

2025 - 2035

STRATEGIC HIGHER EDUCATION MASTER PLAN:  
**ENHANCING THE VALUE  
FOR TENNESSEE**



Tennessee Higher  
Education Commission

## NEED FOR ACTION

Higher education is at a crossroads. Public perception is low. The economy demands more skilled workers. The ways Tennesseans learn—and work—are changing. Tennessee’s 2025-2035 Strategic Higher Education Master Plan sets the expectation that **every Tennessean can earn a credential that leads to lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee.**

The data are clear: Tennesseans who complete a postsecondary credential experience meaningful financial returns, and, as more individuals earn credentials, the State will be better prepared to meet economic and social needs. Higher education is the key to individual and statewide success.

Tennessee’s 2025-2035 Strategic Higher Education Master Plan, or the Plan, lays out a framework for higher education to become more aligned, achievable, and agile for individual lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee. A more aligned higher education will improve completion, recognize learning of all types, and strengthen pathways between education and work. A more achievable higher education is simpler to navigate and guides more Tennesseans to higher education and through to completion. A more agile higher education leads by planning, working together, and using data and evidence. This Plan defines the conditions needed so **every Tennessean can earn a credential that leads to lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee.** To deliver on this vision, higher education must work better and emphasize and enhance its value.



### Higher Education’s Impact on Tennessee

**Bachelor’s degree holders earn \$1.4M more and associate degree holders earn \$417,000 more** over their careers than individuals with a high school diploma.

**Unemployment rates** for individuals with postsecondary training are **consistently lower** than those with a high school diploma only.

**Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) is consistently higher** for individuals with postsecondary training.

Sources: Carruthers (2023); U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Department of Labor

## HIGHER EDUCATION — THE KEY TO SUCCESS

For higher education to be the key to individual and statewide success, the promise of educational attainment must be realized and trust be rebuilt. This promise is not just about the credential, but what it signals: a good job, family-sustaining wage, and independence. More students need to complete the credentials they start and more need to do so on time. Improvement on these outcomes will rebuild confidence.

By 2031, 63% of jobs in Tennessee will require some form of postsecondary training (Carnevale et al., 2023). An estimated 49% of Tennesseans, ages 25-64, have earned a credential (Lumina Foundation, 2023).<sup>1</sup> This leaves a deficit of around 14 percentage points. Since 2009, Tennessee’s postsecondary attainment has risen at an average rate of just over 1 percentage point per year (Lumina Foundation, 2023). Assuming this trend persists uninterrupted, Tennessee will fall short of the economy’s need for a skilled workforce.

Beyond increasing educational attainment, Tennessee higher education needs to produce graduates who can nimbly navigate what future industries need. A recent study estimates that generative artificial intelligence will impact 85% of workers (Kinder et al., 2024), which will disrupt many Tennesseans no matter their educational attainment.

Tennessee is a leader in student access and affordability. The introduction of [Tennessee Promise](#) and [Tennessee Reconnect](#) created coalitions of support to encourage and guide Tennesseans’ college going. With state investments and robust financial aid (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association [SHEEO], SHEF, 2025), the State’s last major strategic effort to boost postsecondary attainment, the Drive to 55, achieved notable improvements, specifically an 8.4 percentage point increase in the share of 25-64-year-olds who have achieved at least an associate’s degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).<sup>2</sup>

1. The Lumina Foundation estimates the number of Tennesseans with credential, which includes the associate’s degree or more estimate from the U.S. Census Bureau and estimates of short-term certificates and certifications.

2. Comparing ACS 1-year estimates from 2013, when the Drive to 55 began, and 2023, the latest ACS 1-year estimates available.

### Critical Measures for Tennessee Higher Education:

 **63%**  
of jobs by 2031 require some form of postsecondary training.

 **49%**  
of working-age Tennesseans have earned a postsecondary credential.

 **< 44%**  
of first-time, full-time freshmen in TN public colleges achieve their degree within four years.

 **85%**  
of workers will be impacted by artificial intelligence (AI), meaning approximately 2.7M Tennessee workers will be impacted by AI.

 **34k**  
public Tennessee collegegoers in 2020-21 left higher education with debt and without a credential (down from 46,000 in 2016-17).

Higher education can improve on-time completion and reduce the number of Tennesseans leaving higher education with debt. Fewer than 44% of first-time, full-time freshmen in Tennessee achieve their degree within four years (THEC Analysis, 2025).<sup>3</sup> Further, many students need to borrow money to attend higher education. Low completion rates may signal students leaving higher education with debt, without a credential, and without the benefits of a degree (U.S. Bureau Labor Statistics, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025).<sup>4,5</sup> Positively, the number of Tennessee graduates and non-graduates leaving with debt has declined, with substantive decreases at Tennessee’s community colleges, reflecting state investment in financial aid and policy changes (THEC, *Tennessee Higher Education Fact Book, 2025*).

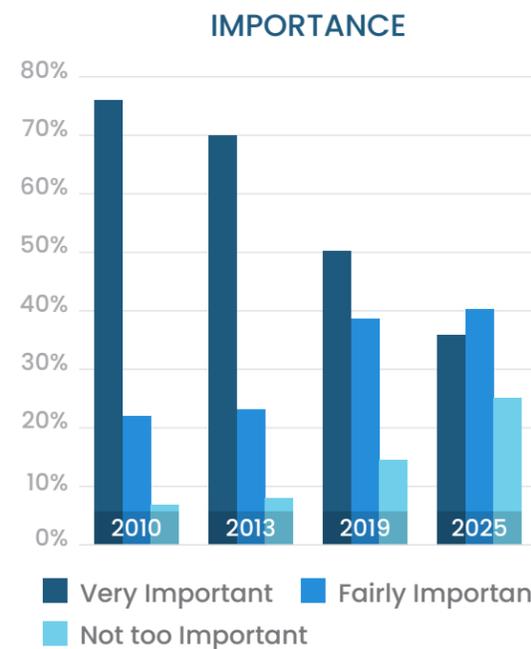
Higher education in Tennessee is strongest when it collaborates, communicates, and comes together. Now is the time to reinvigorate connections across the expanding postsecondary education enterprise. Public confidence in higher education has declined over the past decade (Jones, 2025). Improving affordability, completion, durable<sup>6</sup> and other skill development, and resiliency will rebuild confidence in higher education.

**Figure 1: CONFIDENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION (NATIONAL)**



Source: Gallup, U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises From Recent Low, July 15, 2025, [Read the Gallup Poll Article](#)

**Figure 2: IMPORTANCE OF COLLEGE EDUCATION (NATIONAL)**



Source: Gallup, Perceived Importance of College Hits New Low, September 11, 2025, [Read the Gallup Poll Article](#)

3. Four-year graduation rates reported for the first-time, full-time freshmen class of 2021 and includes both two- and four-year public institutions. This analysis combines awards data from TN public colleges and National Student Clearinghouse (NSC).

4. In 2023-24, borrowing rates for undergraduate students at Tennessee public colleges ranged from a high of 39% to a low of 0%. Borrowing rates are generally higher at private, for-profit and private, non-profit colleges in Tennessee.

5. Non-completers at Tennessee public colleges leave with a median of \$4,800 in federal student loan debt in the two-year sector and a median of \$8,000 in federal student loan debt in the four-year sector. Statistics reflect students who stopped enrolling (or withdrew) from the institution in the 2020-2021 academic year. This totals 34,080 students across Tennessee public two- and four-year colleges (THEC, Fact Book, 2025).

6. See page 11 for more information about durable skills.

## Key Terms

**Postsecondary education** refers to the full range of formal learning opportunities beyond high school offered by public and private institutions, agencies, and providers that contribute to postsecondary learning and success. **Higher education**, a part of postsecondary education, refers to academic credentials offered at public and private colleges and universities. **Student** refers to anyone engaging with postsecondary education at any stage in their journey, whether they are entering directly from high school, returning as an adult, or pursuing an advanced degree. **Institution** means a public or private college or postsecondary institution, inclusive of universities, community colleges, and colleges of applied technology. **Credential** refers to a degree, diploma, or successful completion of a workforce training program that culminates in an industry certification, registered apprenticeship, occupational licensure, or certificate.

The 2025-2035 Strategic Plan is the roadmap for how higher education in Tennessee can enhance individual and statewide success. To deliver on the promise of a credential, higher education should clearly articulate the return on its offerings so that students understand what they are getting for their time and investment. Driving improvements across these outcomes will enhance student and statewide success. At its core, the Plan is designed to make higher education work better, which can ensure individual success and a stronger Tennessee.

