



The Promise of the College Promise

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Introduction

Over the past few years, over 200 College Promise programs in 43 states have become increasingly popular policy proposals at the state and local levels. Simply put, these programs offer students the opportunity to attend a four-year, two-year, or technical college tuition- and fee-free. While models and funding structures vary, the objective of each of these programs is to increase access to higher education, reduce costs, and improve retention and completion rates. Many Promise programs reflect a partnership between state and/or local government and nonprofit entities to provide both scholarship dollars and mentorship to eligible students.

A College Promise program that began locally, expanded regionally, and was implemented statewide in 2015 is the Tennessee Promise, the nation's first state-level tuition- and fee-free community and technical college program.

The Tennessee Context

In 2008, with the support of local philanthropists, Knox County Mayor Mike Ragsdale and Knoxville Mayor Bill Haslam established Knox Achieves, a program allowing graduating high school seniors in Knox County, Tennessee to attend their local community and technical colleges tuition- and fee-free. Knox Achieves provided last-dollar scholarship aid to these students, funded in partnership with local business and nonprofits in East Tennessee.

Between 2009 and 2014, Knox Achieves grew to 27 counties in Tennessee and was renamed tnAchieves ("Tennessee Achieves"). Former Mayor Haslam was elected Governor of Tennessee in 2010, and in the following years expanded tnAchieves to the entire state. Beginning with the high school class of 2015, all graduating high school seniors would be eligible to attend one of Tennessee's 13 community colleges or 27 technical colleges free of tuition and fees. Tennessee became the first state in the nation to establish such a program.

Increases in Community and Technical College Enrollment

Since the Tennessee Promise was implemented in Fall 2015, first-time freshmen enrollment at community colleges in Tennessee has increased by **25 percent**; first-time enrollment at Tennessee's technical colleges has increased by **20 percent, and enrollment of Pell-eligible students has increased concomitantly**. This significant and substantial increase in enrollment has resulted in an increase in Tennessee's college going rate of nearly **five percentage points**, from approximately 57 percent in 2014 to 62 percent in 2015 and 2016.¹ This one-year increase in the college going rate is greater than the combined rate of the previous seven years (2007-2014).

Due to the timing of its implementation, Knox Achieves has additional years of data that may signal longer-term statewide enrollment trends and outcomes. The 2009 implementation of Knox Achieves led to increased first-time freshmen enrollment at the community colleges that served Knox County (primarily Pellissippi State, Roane State, and Walters State community colleges, all located in East Tennessee). In particular, first-time freshmen enrollment at Pellissippi State Community College, one of the largest community colleges in Tennessee, increased by **10 percent** between 2009 and 2014, the year before the program's statewide expansion. First-time freshmen enrollment at both Roane and Walters State Community Colleges remained relatively flat over this period, as the vast majority of Knox Achieves/tnAchieves students enrolled at Pellissippi State CC.

However, the composition of students enrolled at each of these three institutions shifted toward those entering higher education *right out of high school*, rather than entering the workforce directly from high school or taking time off before enrolling in a postsecondary institution. This is a positive effect of Knox Achieves/tnAchieves.

Persistence and Completion among Treated Students²

Since the statewide implementation of the Tennessee Promise, Promise students have been found to persist from Term 1 to Term 2 and Year 1 to Year 2 at higher rates than their non-Promise peers. This is especially true at the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs), which boast a Year 1 to Year 2 persistence rate of **more than 80 percent**. Overall, the term-to-term persistence rate for Promise students is approximately **82 percent**, and the Year 1-2 persistence rate is approximately **63 percent**, five percentage points higher than non-Promise students.

¹ Data provided by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission Student Information System (THEC SIS) and the Tennessee Longitudinal Data System (TLDS), a P-20W data system.

² Persistence and completion data provided by the THEC SIS and the TLDS; National Student Clearinghouse data is also included to account for student transfer.

