



TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

REGULAR CALENDAR ITEM: VI.

MEETING DATE: May 19, 2022
SUBJECT: Navigate Reconnect Overview
ITEM TYPE: Informational
ACTION RECOMMENDATION: NA

SUMMARY

Navigate Reconnect is the regionally-based arm of the Tennessee Reconnect initiative, which provides institution-neutral college navigation services to adult Tennesseans who want to return to or enroll in postsecondary education for the first time. Navigate Reconnect also serves as the hub of local resources including childcare options and affordable transportation for adult learners. Navigate Reconnect Regional Directors and Navigators are supported by state-level staff at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission to meet Reconnectors' needs, while also maximizing the capacity of local Tennessee Reconnect Navigators to provide tailored one-on-one support to Reconnectors.

THE NAVIGATE RECONNECT MODEL

Navigate Reconnect's structure is based on the advising model from the Graduate Network, a national organization focused on illuminating solutions to the educational inequities facing economically vulnerable adults and activate pathways for adults to achieve their educational goals. Tennessee was the first state in the nation to scale the model statewide. The state of Tennessee is divided into three regions, and Navigators are assigned to counties based on Community College Service Areas. The Graduate Network model is designed to organize regional resources to support adult students in returning to college and earn their college degree or credential. This model is supported and organized around four pillars: *Impact Services*, *Partnerships*, *Messaging* and *Sustainability*. Navigate Reconnect has enhanced this model and the 4 Pillars to meet the needs of Reconnectors in Tennessee.

Impact Services

All Reconnect Regions provide impact services that serve Reconnectors at every stage of the college-going process, to and through to graduation. The core of the impact services is navigation services provided to Reconnectors by Reconnect Navigators. These services include, but are not limited to, one-on-one phone calls, texts and e-mails, sharing of community and institution resources as well as reminders of important deadlines and milestones in the college-going process. Navigate Reconnect Regions may also offer workshops and seminars to groups of adults to provide information and develop affinity groups.

Partnerships

The Partnerships Pillar includes the critical work of engaging workforce, colleges, community and state partners in supporting Tennessee's Reconnectors to the completion of a degree or credential. Reconnect Regional Directors work to build partnerships in each region and will create a sustainable system for adult learners to access postsecondary options.

Many Reconnectors require a variety of wrap-around services to ensure college can fit into their lives. These services may include assistance through the college application process, but also access to childcare and transportation options. Navigate Reconnect does not have the capacity to meet all these needs, nor should it. Alternatively, Navigate Reconnect serves at the clearinghouse for all these services. Regional Directors are charged with finding these resources and then brokering partnerships which allow for a warm handoff between the Navigator and the resource (which could include a state agency, community organization and/or institution).

Partnerships are essential in each Reconnect Region to provide comprehensive and wrap-around support to Reconnectors, as well as to raise awareness of the state economic imperative of adult degree attainment. Each Navigate Reconnect Region develops and maintains numerous partnerships. These partnerships include:

- Higher education institutions
- Businesses & industries
- Local government
- State agencies
- Workforce & economic development (American Job Centers)
- Community organizations and social services

Messaging

The Messaging Pillar includes the work of communicating regionally about Navigate Reconnect and available Reconnect resources. Messaging is determined collaboratively between each Reconnect Region and the Navigate Reconnect Central Office, and leverages state resources to create a localized messaging strategy.

Messaging holds an important distinction as a Navigate Reconnect Pillar because communication is essential for both the provision of services and for the sustainability of Reconnect in each Region and Tennessee; for adults to access Navigate Reconnect services, they must know that the services exist, and to build partnerships, each Region must be able to articulate the benefits that Navigate Reconnect offer.

Messaging objectives include:

- Expanding Tennessee Reconnect and establishing Navigate Reconnect brand recognition.
- Communicating to community leaders and stakeholders about Tennessee Reconnect as well as Navigate Reconnect's local effort and successes.
- Articulating how Navigate Reconnect complements and operationalizes the mission of Tennessee Reconnect.
- Telling the story of Navigate Reconnect and the impact it has made in the local community.
- Increasing awareness of resources for Reconnectors.

Sustainability

While sustainability is often associated with funding, Navigate Reconnect is a THEC/TSAC program and funded by State appropriations, and therefore, it is not appropriate to fundraise or solicit funds. Therefore, sustainability is focused on creating a stable and respected presence in the community which is important to the longevity of the program. Each Navigate Reconnect Region (specifically the Director) acts as a connecting point for local employers, local institutions of higher education, and prospective adult learners, working to create awareness of the benefits of adult completion as a strategy for economic development and a source for workforce talent. Each Reconnect Region works to grow their services and expertise through support, idea-

sharing and collaboration across regions. Navigate Reconnect Central Office staff provide structure and support in messaging, technical assistance, capacity building, feedback loops, marketing support, and additional resources to serve Reconnectors.

RECONNECT NAVIGATOR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Tennessee Reconnect Navigators can guide adults through college processes. If a Reconnector does not know where they want to complete a degree, or they need some additional help in navigating their options, assistance filling out forms, and getting access to tools to help them manage their time as they attend college, they can talk to a Tennessee Reconnect Navigator in their community. Tennessee Reconnect Navigators are single points of contact that can help Reconnectors navigate the path to college. They provide free advising, career exploration tools, assistance in understanding financial aid and college costs, and they can help Reconnectors select a college and a major that fits their interests and career goals. Navigators understand and effectively communicate the admissions and financial aid process at the varying Tennessee institutions; know how to connect postsecondary degrees and credentials with career goals; and can decipher and solve problems that may arise for a Reconnector in navigating college systems and the college process. Their work also includes knowing when and whom to refer Reconnectors to when issues such as student loan default or poor past academic history arise. Once the Reconnectors enroll in college, Reconnect Navigators will continue to support, guide, and encourage them until they graduate.