## Measures of Individual, Institution, and State Value

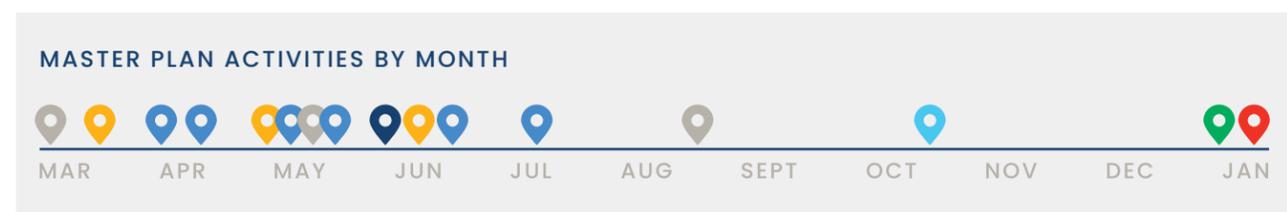
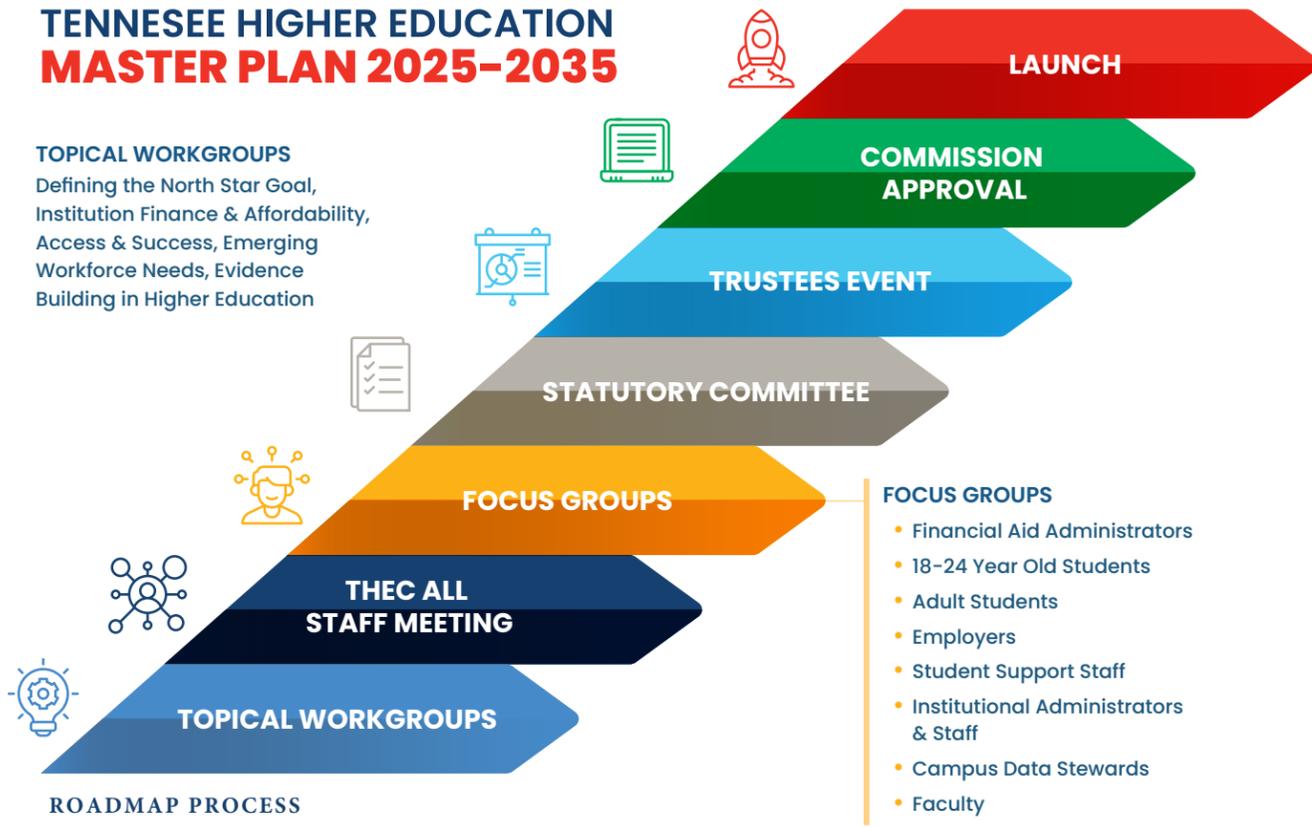
The table below shows measures of value for the individual, institutions, and the State. Throughout 2026, THEC, alongside state and higher education partners, will develop the State’s next attainment goal to measure progress toward ensuring that every Tennessean can earn a credential that leads to lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee.

INDIVIDUAL	INSTITUTION	STATE OF TN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employment</li> <li>Resilience in Economic Downturn</li> <li>Return on Investment</li> <li>Social Mobility</li> <li>Standard of Living</li> <li>Wages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alignment with Workforce</li> <li>Competitiveness</li> <li>Cost Efficiency</li> <li>Employment</li> <li>Graduation rates</li> <li>Student Debt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Economic Vitality</li> <li>High Labor Force Participation Rate</li> <li>Low Unemployment</li> <li>Standard of Living</li> <li>Tax Revenue</li> </ul>

## SETTING THE STAGE

The Plan is a commitment to Tennesseans and the State; it outlines the objectives for Tennessee higher education and is designed to guide policies, programs, and practices to ensure that **every Tennessean can earn a credential that leads to lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee.** The Plan is the culmination of a year-long process of consultation, analysis, and dialogue, described in the *Process for Development* (page 27).

### TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION MASTER PLAN 2025–2035



The 2025-2035 Strategic Plan is designed for those who shape higher education—institutions, faculty and staff, policymakers, state agencies, and education organizations—to support those directly impacted by the Plan—students, families, and the State of Tennessee. The cornerstones of the Plan provide the foundation, while the objectives define the outcomes sought for students, institutions, and the State. Strategies are identified to progress Tennessee towards its desired outcomes, and will evolve over time, ensuring that the Plan is responsive and relevant. Key metrics are suggested alongside select strategies to inform measurement and evaluate progress on the Plan.

Higher education in Tennessee is broad and multifaceted, serving more than 385,000 students across the state (THEC, *Tennessee Higher Education Fact Book, 2025*),<sup>7</sup> including ten public universities, a health science center, institute for public service, 13 community colleges, 23 Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs), 34 Tennessee Independent Colleges and University Association (TICUA) institutions, and over 260 authorized institutions,<sup>8</sup> among other entities not yet defined (see the Coordinated objective).

In 2019, the General Assembly recognized people with histories of incarceration as a focus population in the Plan,<sup>9</sup> underscoring their priority and strategic importance. Throughout the Plan readers will see specific references for people with histories of incarceration and the challenges faced by this population. While this is not exhaustive, these inclusions are meant to acknowledge how higher education must recognize and improve success for these students. The Plan outlines four specific strategies to improve services and awareness for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students.

The 2025-2035 Strategic Plan sets the vision that **every Tennessean can earn a credential that leads to lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee.** Higher education in Tennessee is vast and expanding as it adapts to changing needs of students and employers. A more aligned, achievable, and agile higher education will lead more Tennesseans to a credential, improving individual and statewide success.

7. Fall 2024 headcount at Tennessee public, private, non-profit (TICUA), and proprietary institutions.

8. This number includes institutions authorized through regular authorization and optional expedited authorization as of July 1, 2024.

9. See Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-7-202(d)(4)(d).



## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The 2025-2035 Strategic Plan creates a roadmap so every Tennessean can earn a credential that leads to lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee. The Plan identifies six guiding principles to ground higher education’s values and decision making.

### STUDENT CENTERED

***Prioritize the needs, aspirations, and success of students.***

A student-centered higher education is one that recognizes every student as an individual with unique needs, strengths, and aspirations. Students should be at the forefront when forming new policies, innovating practices, and making decisions. Tennessee higher education will value student perspective and ensure that students are empowered and supported to meet their educational goals.

### AMBITIOUS

***Set the national standard for higher education by pursuing excellence, bold goals, and transformative outcomes.***

Tennessee will set the national standard for what higher education can and should be through the establishment of bold goals that challenge the status quo and demand excellence, while committing to outcomes that are transformative for students, institutions, and communities.

