and your information will not be shared without your permission. Thank you and we look forward to working with you!

First Name*

Last Name*

Home Phone*

Email*

City*

State*

Zip Code*

County of Residence*   --select an item-- ⌄

Birthdate*

Gender You Identify With*   --select an item--   ⌄

Race/Ethnicity*   --select an item--   ⌄

Are you currently, or have you ever served in the U.S. Military (to include Active, Reserve, or National Guard components)?*

  --select an item-- ⌄

Highest level of education completed*   --select an item--   ⌄

Have you attended college in the past?* --select an item-- ⌄

When do you plan to begin college?* --select an item-- ⌄

Have you selected a college?* --select an item-- ⌄

Name of school --select an item-- ⌄

Do you currently have defaulted student loans?* --select an item-- ⌄

Do you owe a balance to a previously attended college?*

--select an item-- ⌄

What is your current yearly income? (include spouse's income if you are married.)*

--select an item-- ⌄

Do you plan to work while enrolled in college?*

--select an item-- ⌄

Is there anything that could prevent you from going to college?*

--select an item-- ⌄

Are you currently receiving SNAP benefits? (You may be eligible for additional college-related funding.)*

--select an item-- ⌄

Are you currently receiving TANF benefits? (You may be eligible for additional college-related funding.)*

--select an item-- ⌄

Are you currently receiving Unemployment Insurance? (You may be eligible to participate in Reconnect to Workforce.)*

--select an item-- ⌄

Are you a formerly incarcerated individual? (You can be connected with a Re-entry Navigator with specific resources for you.)*

--select an item-- ⌄

By submitting the Tennessee Reconnect Intake Form, I certify that the information reported in my Tennessee Reconnect Intake Form is true and complete to the best of my knowledge. I authorize the release and exchange of information related to my Tennessee Reconnect Intake Form between the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC), the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), my Tennessee Reconnect Region, my high school, and my postsecondary institution. Such information may also include student contact information, state and federal financial aid eligibility, FAFSA data, postsecondary enrollment status, academic status, and residency and location information required by my postsecondary institution and my Tennessee Reconnect Region. Such information may also be used by TSAC, THEC, and their contractors for statistical research, and that all application information will be held in strict confidence. I further certify that I have read and understand the applicable program rules and regulations.

*- required

SUBMIT

Appendix B: Reconnect Application Questions

Question	Options
What is the highest level of education you have completed?	a. High school diploma or high school equivalency b. A certificate or diploma from a Tennessee College of Applied Technology or other technical college c. Associate (2 year) degree d. Bachelor's (4 year) degree e. Master's degree or higher
Have you previously taken courses at a community college or university?	a. Yes, but I am not currently enrolled b. Yes, and I am currently enrolled c. No
How long ago did you attend?	a. Less than 3 years ago b. Between 3 and 5 years ago c. Between 6 and 10 years ago d. More than 10 years ago
Are you a veteran?	Yes or No
Do you plan to work while enrolled in college?	a. Yes, I will work one full-time job b. Yes, I will work one part-time job c. Yes, I will work multiple jobs d. No, I will not work while I am enrolled in college
Do you have children or other dependents for whose care you're responsible?	Yes or No
When will you be available to attend classes?	a. Weekday daytime (8 am to 4 pm) b. Evenings (after 4 pm) c. Weekends d. Online (anytime)
When do you plan to begin college?	a. I am currently enrolled b. Immediately c. In 3-6 months d. In 6-12 months e. More than a year from now
Where do you plan to access the internet if there are assignments you need to complete online?	a. I have internet access in my home b. I plan to use the college's library computers for internet access c. I have a laptop/mobile device and plan to access internet at the local library or where free Wi-Fi is available. d. I do not have a computer and I'm not sure how I will access the internet
Do you have reliable transportation to get to and from campus?	Yes or No
Please select up to # items below that you anticipate could be challenges as you pursue a college degree or certificate:	a. Academic Preparation b. Work demands c. Lack of access to support and services available on campus d. Physical or learning disability e. Family Responsibilities f. Finances g. Using required technology h. Time management
Think about your behavior at school or at work. Please indicate how well the statements below describe you. In answering each question, use a range from 1 to 6 where 1 stands for not at all like me and 6 stands for very like me.	Rating questions rank from 1 to 6. With 1 "Not at all like me" and 6 "Very like me"
If I do not understand a task at work or in class, I ask a supervisor/instructor to explain it to me.	1 2 3 4 5 6
If I need help with something at work or in class, I ask a colleague/classmate or supervisor/instructor for help.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I almost never ask for help at work or in class, even when the work is too hard to complete on my own.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I almost never ask for help from colleagues/classmates or supervisors/instructors, even when I need it.	1 2 3 4 5 6
Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. Think of how you compare to most people -- not just people you know well, but most people in the world. There are no right or wrong answers, so just answer honestly (1-6, 1 not at all like me – 6 very much like me)	Rating questions rank from 1 to 6. With 1 "Not at all like me" and 6 "Very like me"
Instead of preparing for some deadlines, I often spend time doing other things.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I often delay simple tasks for days or weeks.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I usually accomplish all the things I plan to do in a day.	1 2 3 4 5 6
I often find myself performing tasks that I had intended to do days before	1 2 3 4 5 6
I often have a task finished sooner than necessary.	1 2 3 4 5 6