Reconnect Navigators create relationships with Reconnectors that help the Reconnectors recognize and understand their maximum educational potential. Reconnect Navigators serve as guides, advocates, referral agents, cheerleaders, and help Reconnectors solve problems and overcome challenges in their postsecondary journey. Navigators also assist Reconnectors in defining their own education goals and creating a plan that clearly leads the Reconnector to meeting his or her goals. The navigation process works best when it is ongoing and both parties have agency in the process. Reconnectors are most successful when they take an active role in establishing goals, developing their plan, and take ownership of the decision-making process.

Re-Entry Reconnect Navigators

In 2019, Governor Lee announced the Correction Education Investment with the goal of providing a full landscape of educational opportunities to those incarcerated in Tennessee prisons - ranging from the opportunity to complete a high school credential all the way through the completion of a postsecondary credential. Navigators specializing in working with incarcerated Reconnectors is a large part of that initiative. Three Reconnect Re-Entry Navigators work in nine state prisons with individuals who have not earned a postsecondary credential to connect them with an institution in the community where they can begin or continue their progress towards a degree. In addition to specialized services geared to this student population, Re-Entry Navigators provide the same services traditional Reconnectors receive. Re-Entry Navigators serve as a bridge between postsecondary programming in the prison and the community. Financial aid applications, institution applications, and course selection are all supported by a Re-Entry Navigator.

HOW STUDENTS CONNECT TO RECONNECT NAVIGATORS

Reconnectors can initially engage with Navigate Reconnect through several different avenues including emailing the centralized Navigate Reconnect email address, completing the centralized intake form, completing the Tennessee Reconnect Grant application, or directly contacting a local Reconnect Region via phone or local events. Regardless of where they enter, basic intake information is collected through a

standardized intake form or Tennessee Reconnect Application. Reconnectors are welcomed to Navigate Reconnect through an intake interview with a Navigator at the THEC office. After the initial intake interview, the Reconnector is assigned a local Navigator who will support them through the college process to graduation, providing them support and nudging through the college-going process.

Incarcerated Reconnectors access services through requests to corrections officers at the prisons in which they are housed. Navigators present to various classes within the prison, at town hall meetings, and through closed circuit video commercials for the purpose of informing potential Reconnectors of the services they provide.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

In addition to the direct services provided by Navigate Reconnect, the THEC Adult Learner Initiatives team partners with other organizations and agencies to streamline access to additional state and community support resources, and to equip Tennessee residents with information they can share with potential Reconnectors.

Reconnect Ambassadors

In the service of outreach and support, THEC created the Reconnect Ambassador program in 2016. A Tennessee Reconnect Ambassador is an individual with ties to their neighbors, coworkers, and community members and who provides encouragement and support to adults they know who are interested in finishing a college degree or credential. In addition to becoming an active player in an adult learner's support network, Ambassadors will ultimately connect interested adults to Reconnect Navigators, institutional representatives, or online resources to assist them with taking the next step of developing a plan of action for returning to college or going for the first time.

Reconnect Ambassadors identify potential Reconnectors; talk to and encourage potential Reconnectors about completing college; and refer potential Reconnectors to Reconnect Navigators, institutional representatives, and resources.

THEC has partnered with the Tennessee Departments of Labor and Workforce Development, Human Services, and Transportation, as well as employers, chambers of commerce, and non-profit organizations to train over 2000 Tennesseans as Reconnect Ambassadors.

Tennessee Reconnect Success Collaborative

In an effort to address the barriers identified by adult learners in persisting and completing their chosen credentials, THEC, through the support of a grant from the ECMC Foundation, created the Tennessee Reconnect Success Collaborative in partnership with the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), the Tennessee Departments of Human Services (TDHS) and Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWFD) to identify, combine, and then connect adults to public benefits available to adult Tennesseans to provide support to adult learners as they complete their credentials. The goal of this Collaborative is to expand partnerships to provide wrap-around support via public benefits to adult learners using Reconnect services. Through the TRSC THEC is focused on 1) expanding and formalizing partnerships between state agencies to increase awareness of Reconnect, 2) developing new training components for college staff, Reconnect Navigators, and employees of partner state agencies that incorporate needs of underserved adult student populations and highlight the public benefits available across state agencies, and 3) creating a digital database that houses information

about existing public benefits, resources, and supports for staff working with adult learners to better connect them to benefits they may be eligible for while pursuing their degree.

TN Quick Screener

The TN Quick Screener is an online tool that allows users to be screened for six key support services, as well as information about four additional programs. These key support services include SNAP, TANF, WIC, Lifeline, Earned Income Tax Credit, and Child Tax Credit. It also provides information about WIOA, Smart Steps Childcare Payment Assistance, Tennessee Reconnect Grant, and SNAP Employment and Training. The tool has been developed through funding from the ECMC Foundation and in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the Tennessee Department of Human Services.

Reconnect Navigators will use the Quick Screener during the Reconnector intake process and pilot a referral process with specific referral contacts amongst service providers at partner agencies. The Quick Screener may also be used by service providers in other state agency programs and by postsecondary institution partners. Cross-trainings are intended to ensure that Navigators, state agencies, and other engaged partners are familiar with all the services covered in the Quick Screener so that they can make informed recommendations to users and referrals to other agencies.