### COLLABORATIVE

***Work together towards shared objectives by finding consensus and solving problems.***

The most effective solutions and lasting impact come from collaboration and shared understanding. Building trust, listening deeply, and engaging different perspectives are critical to resolving the unique complexities and challenges within higher education. By fostering a culture of collaboration, Tennessee will strengthen its ability to solve problems creatively and collectively.

### CONSISTENT

***Maintain commitment to responsibilities, goals, and vision and stay dependable for stakeholders.***

Consistency is essential to credibility, resiliency, and long-term success. Tennessee higher education must sustain its commitment to students, families, staff, and the State, ensuring that policies, practices, and communications are aligned and dependable. Consistency will foster stability, promote accountability, and create an environment where innovation and progress can take root.

### INNOVATIVE

***Embrace original, forward-thinking solutions and re-evaluate established practices.***

Innovation requires creativity and curiosity in solving the most complex challenges. Higher education must maintain relevance which requires regular exploration of new ideas, re-evaluation of current practices, and problem-solving to meet the needs of students, communities, and the workforce. By embracing innovation, Tennessee higher education will lead with agility, advance academic excellence, and ensure that higher education remains aligned with the demands of a dynamic and diverse society.

### UNDERSTANDABLE

***Simplify processes and effectively communicate to make higher education easier for students, families, and staff.***

An understandable higher education is one that is clear, navigable, and accessible to all. In creating policy and communicating to students, families, and staff, clarity should be the aim. Empowering students, families, and staff through the removal of unnecessary complexity will make higher education more hospitable and effective for everyone it serves.

## ALIGNED

Higher education is rapidly evolving. The rise of non-degree credentials, industry certifications, and experiential learning requires Tennessee to broaden its definition of higher education and integrate these experiences. To meet today’s students’ needs, Tennessee must become better aligned—across higher education, secondary education, and the workforce. Alignment demands greater efficiency and effectiveness, ensuring all learning experiences are recognized in the student’s journey. Higher education must be continuous, recognizing Tennesseans as lifelong learners and adapting to students wherever and whenever they enroll. Finally, higher education must be meaningful, articulating skill development and connecting learning to real-world experiences.

### Efficient and Effective

Tennessee higher education must operate efficiently and effectively while maintaining high standards. Students should trust that their investment of time and money yields a better future. Several strategies can make higher education more efficient and effective: improving credit mobility, reducing time to completion, and ensuring academic quality. A more efficient and effective higher education will strengthen connections within and across the education to workforce continuum and ensure more Tennesseans achieve credentials in a timely manner.

### Strengthen credit mobility between all postsecondary sectors to maximize degree completion and minimize excess credit accumulation.

Credit mobility takes many forms. Traditional pathways include the transfer of credit via articulation agreements, like the Tennessee Transfer Pathways,<sup>10</sup> and resources, like the [Servicemember Opportunity Portal](#) which translates military service to college credit. While Tennessee has a strong foundation, institutions, in coordination with THEC, should scale alignment between technical education and university programs, award credit for prior learning, and link workforce training to college credit. More Tennesseans are engaging in non-degree programs, like apprenticeships (Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development [TDLWD], n.d.), and THEC should partner with systems and institutions to create clear pathways that award college credit alongside accountability measures that assess the quality and return on investment of these types of non-credit experiences.

Key Metrics: Credit Awarded for Prior Learning; Average Time to Degree

**Juliet Avila**, a GEAR UP graduate, has a college-going experience like many Tennesseans. She will enroll at multiple institutions on her way to her desired credential. ***“I plan on finishing my associate degree at Roane State Community College and then transferring over to the***

***University of Tennessee Knoxville. I will be transferring over by Spring Semester of 2025. I would like to major under the Marketing field and/or International Business. I will also be minoring in a foreign language. I am still debating on whether or not to go for a degree higher than a bachelor’s degree; it is still a thought.”***

<sup>10</sup> [Tennessee Transfer Pathways](#) (TTPs) are structured academic plans that allow students to complete an associate degree at a Tennessee community college and transfer seamlessly to a public university or participating private institution in the state to complete a bachelor’s degree.

**Design and scale models that reduce time to completion while upholding academic standards.** Higher education should evaluate existing models of degree attainment and adopt alternative pathways that reduce time to completion. Some promising models focus on compressed programs of study which allow for completion of bachelor’s degrees in less than four years. The BlueSky Initiative in Chattanooga, a collaboration between East Tennessee State University (ETSU) and BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee (BCBST), allows students to complete a Bachelor of Science in Computing from ETSU in just over two years on-site at BCBST in Chattanooga (ETSU, n.d.). Other promising models include reduced credit bachelor’s degrees which are increasingly possible with policy changes by accrediting bodies (Alonso, 2025; Utah System of Higher Education, 2025). Institutions and THEC must evaluate these **innovative** models to ensure they deliver quality teaching and learning. THEC can use policy levers, such as Quality Assurance Funding (QAF)<sup>11</sup> and postsecondary state authorization,<sup>12</sup> to ensure new pathways maintain quality and meet standards. Tennessee institutions and THEC should improve efficiencies through new degree models and monitor their effectiveness.

Key Metrics: Average Time to Degree; On-Time Graduation Rates

**Leverage dual enrollment and dual admissions to promote intentional, streamlined pathways for Tennessee students.** Dual enrollment (DE), in which high school students take college courses for credit while fulfilling high school graduation requirements, has increased 50% over the past five years, with the State investing over \$59 million in Dual Enrollment Grants in 2023-24 (THEC, Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship [TELS] Year End, 2022 & 2024). Participation in dual enrollment programs demonstrates positive impacts on students’ college going and completion (Community College Research Center, 2024). Given the growth of dual enrollment participation, THEC, institutions, the State Board of Education, and the Department of Education (TDOE) must ensure seamless transfer and application of DE courses to degrees.

Dual admissions is another strategy to smooth pathways between community college and four-year institutions, providing students, typically, conditional admission to a four-year upon completion or academic progress at the community college. Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-7-202(r)(3)(c) requires THEC, in consultation with governing bodies, to implement a dual admissions policy to strengthen the alignment between two- and four-year colleges in Tennessee. THEC and institutions should evaluate the effectiveness of dual admissions to strengthen transfer outcomes. Strategically using dual enrollment and dual admissions programs can support more efficient degree completion, which will improve value for Tennesseans and Tennessee.

Key Metrics: Credit Awarded for Prior Learning; Credit Accumulation upon Degree Receipt; Number of Dual Admissions Agreements



11. [Quality Assurance Funding \(QAF\)](#) measures student learning and institutional effectiveness for Tennessee’s public universities and community colleges.

12. [Postsecondary State Authorization](#) is required for all non-exempt institutions to operate in the State of Tennessee. Authorization requires annual review and evaluates minimum standards concerning quality of education, ethical business practices, health, safety, and fiscal responsibility.

## Continuous

Tennessee higher education must offer seamless pathways for students at any point in their journey. By **collaborating** with employers and prioritizing lifelong learning, higher education should equip traditional and adult learners with the skills, credentials, and adaptability needed to thrive in a changing economy. State policy and institutional strategy should recognize all forms of learning, catalog quality credentials and how they integrate with other competencies, and ensure students build durable skills aligned with high-demand careers. A more continuous higher education requires structural improvements to systems and technology to enable clarity and **consistency** in gaining and awarding credit. When students have clear on- and off-ramps, they will be better equipped to meet the needs of tomorrow.

**Develop informational tools on careers, career pathways, and labor market needs. Identify opportunities for exploration of careers for individuals at all stages.**

THEC and other state agencies, secondary, and institutions need to ensure Tennessee’s workforce needs are represented in training and education opportunities for students. Current labor market information should be made accessible at institutions to ensure institutional practices, including program development and refinement, instruction, and advising align with workforce needs (Cleary & Van Noy, 2014). Students should know that they are completing credentials that provide them with skills and knowledge to enter the workforce (DeBaun, 2025). Career navigation resources should be utilized across the education to workforce continuum, and undergo continuous iteration, to support students and advisors, including adult learners, of promising education and career choices (Jobs for the Future, n.d.). Institutions should design these tools with input from employers to ensure graduates transition into strong careers that offer advancement and stability.