Appendix C: Sample Reconnect Success Plan

TENNESSEE
Reconnect

Reconnect Success Plan for John Doe

What is my Reconnect Success Plan?

You've made the decision to attend college and have set a goal to earn a degree. Your focus and determination will help ensure that you persist to graduation. You will also need a plan. The Reconnect Success Plan provides information to you, based on your specific needs, so that you can keep life – and fear – from getting in the way of reaching that goal. Use this Reconnect Success Plan to learn about the help and support that exists for you, to connect to real people who can answer your questions and guide you, and to chart your course to becoming a college graduate. Whether you have a busy schedule with work commitments, kids to take care of, or fears about returning to the classroom, you are still within reach of earning a college degree, and your Reconnect Success Plan can help.

You must update your Reconnect Success Plan annually to remain eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant.

Congratulations! You have officially applied for the TN Reconnect Grant! You are joining a community of other adult learners working to fulfill their goals and expand their opportunities for themselves and their families. We look forward to working alongside you as you achieve your goals! Your next steps are to:

- Apply for admissions to Tennessee Community College at https://www.tennesseecommunitycollege.edu/admissions. If you are currently enrolled, contact your Financial Aid Office to check on the status of your Reconnect Grant Application at https://www.tennesseecommunitycollege.edu/financial-aid-tuition or email them at financial.aid@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu.
- Submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) here: https://fafsa.gov. If you need help with your FAFSA, contact https://www.tennesseecommunitycollege.edu/financial-aid-tuition or email them at financial.aid@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu.
  You have indicated that you plan on attending Tennessee Community College, if you need to update this to another college you can do so by listing the new college first when you complete the FAFSA.

Tennessee Community College Resources and Information	Tennessee Reconnect Region Resources and Information
For information specific to adult learners visit https://www.tennesseecommunitycollege.edu/financial-aid-tuition/tennessee-reconnect or contact Jane Doe at Jane.Doe@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu or 555-555-5555. Because your success is important to Tennessee Community College, they offer the following information and resources specifically for adults: • A student orientation just for adult learners like you. Make sure you attend to get your questions answered and to prepare for your classes. • Student groups like these to connect to other adult learners: Reconnect Cafe/john.doe@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu	Tennessee Reconnect Communities are local organizations across Tennessee dedicated to supporting adult Tennesseans in going to college. This free resource is available to you, regardless of the college you plan to attend. Each TRC has Reconnect Navigators, who work one-on-one with adult learners through all aspects of the college-going process, including: • Exploring school and program of study options that fit your interests and career goals. • Understanding college costs and applying for financial aid. • Fitting college into your life and creating a work/life balance.

- Workshops like these to help you prepare for your coursework: Technology, Financial Literacy/Planning

Important Offices:
Financial Aid: financial.aid@ tennesseecommunitycollege.edu; 555-555-5555
Admissions and Records: admissions@ tennesseecommunitycollege.edu; 555-555-5555
Student Support Center:
Food pantry: jane.doe@ tennesseecommunitycollege.edu; 555-555-5555

Places to Study and Use Computers:
Library: for Hours and locations visit
https://www.tennesseecommunitycollege.edu/ library

- Locating resources in your community to support your college-going journey.
- Problem-solving challenges that may arise.

Your county is part of the Tennessee Reconnect Region.
You can connect with your local Tennessee Reconnect Community Navigator in the way that works best for you!
Tennessee Reconnect Region
Tennessee Reconnect Region Website
John.Doe@tn.gov

Start Collecting Your Past Transcripts

Most colleges will not allow you to start classes without having your official transcripts in hand from institutions you've previously attended.