Year 1 to Year 2 persistence rates at Pellissippi State, Roane State, and Walters State Community Colleges remained relatively constant at approximately **60 percent** from Fall 2009, when Knox Achieves was implemented, through Fall 2014, the last fall term prior to statewide expansion. While completion data are not yet available for the first cohorts of Tennessee Promise students, the three institutions mentioned above experienced an increase of **3.5 percentage points** in graduation rates (29.7 percent to 33.2 percent) between Fall 2009 and Fall 2014. This increase reflects increased diversity among students enrolled at these three community colleges during this period (i.e., age, race, socioeconomic diversity) and shifts in the college-going and postsecondary attainment culture in Tennessee during this time.

Affordability

Funding provided by the Tennessee Promise, as well as tnAchieves and Knox Achieves, is in the form of a last dollar scholarship: all other federal and state grant aid must be applied before students receive Tennessee Promise dollars. The sources of aid include federal Pell grants, Tennessee Student Assistance (need-based) awards, and Tennessee HOPE scholarships. As such, the average award received by a Tennessee Promise student is approximately \$1,000; prior to statewide implementation, the average tnAchieves or Knox Achieves award was approximately \$900. As tuition and fees at Tennessee's community colleges and TCATs are approximately \$4,000 and \$3,000, respectively, the average Tennessee Promise award covers 25-30 percent of a annual student's tuition and fees.

It is important to note, however, that the Tennessee Promise program does not cover the full cost of attendance: students still have many expenses (i.e., housing, books and course materials, child care, etc.) that must be paid out of pocket or using student loans. Despite this, student borrowing since the inception of the Tennessee Promise has decreased by over 25 percent; the cost of attendance (including for students from families making \$30,000 or less) at many participating institutions has declined; and FAFSA filing has increased over 12 percentage points to **73 percent**, earning Tennessee the distinction of having the highest FAFSA filing rate in the nation.³

Conclusion

Although it started as a local community initiative, the Tennessee Promise grew and has had dramatically positive effects on access, affordability, persistence, and completion. As students continue to move through Tennessee higher education as Tennessee Promise students, educators and policymakers will learn a great deal more about the effects of this College Promise initiative on future cohorts of students. This movement is growing: 200 communities in 43 states have Promise programs and 16 states have developed their own College Promise initiatives. While College Promise programs are by no means a "one size fits all" for all communities, cities, or states, many lessons can be learned from the success and challenges of Tennessee's Promise programs to better inform program implementation and student outcomes nationwide.

³ Data provided by the United State Department of Education (US DOE) and the Institute for College Access & Success Project on Student Debt.

About the Authors



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Robyn Hiestand is an independent budget and policy consultant where she provides strategic advice for clients on education finance, data and policy as well as the federal budget and appropriations process. Robyn spent over eight years at the U.S. Senate Budget Committee for three U.S. Senators and has drafted key pieces of legislation: Sen. Sanders' "College for All" Act, Sen. Murray's "In-STATE for DREAMERS," and she took a lead role in drafting and developing the 2013 Bipartisan Budget Act (the "Murray-Ryan" budget agreement) to provide sequester relief. In addition, Robyn worked directly on the education titles of two reconciliation bills — the 2010 Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act and the 2007 College Cost Reduction Act. Before her time in the Senate, Robyn worked on higher education issues for tribal colleges, where she managed a comprehensive data collection project.



TN Higher Education Commission

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) is the coordinating body for public higher education in Tennessee. THEC is relentlessly focused on increasing the number of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential.

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The College Promise Campaign builds widespread support for free community college for all hardworking students. In the 21st century, a high school diploma is no longer enough to lead Americans to a good job and a decent quality of life. Free community college is an investment in America's future.

The College Promise Campaign is a nonpartisan initiative of Civic Nation, a 501(c)3 organized exclusively for charitable and educational purposes. For more information, please visit collegepromise.org.

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