**Create a central repository of all credential types.** THEC and the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD) should develop

a credential repository to capture the growing range of non-degree training and certifications offered by institutions, private providers, and employers. Evidence shows more individuals are seeking short-term training. A multi-survey study of youth, ages 14-18, found that more than half (56%) believe a skills-based education makes sense today and nearly half (47%) favor shorter programs (ECMC, 2022). Little is known about the scope or substance of these offerings in Tennessee, because there is no clear, comprehensive, or consistent data collection. Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, and Utah have begun tracking credentials and may serve as examples to draw upon (ExcelinEd, n.d.). As credential offerings proliferate to meet demands of students and employers, THEC should work with state agency partners and institutions to understand their scope and assess their application and outcomes for Tennesseans. A clearer understanding of non-degree training and certifications will help Tennessee higher education become more aligned.

Key Metrics: Number of Inventoried Credentials

**Create a skills inventory for all credentials to translate learning experiences across degree seeking programs, certificates, short-term training, and non-degree credentials.** Aligning skills to credentials will help students, institutions, and employers understand the value of each learning experience and connect education with workforce needs. A skills inventory can also guide how higher education integrates non-degree experiences into traditional programs. One promising model is the Comprehensive Learner Record, which provides students with a digital repository for all trainings and credentials (Munip & Klein-Collins, 2024). Streamlining, standardizing, and expanding on a statewide repository will ensure skills gained through degree programs, training, and non-degree credentials are clearly stated and easy to understand for students, institutions, and employers. As the coordinating body, THEC should convene institutions and TDLWD to create and maintain this inventory, ensuring all credential types can align learned skills to industry need.

Key Metrics: Share of credentials with complete skills inventory

**Maximize opportunities for credentials to integrate and stack in degree pathways.** Once credential and skills inventories are established, Tennessee should build a statewide digital platform that maps competencies from military service, industry certifications, training, and prior learning to academic programs. This platform would recognize existing skills, award credit **consistently**, and accelerate students' progress toward a degree. Though underutilized, stackable credentialing offers promising opportunities for students to gather meaningful experiences on the way to a traditional degree or certificate (Education Strategy Group [ESG], 2023). Integrated and stacked credentials allow a student who pauses their studies at any point to walk away with a meaningful educational experience. As THEC and institutions explore and develop integrated and stacked pathways, they should ensure that short-term and/or stackable credentials have workforce value on their own.

Key Metrics: Definition of stackable; Number of stackable pathways; Share of in-demand jobs with stackable pathways

## Meaningful

To make students' education more impactful and relevant, higher education must translate student learning to real-world skills and experiences. Many students feel disconnect between what they are learning and how it prepares them for their careers. Tennesseans are questioning the time required to earn a degree and the relevance of coursework in a program (Carruthers, 2023). A more meaningful higher education requires thoughtful process improvement to integrate formal and informal education experiences to empower more Tennesseans with lifelong learning, skills, and the resiliency to adapt. Through regional workforce initiatives and programs that embed real-world learning,<sup>13</sup> students can see clear connections between coursework and the practical skills and experiences needed for careers. When Tennesseans understand the purpose of their education, they gain confidence that their investment prepares them for what lies ahead.

**Ensure all academic programs, including general education, clearly articulate durable and other skills acquired as relevant to students' study.** Institutions must adopt an integrated approach to communicate defined skills aligned with students' academic, professional, and personal development. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education updated the Employability Skills

Framework which reflects eight categories of employability, referred to as durable throughout the Plan, skills, ranging from demonstrating resilience, to effectively exchanging ideas, and addressing complex challenges. The scope of skills, specifically durable skills, needed to thrive in the workplace can be developed through higher education and should be articulated clearly for students (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Skills serve as shared language between employers and job seekers. Higher education should evaluate skill alignment throughout their education portfolio, including at the college, program, and course level (Emsi, 2021). Through transparent communication in syllabi, advising materials, and program descriptions, institutions can make skills visible to students and reinforce them through advising and faculty **collaboration**. Regular feedback from students and employers should inform ongoing updates to ensure programs stay responsive to workforce needs. Connecting classroom learning to skills builds understanding between students and employers, strengthening alignment between education and the workforce.

Key Metrics: Share of Coursework defining skill attainment

13. THEC has pre-existing grant programs to incentivize Workforce and Economic Development.

**Expand and integrate high-quality experiential learning that aligns with academic programs and equips students with real-world durable skills and career readiness.** As workforce demands evolve, higher education must ensure every student engages in meaningful, applied experiences. Experiential learning includes internships, simulated learning, study abroad, and others. Research shows that such experiences help students gain new skills and knowledge relevant to their careers (Gavillet, 2018). By embedding these experiences into all types of learning, institutions can make career readiness central to the student academic experience. Expanding and integrating experiential learning into institutional structures and state policy will ensure students graduate with the durable skills, experiences, and credentials needed to thrive in a dynamic economy.

Key Metrics: Share of Courses with Experiential Learning

**Advance statewide accountability measures to foster continuous improvement and ensure quality academic programs. Establish policies and procedures to strengthen and monitor the credentialing arena.** Accountability structures enable regular evaluation and benchmark performance against national best practices (Sedney & Lane, 2025). Students must have access to rigorous academic experiences that produce measurable, valuable outcomes. A transparent, data-informed accountability framework will promote institutional improvement. Tennessee has long led the nation in performance-based funding; continuing to leverage programs, such as Quality Assurance Funding, can ensure programs remain meaningful for students and institutions. As the State collects more information on credentials (see Continuous objective), it will be essential to assess their value for students and maintain the State's commitment to quality.

**Protect students and ensure institutional integrity through the regulation of higher education providers operating in Tennessee. Review expectations for regulation to meet the needs of students and the State.** Institutions must maintain rigorous authorization and accreditation standards that ensure academic quality, financial stability, and effective student support. Tennessee already has a robust authorization structure, but the expansions identified throughout this cornerstone raises new questions about how best to regulate an expanding higher education landscape. Refining regulatory measures can promote oversight, transparency, and student protection. THEC should assess next steps for regulation in this changing environment. The regulatory statutes, policy mechanisms, and funding streams that govern or support credential oversight vary substantially across states (Sedney & Lane, 2025), underscoring the need for an effective, state-based approach. Tennessee remains committed to putting students first and strengthening public confidence in the integrity and quality of its institutions.

Key Metrics: Number of Accredited and Authorized Institutions



## ACHIEVABLE

Higher education is complex, and Tennessee must make it easier for students to achieve success. An achievable system is one that is accessible, affordable, and supported at every stage of a student’s journey. Realizing this vision requires deliberate, **student-centered** strategies that clarify processes, enhance transparency, and guide students so they can access, persist, and complete.

### Accessible

Tennesseans need clear tools and **consistent** guidance to navigate their higher education journey. Students and families interact with many stakeholders (e.g., college administrative staff, social groups, social media, THEC staff, state and federal agencies, etc.), and the information they receive is often fragmented, outdated, or even contradictory. Evidence shows that while Tennessee’s overall college-going rate has remained steady, significant gaps persist across student groups, particularly among economically disadvantaged students (THEC, Tennessee College Going, [CGR], 2025). To understand adult access and re-enrollment, nearly 590,000 Tennesseans have some college experience and no credential and only 2.3% re-enroll after a yearlong stop out (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2025). Removing information barriers, providing clear and **consistent** information, and creating centralized tools will help more Tennesseans enter and complete higher education. By reducing these barriers and making higher education more accessible, Tennessee can increase participation and attainment, maximize value for students and families, and strengthen institutions and the State as a whole.

A Prison Policy Initiative study found that formerly incarcerated people are eight times less likely to complete college than the general population (Couloute, 2018). Tennessee has invested in the Corrections Education Initiative (CEI) to expand college offerings to those inside Tennessee prisons. Over 2,100 students have enrolled in CEI programs since 2019, earning 259 community college and TCAT awards (TBR, personal communication, November 4, 2025).

[Tennessee’s Direct Admissions Pilot](#) is the first program in the nation to automatically link eligible high school seniors with college acceptance and personalized financial aid information. For the pilot, over 60,000 students in the class of 2026 were eligible to receive Direct Admissions letters detailing the institutions where they are accepted and the financial aid available to them. The pilot aims to simplify the college application and financial aid process, reducing barriers that often prevent students from enrolling. Tennessee’s pilot builds on the evidence, combining clear, streamlined communication with proactive outreach to students, families, and school counselors. Tennessee’s pilot is being actively evaluated to inform statewide implementation and scalability.