You've indicated that you have previously attended the institutions listed below. Visit the provided links and have your transcripts sent to Tennessee Community College once you are accepted. Below you will find links to ordering your transcripts and any associated cost:

School Name	Website	Cost
Tennessee University	http://tennesseeuniversity.edu/TennesseeUniversity/media/Tennessee/Registrar/PDF/TRANSCRIPT-REQUEST-FORM_1.pdf	Free

If you have attended a college not listed above, contact that college's registrar or records office to request a transcript.

You need to request that these transcripts be sent to Tennessee Community College. They will accept transcripts in the following ways:

Email	Mailed	Hand Delivered
Yes	Yes	Yes

For more information regarding sending transcripts see the contact information below:
Admissions
555-555-5555
admissions@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu

Information for Veterans and Service Members

Every college has an office or individual ready to help veterans and service members navigate their way into and through college. They can also connect you to campus resources and support systems. Tennessee Community College has a veteran student center where you can meet other veterans, connect to academic and enrollment support, and get help in understanding your veteran education benefits. For information use the contact information below:

Jane Doe
vetcom@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu
555-555-5555
https://www.tennesseecommunitycollege.edu/admissions/veteran-benefits

Programs Available to Fit Your Schedule

Tennessee Community College offers a wide range of programs available during traditional business hours.
To search for the programs available at Tennessee Community College, click here.
If you'd like to know if you are online-course-ready, you can take an online course readiness assessment here.

Tennessee Community College may charge additional online course fees that will not be covered by your Reconnect grant.

Childcare While You Are in Class

Did you know that 1 out of 4 college students are raising children of their own while going to college? Many parents work in addition to going to school and raising children. While this may feel

Internet Access: Stay Connected

College courses today require that you have internet access so that you can connect to your professors, your student portal, do research, check and respond to emails, and complete assignments.

daunting, completing a degree will lead to higher lifetime earnings and employment for you. The research also shows that when you attend college, your child is more likely to attend college. The work you are doing now can impact your family for generations to come. While balancing caretaking and college can present challenges, a Tennessee Reconnect Community Navigator can help you work through the challenge of childcare during classes. Visit a community advisor here.

Even though you have internet access in your home, you can use campus resources to complete your work. Along with study spaces for students, Tennessee Community College's library has computers that you can use to complete assignments. Location(s) and hours can be found at the link below:

- https://www.tennesseecommunitycollege.edu/library

Employed While in College?

You may be going to college to improve your job prospects, move up within your company, or change jobs. Today, more than ever, employers are looking for employees who are willing to grow, and with skills and critical thinking abilities that are often developed in education programs beyond high school. Ask your employer if you are eligible for any education benefits or reimbursement that can help you with tuition and related costs. There may be support available to you.

Because you are already employed, you understand your job demands and may be wondering how you can balance work, school and your life responsibilities. Your local Tennessee Reconnect Community Navigator can help you create a plan to successfully balance your responsibilities and find more time for classes, homework and studying. Visit this link.

Experience counts!

You may be able to earn college credit for what you already know from your work, military or other personal experiences.

For more information contact:
Jane Doe
admissions@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu
555-555-5555

Additional Locations with Computer Access:

- **Main Campus Library**
  M-TH-7:30-8; F-7:30-4:30, Sat. 9-2. Office hours may be impacted by COVID restrictions.
- **Main Campus Learning Center**
  M-TH-8-7; Friday 8-4:30, Sat. 9-12. Office hours may be impacted by COVID restrictions.
- **Main Campus Open Lab Computer Services**
  M-Thursday 8am-9:30pm, Friday 8-4:30pm, Saturday 9-2pm. Office hours may be impacted by COVID restrictions.

Prep for Academic Success

Returning to college after taking time off or beginning college for the first time as an adult student can be intimidating. Know that you are not alone! There are numerous people and resources on your campus to support your academic success. To assist adults with any academic challenges that may arise, Tennessee Community College offers: Additionally, every adult learner on campus is provided with:

- Success Coaches
- Academic Completion Specialists
- Faculty Advisor

Check the college profile on the first page of this Reconnect Success Plan to see what other workshops your college offers to help you brush up on your academic and study skills.

Including Your Family In Your College Journey

Although managing multiple priorities as an adult student can be difficult at times, having your family alongside you through your college experience can provide encouragement and motivation to succeed. Students have joined their children in setting aside "homework time" to do their own college work while their children work on their homework. Campuses often invite families to certain events on campus to help create a college journey that includes both you AND your family. Additionally, your Tennessee Reconnect Community Navigator may have tips on what has worked for other parents. Your friends and family will be your support system as you go to school and often are willing to help out when they see you are pursuing this goal.

