



SNAPSHOT

Tennessee Reconnect Grant Evaluation

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The Tennessee Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) has evaluated the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, as required by state law. The General Assembly created the grant in 2017 as part of the Drive to 55 initiative. Adults who have not yet earned an associate or bachelor's degree may use the grant at a community college or other eligible institution to pursue an associate degree or technical certificate free of tuition and mandatory fees. The first installment of OREA's recurring evaluation of the program includes data from fall 2018 through 2020.

Key Points

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 applicants has declined by 46 percent over the past three years (2018-2020). During the same time, almost two-thirds of individuals who filled out a Reconnect application did not become part of the program. Program participation in fall 2020 was likely impacted by COVID-19.

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

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. (Reconnect students are required to remain enrolled in at least 6 credit hours each fall and spring 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.

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. Reconnect students pay, on average, \$400 per semester for textbooks, supplies, and special fees that are not covered by the grant, according to an OREA survey of community college administrators. 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.

Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of Navigators, state-funded staff who help adults explore college options, answer questions about the enrollment process, and provide supports to students once they are enrolled in college.

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 Comptroller's Office has included several policy options for the General Assembly and other stakeholders in its report. These include changes that could be made to increase the number of students who apply for the grant, participate in the program, and earn a credential.

To read the report, visit the Comptroller's OREA website at tncot.cc/orea.