**Create common messaging to be used across higher education to streamline information sharing, improve efficiency, and get information into the hands of students and families.** Tennessee has had success with coordinated communication through initiatives, such as [Tennessee Promise](#) and [Tennessee Reconnect](#), where clear, uniform messages about eligibility, timelines, and next steps simplified the college-going process for students and families statewide. National research supports these approaches, finding that providing students and families with simplified, personalized information about financial aid and assistance completing the FAFSA significantly increased college enrollment (Bettinger et al., 2012). By applying lessons from both Tennessee’s experience and national evidence, THEC, institutions, the State Board of Education, and college-access organizations can strengthen a common messaging strategy to ensure students and families receive accurate, timely, and **understandable** information about their college options. Clear and **consistent** messaging can reduce confusion, help students better understand the value of the college process, and give families confidence that they are making informed decisions for the future.

**Regularly update, use, and train on centralized resources for students, families, and education partners.** Students and families often face significant challenges navigating the complex processes of college exploration, application, and financial aid. Many lack access to clear, timely, and reliable information to guide their decisions, and existing resources can be fragmented or difficult to use. Research highlights that informational and procedural barriers disproportionately affect first-generation and low-income students (Dynarski et al., 2022), underscoring the need for coordinated, user-friendly tools that make college and career information easier to access. Centralized tools, such as [CollegeforTN.org](#), complement Tennessee’s broader efforts to support college access. CollegeforTN.org serves as a hub for information, resources, and guidance and is one example of how a centralized tool can simplify navigation and connect students to essential resources. CollegeforTN.org has an average of 550,000+ active users per year. Tools, like CollegeforTN.org, paired with training on the college, career, and financial aid resources can provide critical information for students, families, and counselors as they progress on their educational journey.

A THEC administered survey of Tennessee school counselors found that those who use CollegeforTN.org describe it as user-friendly, easy to navigate, and a valuable source of information for career exploration, financial aid, and college planning. Several counselors noted that students and their families particularly appreciate the salary calculator, FAFSA resources, and next-step guides. These insights underscore the site’s role as an accessible, trusted entry point within Tennessee’s broader ecosystem of college-going supports.



THEC, in partnership with secondary education and college access organizations, must continuously review tools for effectiveness and identify new opportunities to meet future students' needs. How prospective students prefer to explore higher education changes over time and varies by age cohort (Ruffalo Noel Levitz [RNL], 2024). Higher education must invest in outreach tools and supports to reach Tennesseans from all backgrounds. THEC, in partnership with institutions and education organizations, should continue to build on the successes of programs, such as Navigate Reconnect for adult learners and incarcerated students and [AdviseTN](#) for high school students, to ensure no Tennessean is without a clear pathway to higher education (see Supported objective). Centralized tools must continue to evolve over time, embracing newer technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence, to help students career plan and identify colleges that best meet their needs (Complete College America [CCA], 2023).

Key Metrics: Number of visits to [CollegeforTN.org](#); Number of Trainings on [CollegeforTN.org](#)

### Enhance financial literacy for students and families.

Providing students and families with comprehensive financial literacy education empowers them to make informed decisions about their college and career options, including the time and money investment in college going. Integrating financial education into existing tools (e.g., [CollegeforTN.org](#)) can help make this learning available to all Tennesseans. The U.S. Financial Literacy and Education Commission (2019) identifies best practices, including knowing the target population, establishment of standards and training for staff, and timely information, among other strategies, to improve delivery of financial literacy programming. By offering **understandable** guidance and integrating financial education into advising and centralized resources, THEC, partnering organizations, and secondary and postsecondary advisors, can reduce financial barriers and empower students to make informed choices.

Key Metrics: Indicators from the High School Senior Opinion Survey

**Hannah Rice, “Advise TN assisted me with my education by providing information on all available paths to college, including TN Promise, which allowed me to earn my degree at no cost. Upon graduating, I utilized the TN Promise scholarship by attending Dyersburg State Community College, where I graduated with an associate’s degree in general studies. I transferred to UT Martin in Fall 2022, earning a bachelor’s degree in business administration with a minor in marketing.”**



### Affordable

Tennessee is committed to making higher education affordable for every Tennessean seeking to gain new skills, earn a short-term credential, or pursue a traditional degree. Tennessee ranks second highest among the states investing in per student expenditures of financial aid (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association [SHEEO] SHEF, 2025). State investments in Tennessee’s public colleges over the past decade have helped institutions to reduce reliance on tuition revenues, which has lowered the student burden.<sup>14</sup> At the federal level, the Pell grant helps to make college-going more affordable for Tennesseans. In July 2023, rules took effect to restore Pell grant eligibility for incarcerated individuals (U.S. Department of Education, 2023), a focus population in this Plan, which will help to reduce costs for incarcerated students in eligible four-year programs (community college and TCAT Corrections Education Initiative (CEI) programs are fully state funded).<sup>15</sup> While there is a lot to be proud of, opportunities remain to ensure Tennesseans can afford to complete their education and institutions can sustain financial health.

Through targeted investments, cross-sector **collaboration**, and continuous evaluation, Tennessee aspires to ensure cost is not a barrier to educational advancement. Affordability encompasses a full spectrum of student needs beyond tuition, such as food insecurity, housing instability, and lack of access to transportation or childcare. These external factors can derail a student’s educational journey (see Supported objective) and must be recognized in higher education’s strategies. Affordability is a measure of value, as Tennessee makes higher education more affordable for Tennesseans, it will enhance the return that students and families derive from their investment.

### Maintain and strengthen operating investments in higher education by recognizing institutions’ outcomes and improvement.

Since Tennessee created the [Outcomes-Based Funding \(OBF\)](#) formula in 2010, the State has experienced improvement in institutional performance yielding increased state investments.<sup>16</sup> Tennessee will continue to emphasize growth in student outcomes through the enhancement and iteration of the OBF model. Every five years, THEC and the Statutory Review Committee gather to review and update the formula to ensure it reflects the State’s needs and strategic goals. This model rewards institutions for student success, particularly among focus populations, like low income, adult, and academically underprepared students. Providing stable and predictable funding enables institutions to implement long-term affordability initiatives and student support services to advance the State’s higher education completion and workforce development goals. By tying funding to results, Tennessee ensures that public dollars are used effectively to promote student achievement and institutional accountability, thereby improving value for Tennesseans and the State.

14. THEC analysis of institutionally reported revenues and expenditures data and SHEEO’s 2024 SHEF report.

15. See page 22 for more information about the Corrections Education Initiative (CEI).

16. THEC analysis of [outcomes-based funding formula](#) metrics shows increases in degree production at all levels and growth in graduation rates at four-year colleges.



**Preserve the viability of Tennessee’s financial aid portfolio through strategic communication, collaboration with state partners, and rigorous evaluation of financial aid programs.** Tennessee maintains a robust financial aid portfolio, including the state-funded Tennessee Student Assistance Award (TSAA) and the lottery-funded Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship (TELS) suite of programs. Recent expansions to the portfolio include the introduction of tuition- and fee-free community and technical college programs, Tennessee Promise, and Tennessee Reconnect. Scholarship participation and expenditures have grown over the years in alignment with new and expanded programs (THEC, TELS, 2023-24).

With continuous growth in lottery expenditures, higher education must remain diligent. This requires reporting, communication with state leadership, and enhanced data use to understand future program take-up. Tennessee is one of the few states expected to experience an increase in high school graduates over the next decade (Lane et al., 2024), and the majority of TELS programs support recent high school graduates. THEC collaborates with research partners to conduct rigorous evaluations of financial aid programs to assess impact and sustainability, ensuring that aid dollars are targeted where they are most effective. These strategies can help to ensure that Tennessee’s financial aid system remains viable amid changing student needs and financial conditions.

Key Metrics: Lottery Scholarship Participation and Expenditures

Given the footprint of the [HOPE scholarship](#) and the rapid growth of the [Dual Enrollment Grant](#), THEC is partnered with three different groups to support program evaluation (as of October 2025). The University of Michigan, a multi-year partner, is exploring HOPE scholarship loss and working to understand the impact of HOPE on student completion and workforce outcomes. The Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) is helping to understand the impact of expanded TCAT dual enrollment access for 9th and 10th graders. Additionally, Tennessee is part of MDRC’s Rural Research Center, a multi-state effort aimed at providing insights into dual enrollment across rural Tennessee.

**Explore opportunities to minimize cost to higher education by regularly evaluating processes and identifying places for shared services.** Affordability is not only about reducing costs for students; managing the cost of delivering higher education is equally important. Higher education should regularly evaluate processes to identify inefficiencies and target areas for improvement. Institutions and systems are best positioned to determine the most effective cost-containment strategies (Bell, 2025). While specific institutional strategies will vary, opportunities also exist at the statewide level to evaluate processes and policies that influence costs. Shared services are another option to alleviate costs and improve productivity. Institutions should **innovate** in service delivery, including the use of technology and cross-campus **collaboration**, to improve quality while containing costs (CCA, 2023). These efforts will allow institutions to reinvest savings into student-facing services and affordability initiatives, improving operations and reducing costs.