Overcoming Technology Challenges

Campuses rely on technology to schedule classes and distribute financial aid. If you are having trouble using the college's website to register, enroll or pay for classes, ask for help. Start with the adult learner contact listed on the first page of this Reconnect Success Plan. Also, instructors will often utilize online platforms to post assignments, content, and helpful supplements to material presented in class. Once enrolled, instructors will make it clear what technologies you will need to access to complete the requirements of the class. If you are feeling overwhelmed or nervous about utilizing technology in these new ways, your institution has resources to assist you. Tennessee Community College offers the following services to assist you:

- Technology boot camps
- Technology help desk
- Technology Online

See this link for information regarding hours and locations:

- https://www.tennessee communitycollege.edu/library

Beyond the Reconnect Grant: Covering Other College Costs

While the Tennessee Reconnect grant will help pay for tuition and most fees, there are still college expenses – like special program fees or online fees, books and supplies – and living expenses that you will need to cover. But there are options available to help you. Being informed and prepared will assist you in the process. Use these resources to get ready. To get started, visit here to explore state and federal financial aid programs for which you may be eligible. You will also find information here about employer tuition reimbursement programs and tax benefits for education expenses.

In addition, your campus also has resources to help ensure financial strain is not a barrier to completing your college degree. Tennessee Community College offers the following financial assistance resources:

- **Institutional Scholarships** - Scholarships provided by the individual school with varying criteria. Visit this link for more information.
  https://www.tennesseecommunitycollege.edu/financial-aid-tuition/sources-of-financial-aid/scholarships
- **Emergency Funds** - One time scholarships to cover unexpected costs that create barriers for you to continue on a path towards graduation. For more information contact:
  jane.doe@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu
  555-555-5555
- **Nontraditional Payment plans** – Options for dividing payment for tuition and fees into smaller payments distributed throughout the semester. Your college offers the following payment options.
  - Deferred payment options
  See the following for more details:
  - https://www.tennesseecommunitycollege.edu/financial-aid-tuition/payment-and-refunds/deferred-payment
  - bursar@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu
  - 555-555-5555
- **Financial literacy education** – Have questions about interest rates, repaying loans, or budgeting? Learn more through financial literacy workshops and resources at your institution.
  See the following for more details:
  - https://www.tennesseecommunitycollege.edu/financial-aid-tuition
  - Jane.Doe@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu
  - 555-555-5555
- **Scholarship for books and supply costs** – Apply for funds to cover book and supply costs that are not covered by other financial aid programs.
  See the following for more details:
  - https://www.tennesseecommunitycollegefoundation.org/textbooks/
  - foundation@tennesseecommunitycollege.edu
  - 555-555-5555
- **Textbook rental options** – Textbooks can often be an unexpected expense in addition to tuition and fees. Rent your textbooks to help decrease costs. See the following for more details:
  - https://www.bkstr.com/tennesseecommunitycollege
  - John.Doe@bookstore.com
  - 555-555-5555

Your Tennessee Reconnect Navigator is also a great resource to help connect you with community resources that may be available in your region.

Appendix D: Reconnect declination form

TENNESSEE RECONNECT PROGRAM DECLINATION

If you wish to postpone participation in the Tennessee Reconnect Grant Program:

- *Provide the information below and submit the completed form to the financial aid office of the institution you plan to attend.*
- *Completed form must be submitted prior to enrollment in the initial term as a Tennessee Reconnect Student.*
- *Use of this form will postpone your participation in the Tennessee Reconnect Grant program. This may impact the GPA calculated by the postsecondary institution. Semesters in which you choose to postpone participation will not impact the five (5) year program participation limit.*
- *If you have questions please contact the financial aid office of the institution you plan to attend or email tn.reconnect@tn.gov.*

NAME: _____ SSN4: XXX-XX- __ __ __ __
(FIRST NAME / MI / LAST NAME)

ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP: _____

EMAIL: _____ PHONE: _____

CURRENT INSTITUTION: _____

TERM OF INITIAL ENROLLMENT:_____ ACADEMIC YR: _____
(EX: FALL)   (EX: 2018-19)

I certify that the information provided on this form is true and complete to the best of my knowledge. I further certify that I have not previously earned an associate or bachelor's degree. I understand that under penalty of perjury any false statements intentionally made may result in prosecution for violation of Tenn. Code Ann. § 39-16-702 and in the permanent loss of Tennessee Reconnect eligibility and repayment of any funds received under Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-4-944.

SIGNATURE: _____ DATE: _____

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