## Supported

Before a student enrolls in a postsecondary program, they must first navigate confusing and overwhelming college admissions and financial aid processes. Once enrolled, academic success can be shaped by the challenges students face outside the classroom. Across Tennessee, students are facing food and housing insecurity, mental health struggles, transportation gaps, caregiving responsibilities, and financial needs that can derail their progress. These challenges can be especially acute for first-generation, adult, and historically underserved students.

Support for students and institutions is foundational for persistence, completion, and workforce readiness. Support includes guidance through complicated college processes; streamlined access to state and federal benefits; **consistent**, high-quality advising; and clear, flexible pathways to credentials (see *Aligned* cornerstone). A more supported system requires coordination of multiple sources, including secondary and postsecondary institutions, THEC, state agencies, and education organizations, among others. When students receive holistic support and are acknowledged as whole individuals who have responsibilities beyond their academic roles, they demonstrate higher rates of enrollment, persistence, and credential attainment (City University of New York [CUNY], 2024). Better supported students and a more supported system will help Tennessee increase educational attainment which will better outcomes for Tennesseans and Tennessee.

### ***Strengthen student access to basic needs resources by increasing awareness, institutional capacity, and cross-sector coordination.***

A 2025 survey of Tennessee college students determined that 42% are food insecure and 35% lack adequate housing (Fletcher et al., 2025). Students experiencing food insecurity are 43% less likely to graduate than their food-secure peers (Plumb, 2023), and housing insecurity is linked to lower retention and credit accumulation (California, 2020). Only 18% of U.S. colleges, however, offer public benefits coordination (Plumb, 2024), and just 25% use FAFSA data to identify and support eligible students (Duke-Benfield, 2024). Programs like CUNY’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (Kramer et al., 2025) shows that integrating basic needs support into academic pathways improves retention and completion, especially among adults and low-income students. Integrating basic needs support could also increase take-up of support services and create stronger alignment between higher education, workforce development, and human services.

### ***Tennessee can strengthen access to basic needs resources in the following ways:***

- Integrate information about basic needs resources such as housing, food, transportation, childcare, and emergency aid into marketing, orientation, advising, and student support protocols to normalize challenges and reduce stigma.
- Equip faculty and staff with current resource information, referral tools and training on benefits navigation and holistic student support. THEC offers the [Quick Screener](#) for students to self-evaluate potential eligibility for benefits and free online training modules for institutions on 15 federal and state benefits that students can access.
- Higher education institutions can **collaborate** with agencies such as the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and THEC to streamline student access to public benefits and workforce support. For the State and TBR institutions, exploration of unified benefits and aid applications and co-location of services could increase the uptake of eligible resources.

Key Metrics: Share of students facing basic needs insecurity; Share of students receiving benefits from multiple agencies

**Support students with proactive, personalized academic advising to help them achieve their educational and personal goals.** Academic advising is a foundation of student support and is directly linked to improved retention, persistence, and degree completion. Institutions that invest in proactive, data-informed advising models experience stronger student engagement in academic and career planning (Feygin et al., 2022). The University Innovation Alliance (UIA) collaborated with eleven colleges to study proactive advising and key qualities of advising programs, which have demonstrated improved student outcomes, especially among first-generation and underserved students (2021). By embedding personalized advising into the student experience, colleges can help students overcome barriers by providing information to make academic decisions and navigate complex higher education processes with confidence. Proactive advising removes information barriers by ensuring that all students receive timely, tailored guidance aligned with their goals and circumstances. This approach allows advisors to anticipate challenges, provide critical information, and build trust through **consistent, collaborative** relationships, ensuring every student has access to the guidance they need to succeed.

Key Metrics: Share of First-Time Students with an Academic Advisor; Ratio of Students to Academic Advisors

**Colby Lowery, “Tennessee Promise played a pivotal role in my journey at TCAT Crossville. The program enabled me to pursue my education without the burden of the hefty tuition fees. Additionally, Suzanne Rushing, my college advisor, offered invaluable support throughout the entire process. Her guidance, expertise, and unwavering encouragement ensured I stayed on track and ultimately achieved my goal of graduating.”**

17. THEC analysis of fall 2024 end of term enrollment for undergraduate students at public Tennessee community colleges and universities. The university statistic represents the overall part-time status for both LGI and UT universities.

**Ensure all students have access to a student support coach to help achieve their educational goals.** A review by the College Completion Network found that combining academic advising with nonacademic support significantly boosts student outcomes across different student populations (Feygin et al., 2022). Ensuring every student has access to a coach to provide nonacademic support is a proven strategy for improving educational outcomes, especially among adult learners and first-generation students. [Tennessee’s Navigate Reconnect](#) program demonstrated that adult students who worked with a Navigator were 11 percentage points more likely to persist or complete a credential than their peers (Carruthers & Pratt, 2025). Similarly, AdviseTN (THEC, *AdviseTN*, 2024) has shown that personalized counseling increases college enrollment and FAFSA completion. Finally, the [Tennessee Coaching Project](#) has demonstrated the benefits of coaching on various student success outcomes, including persistence (TBR, 2025). These models succeed by focusing on barrier-reduction strategies like financial aid navigation, career planning, and wraparound support.

Key Metrics: Number of Colleges with Student Support Coaches; Ratio of Students to Support Coaches

**Provide flexible pathways and solutions to accommodate part-time and working students.** More than 53% of students at Tennessee’s community colleges and 18% at public universities attend part-time (THEC Analysis, 2025),<sup>17</sup> often due to the need to balance college with work, caregiving, and other responsibilities. Nationally, 81% of part-time students work more than 20 hours per week (Perna & Odle, 2020), which can significantly impact their ability to persist and complete a credential. To support these students, institutions must offer flexible, accelerated pathways that reduce time to degree, lower costs, and recognize prior learning and work experience. Strategies such as evening and weekend classes, modular course formats, stackable credentials, work-based learning opportunities, and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) can help students progress more efficiently. Additionally, providing academic advising and support services outside of traditional business hours is essential to ensuring success for working students.

Key Metrics: Share of Students Working While Enrolled; Number of Accelerated Pathways

## AGILE

To meet the evolving needs of students, institutions, and the workforce, Tennessee higher education must be agile — proactive in its actions, coordinated in its efforts, and informed by data. Tennessee has a robust set of universities, community colleges, and colleges of applied technology and higher education must work better together. To become more agile, and ultimately more valuable, requires intentionality. THEC must leverage its responsibility as the coordinating body for higher education to bring institutions, both public and private, and stakeholders together, build consensus, and **collaboratively** solve problems. These objectives will strengthen Tennessee higher education to meet the challenges of today and anticipate the needs of tomorrow.

### Proactive

The world is constantly changing, and Tennessee higher education needs to anticipate and prepare. Advancements in technology and changing industry trends require higher education to be nimble, adapt, and evolve (Goger et al., 2024). Tennessee can do this by bringing people together, leveraging data, generating knowledge, and using new tools. Higher education must demonstrate it is adaptable and forward-thinking to deliver on its value to students and the State.

**Regularly collect perspectives from the higher education community, including students and college leadership, to understand challenges and emerging practices.** While there are many examples of THEC, systems, and institutions engaging students, staff, and everyday Tennesseans, higher education should be strategic and intentional about gathering and understanding those voices. Tennessee’s colleges are well positioned to facilitate this discussion and serve as a conduit to share with THEC, state agencies, and others. Tennessee’s colleges conduct surveys, which can offer insights into the campus community and perspectives (THEC, *Quality Assurance Funding*, 2025), and these can be leveraged for awareness building and improvement. Further, THEC can promote structured conversations about the opportunities and challenges facing higher education through the establishment of a President’s Council. Examples in other states and within system offices serve as possible models to adopt (Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development, n.d.; TBR, 2023). A President’s Council can strategize on the issues and set priorities, while also serving as a touchpoint for State leadership, THEC Commissioners, and others to hear from colleges. A more proactive enterprise is one that listens to its constituencies and strategizes for the future which will enhance higher education’s value for Tennesseans.

**Leverage cross-sector data and labor market intelligence to anticipate future academic program demand.** To improve higher education’s value, Tennessee must leverage information and partnerships to ensure connectedness to needs. Over the past decade, there has been a concerted effort to bridge education and workforce. Projects, such as [Tennessee’s Supply and Demand Report](#), however, rely primarily on lagged measures to understand labor market needs (THEC, *Labor and Workforce Reports*, 2025). Higher education should incorporate multiple measures of labor market data and partner with employers (and State agencies) to link education and workforce more comprehensively (Cleary & Van Noy, 2014). Labor market data can be used to address job vacancy and alignment goals, which can resemble a range of activities within the education enterprise, including advising, integration of experiential learning, instruction, and program development, among others (Cleary & Van Noy, 2014). To maximize value for Tennessee, institutions, THEC, and state agency partners must anticipate workforce needs to ensure academic programs offer the skills and experiences necessary to thrive in the forthcoming workforce.



**Promote and elevate academic research to propel State growth and achieve improved societal impact.**

Academic research is a critical part of many institutions’ missions. In Tennessee, academic research represents over \$1.97 billion in research and development (R&D) expenditures in FY 2023 (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2024). R&D at institutions advances knowledge, makes discoveries, and enhances student experience (Association of Public Land-grant Universities, n.d.). The State should harness the R&D strengths of its universities to accelerate **innovation**, attract workforce investment, and propel future economic development. Higher education must partner with state agencies, like the Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD), to identify priority R&D focus areas. In turn, the State should strategically invest in universities to fuel further R&D, taking inspiration from peer states (e.g., Alabama’s Research and Development Enhancement Fund; Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, n.d.). Elevating and investing in academic research will enable Tennessee institutions to **innovate** for a prosperous future.

Key Metrics: Research and Development Dollars Awarded

**Coordinated**

Tennessee higher education must be better coordinated to maximize student and institutional success. Institutions and state agencies often operate in silos, which results in duplicated efforts, inefficiencies, and missed opportunities to improve outcomes. By fostering **collaboration** and building consensus across higher education, Tennessee can align definitions; streamline processes; and promote **consistent**, transparent support for students and institutions. A well-coordinated system strengthens efficiency and reliability, ensuring that Tennessee students have clear pathways to success, institutions operate effectively, and the state maximizes the value of its higher education investments.

**STUDENTS WITH HISTORIES OF INCARCERATION**

Education is a powerful tool for reducing recidivism. Of the approximately 41,000 Tennesseans currently incarcerated (Tennessee Department of Corrections [TDOC], 2025), it is estimated that 95% will eventually return to their communities (Spears & Melton, 2019) and nearly 35% of those with felony convictions are reincarcerated within three years (TDOC 2025). Higher education can change that trajectory: incarcerated individuals who participate in college programs are 42.5% less likely to recidivate than those who do not (Sanders, 2023). Moreover, postsecondary education increases post-release employment by 20.7% (Sanders, 2023).

The Correctional Education Investment (CEI), launched in 2019, established TCAT and community college programs in state prisons. As of 2025, 35 TCAT and community college programs have launched across 11 prison facilities (Franz, 2025).<sup>18</sup> The CEI initiative has fostered collaboration across

TDOC, THEC, the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), and the Tennessee Higher Education in Prison Initiative (THEI). This partnership led to the formation of the Tennessee Prison College Coalition (TPCC), a statewide network aligning correctional education with broader higher education and workforce development systems (Franz, 2025).

Over 2,100 students have enrolled in CEI programs since 2019, earning 259 community college and TCAT awards (TBR, personal communication, November 4, 2025). These programs are strategically aligned with regional labor market needs to support successful reentry and employment. Although long-term recidivism data is still emerging, early indicators are promising. Only 2% of THEI program graduates are re-arrested, re-convicted, or return to prison within a three-year period after release (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2025).

18. In addition to CEI funded programs, several Tennessee colleges and universities (public and private) provide educational opportunities to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals.

**The Plan identifies four strategies for strengthening the work of reaching and supporting more people with history of incarceration in Tennessee:**



**INSTITUTIONAL SELF-ASSESSMENT**

Encourage institutions to evaluate their accessibility and readiness to support incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students.



**ENGAGE NON-PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS**

Conduct a statewide survey to gather insights from colleges not currently involved in correctional education, identifying barriers and opportunities for engagement.



**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Convene training sessions for college staff focused on serving incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students and fostering inclusive campus environments.



**EXPAND HIGHER EDUCATION INVOLVEMENT**

Host state-level convenings to build momentum, share best practices, and expand institutional participation in correctional education.

### Collaborate with state agency partners and authorizing bodies to align definitions and clearly define who is operating in Tennessee.

Tennessee needs clear and **consistent** criteria for what counts as *postsecondary education*, including institutions authorized to operate by THEC, those eligible to participate in state or federal programming, or those accredited by recognized bodies. Working with state agency partners and authorizing bodies to align definitions and streamline processes will strengthen relationships and identify efficiencies in shared practices. Defining the scope of postsecondary education and creating an inventory of the full range of providers, including public, private, and proprietary, will ensure that all higher education is engaged in meeting the State's goals. This effort includes capturing institutions participating in programs such as the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA),<sup>19</sup> apprenticeship programs registered with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD), on-the-job training providers, and institutions receiving Title IV funding or Veterans Benefits, for example. By inventorying providers, Tennessee can better leverage their assets for Tennesseans, reduce undue duplication, increase **consistency**, and ensure policies and practices are implemented more effectively.

Key Metrics: Higher Education Provider Inventory

### Regularly gather higher education to promote information sharing, shared understanding, and problem resolution.

Frequent gathering can provide opportunities to highlight and replicate best practices, strengthen relationships across institutions, and create space for timely discussions on emerging challenges. By making these gatherings a **consistent** practice, Tennessee demonstrates its commitment to **collaboration** and continuous improvement. Students and institutions both benefit from a more connected system that responds quickly to challenges and builds collective momentum toward **ambitious** goals.

19. NC-SARA is an agreement, among member states, that streamlines regulations pertaining to distance education programs. More information can be found here: <https://nc-sara.org/about-nc-sara/>

### Cultivate and expand the intersection between state agencies and higher education to maximize efficiencies, enhance shared services, and shared resources.

A clear mapping of the intersections between higher education and state agencies allows for the identification of overlapping responsibilities, shared services, and opportunities to improve efficiency. More specifically, THEC should continue and grow its relationships with TDLWD, TNECD, TDOC, Tennessee's Department of Education (TDOE), and Tennessee's Department of Human Services (TDHS) to build awareness and improve agility of our processes and practices. This strategy not only highlights areas where processes can be streamlined but also ensures that resources are maximized for the benefit of students and families. Tennessee can reduce unnecessary barriers, simplify the student experience, and strengthen cross-agency alignment. This strategy builds a more efficient, **student-centered** system that is more **understandable** and proactive in meeting current and future needs.

As an example, the State Board of Education (SBOE) and THEC should regularly convene, both as staff and as boards, to address shared opportunities and issues. A strong relationship between secondary and higher education will improve value, as higher education relies upon secondary education to adequately prepare students, and secondary education relies upon higher education to adequately prepare teachers. With the expansion of early postsecondary opportunities, where secondary education stops and where higher education starts is no longer distinct. As the SBOE and THEC's executive directors sit on each other's boards, so too should the agencies and boards convene and work closely with each other. This strategy builds a more efficient, **student-centered** system that is more **understandable** and proactive in meeting current and future needs.

Key Metrics: Engagement Plan for interactions with Key State Agency partners; Number of Joint Meetings between THEC and SBOE

### Data Informed

Tennessee maintains a robust data infrastructure which enables understanding of conditions across the education to workforce continuum and helps see where we need to go. While significant progress has been made over the years to improve data quality and access, opportunities remain to leverage this information for insights and improvement. Higher education needs access to real-time, localized labor market data to ensure that Tennessee is prepared to meet the needs of today and tomorrow. Data systems need to work together instead of operating in silos with different definitions and practices. Data needs to become even more accessible and packaged in useful formats for decision-makers.

Achieving a more data-informed system will allow Tennessee higher education to make evidence-based decisions and empower students and families to understand what they're getting for their time and investment. For higher education to become more valuable, individuals need to understand higher education's value. Tennessee has significant data resources at the institution, system, and state level and it must improve how it leverages data for insights and improvement.

The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE), TDLWD, and THEC, represent the three originating agencies to Tennessee's statewide longitudinal data system, known as Tennessee Data Analytics for Transparency and Accountability (TN DATA). As of December 2025, thirteen organizations contribute to TN DATA which allows the State to observe student progression from elementary school into the Tennessee workforce. These data connections are critical to understanding how Tennesseans migrate across the continuum of education and work. For more information check out [TN DATA dashboards](#).



### Lead regular convenings of cross-functional teams to expand, improve, and utilize information to resolve problems and share insights.

Building dashboards and creating reports does not necessarily result in policy transformation. Bringing stakeholders together to digest and grapple with information will increase awareness and serve as a forum for problem resolution. THEC, in partnership with college data stewards, should continue the critical data issue (CDI) framework,<sup>20</sup> to evaluate data quality and usage. The CDI workgroups allow THEC to understand the availability and consistency of data and **collaborate** with institutions, and other partners, on practical, sustainable solutions. Higher education needs to take a step forward from sharing data for data's sake to leveraging data to understand and to tell a story. The answer is not necessarily more data or more dashboards. THEC should build upon critical data issues to gather campus constituencies on topically focused challenges driven by data and research. Higher education must recognize areas for improvement and implement effective strategies to get more students across the finish line to their degree.

Key Metrics: Number of Critical Data Issue Working Group meetings

20. Critical data issues are jointly identified by THEC and data providers. In 2024-25, working groups developed recommendations for integrating out of state Pell eligibility data into regular data collections and explored the establishment of a course level data collection at the state level. These working groups took place as part of THEC's data governance program.

**Develop and execute a research agenda, with input from the higher education community, to enhance understanding of the challenges facing higher education and evaluate programmatic efforts to improve conditions.** A research agenda will help prioritize and organize THEC’s evaluative efforts to ensure time and energy is spent on the most impactful work. THEC has leveraged partnerships with academic researchers across Tennessee and beyond to provide rigorous insights on program operations and outcomes. UT, TBR, and institutions conduct research to test and evaluate initiatives, such as TBR’s Coaching project, which is piloting coaching for learning support students and adult learners (TBR, 2025). Partner agencies, like the Office of Evidence and Impact (OEI), have created a Learning Agenda to structure research and evaluation for state government. THEC should build upon previous strategies to help identify the questions that are posing the biggest challenges to help drive rigorous analysis and evaluation. Facilitating the creation of a joint agenda and strategizing together on priorities can create efficiencies and support greater awareness and success.

**Implement data governance.** Data governance refers to how decisions are made about the information being used to drive operations and policy. A data governance program can promote clear concepts of data ownership and stewardship; strengthen communication between stakeholders throughout the data lifecycle; and enhance the quality, **consistency**, and timeliness of information used to drive higher education policy and practice (National Forum for Education Statistics, 2011). A critical challenge identified throughout the strategic planning process centered on data awareness—institutional leadership, staff, students and families, and others do not have the information they need. Worse, they do not know what exists or how they can use it. Several institutions in Tennessee provide professional development to staff to build familiarity with data and reports and higher education should build upon these efforts to encourage and guide institutional and THEC staff to own and use data in their work. Establishing a data governance program can create the structures and documentation to support these goals and ensure clear and **consistent** processes for using and sharing this information (National Forum for Education Statistics, 2011). With the vast amounts of data in Tennessee and the increasing demand to make it more accessible, higher education needs a clear and safe way to manage it.

## CALL TO ACTION

The Tennessee 2025-2035 Strategic Higher Education Master Plan is higher education’s promise that every Tennessean can earn a credential that leads to lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee. The Plan is a roadmap to improved alignment, clearer paths, and greater collaboration. To meet this promise requires everyone—institutions, THEC, state agencies, and education organizations—working together to enhance higher education’s value and deliver on its promise.

### Disseminate the Plan

Upon approval of the Plan, THEC, in partnership with institutions and systems, will initiate a series of presentations and communication efforts to distribute the Plan and its meaning within and across institutions, education organizations, state leadership and agencies, and the public. For this Plan to have its intended impact, it needs to be known across the State.

## Measurement

Alongside the distribution, higher education leaders and data stewards must come together to identify and implement measures of progress on the Plan’s objectives and strategies. Because this Plan is for higher education in Tennessee, inclusive of THEC, systems, and institutions, it requires intentional scaffolding for data collection, discussion, and reporting. A preview of the Plan and measurement needs was shared at THEC’s second annual Data and Research Forum. Over the next year (2026), THEC will convene campus data stewards to co-develop measures for institution-, system-, and statewide progress on the Plan’s objectives. These conversations will yield a series of measures to illustrate how higher education needs to prioritize, iterate, and evolve to better individual and statewide success. THEC will develop an annual report (or dashboard) to document these measures and the State’s progress. This will be used to guide annual Statutory Committee meetings and, at minimum, annual updates to the Commission.

### Application of the Plan

As the Strategic Plan for Higher Education in Tennessee, this Plan must be statewide and inform the activities and strategic planning at Tennessee’s institutions. As the front line to Tennessee students and families, institutions must embody the vision that every Tennessean can earn a credential that leads to lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee. In 2026, THEC will work with institution and system partners to address application of the Plan.<sup>21</sup> Tennessee’s diverse array of institutions are assets and prior statewide master plans dedicated sections to documenting institution mission, distinctiveness, and role within the broader higher education system. THEC will revise institution mission profile expectations through direct dialogue with individual campuses and leadership. Without institution and system support, this Plan cannot work. These conversations will document individualized application of the Plan and serve as a space to strengthen relationships, understand challenges, and co-develop solutions together, as envisioned in the Agile cornerstone.

## Policy Alignment

To have the impact of a statewide strategic plan, the Plan must influence and inform all facets of higher education policy, programs, and practices. THEC will continue to align major policies, like new academic program approval and capital improvement requests to the Plan. The Outcomes-Based Funding (OBF) formula will continue to serve as a lever to further the goals of the Plan, as dictated in statute.

## Statutory Committee Reimagined

Finally, the Plan must be regularly assessed and iterated upon to ensure relevance and responsiveness. As envisioned in the Agile cornerstone, THEC must use its coordinating responsibility to bring parties together, which includes a reimagining of the annual Statutory Review Committee to focus on furthering the master plan.<sup>22</sup> This group should receive annual updates on the State’s progress on the Plan, identify emerging challenges and needs, and strategize where higher education needs to adjust in the coming year. THEC will work with Statutory Committee members to establish an annual cadence for this meeting. This gathering will inform updates and communications to the THEC Commission as THEC staff prepares for the next year of Plan implementation.

## MOVING FORWARD

Tennessee higher education is the key to ensuring that **every Tennessean can earn a credential leading to lifelong success and a stronger Tennessee.** The opportunity to act is now — higher education’s ability to demonstrate what it offers and improve upon the value of those offerings will cement its role in creating success for Tennesseans and Tennessee. The 2025-2035 Strategic Higher Education Master Plan charts the course for how higher education can meet this moment and prepare Tennessee to thrive in an uncertain future.

21. Pursuant to Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-7-202(e), concurrent with the adoption of a revised master plan and in consultation with respective governing boards, the Commission shall approve institutional mission statements which provide the State with distinctive details about each of Tennessee’s public institutions.

22. Per Tenn. Code Ann. §49-7-202(g), this committee is to be convened annually regarding the strategic direction of higher education.

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## PROCESS FOR DEVELOPMENT

Throughout 2025, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) held a series of presentations, meetings, and focus groups to gather perspectives, discuss issues, and identify a path forward for higher education in Tennessee. This strategic planning process comprised three phases and engaged a wide array of stakeholders to promote buy-in and shared ownership in enhancing value for the higher education enterprise.

Phase I began with a survey of principal stakeholders and selected interviews which included higher education, state government, Commission members, and education organizations. This initial phase culminated in presentations to the Commission and the Statutory Review Committee.<sup>23</sup>

In phase II, THEC staff, in partnership with Education Strategy Group (ESG), hosted five day-long topical workgroups guided by the information collected in phase I. These workgroups covered topics including Defining the North Star Goal, Institution Finance and Affordability, Access and Success, Emerging Workforce Needs, and Evidence Building in Higher Education. THEC hosted eight focus groups to hear directly from important constituency groups about their experiences. THEC staff also met directly with members of the 114th Tennessee General Assembly, including leaders of the House and Senate education committees.

In phase III, THEC staff collated information from these activities and created the Master Plan outline, which was distributed and presented to the Commission, the Statutory Review Committee, the State Board of Education, campus stakeholder groups, and others, throughout summer 2025 to collect feedback and refine. The Higher Education Master Plan outline identified the priorities and strategies to propel Tennessee toward a more valuable higher education system.

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