



TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

REGULAR CALENDAR ITEM: I.

MEETING DATE: July 28, 2022
SUBJECT: 2023-24 Agency Strategic Initiatives
ITEM TYPE: Action
ACTION RECOMMENDATION: Approval

BACKGROUND

In August, the Department of Finance and Administration initiates its annual budget process by soliciting budget improvement requests from each state agency for the upcoming fiscal year. To be considered for funding priority, these requests should be supported by evidence, with justified, clear linkages to departmental goals, or be deemed mandatory by state or federal law, court order, or other contractual obligations.

The Commission has traditionally considered and recommended agency strategic initiative investment requests in November, along with appropriation recommendations for all higher education institutions. This year, for the FY2023-24 cycle, agency requests are due to the Department of Finance and Administration by Friday, September 9. To meet the requirements of this deadline, THEC staff will present for consideration and recommendation the agency strategic initiatives earlier than in prior years. All other appropriation recommendations will continue to be presented to the Commission for recommendation at the November meeting.

RECOMMENDED AGENCY STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

This year's recommendations encompass six strategic initiatives from across the agency, totaling \$3,270,000 in recurring requests and \$6,000,000 in nonrecurring. Attachment A shows summary statements on each request. Below are in-depth backgrounds on each initiative as well as how each aligns with THEC strategy as defined by statute or the agency's *2015-2025 Master Plan*, *Master Plan Update 2020*, or *Strategic Financial Plan*.

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Initiative: Advise TN
Bureau: Access and Outreach
Division: College Access and Success
Request: \$925,000 (recurring)

Advise TN is a college advising and capacity building program administered by THEC. Driven by the belief that every student has the potential to attend and thrive in postsecondary education and training, Advise TN aims to increase the number of Tennesseans accessing higher education by partnering with high schools and currently providing advising services to over 12,000 junior and senior students across Tennessee. The 28 Advise TN partner high schools were selected through a competitive application. To be eligible, all high schools were required to have a college-going rate below the state average.

This budget request will allow the Advise TN program to increase the number of advisors available to serve students from 30 advisors to 34 advisors. By doing so, Advise TN will achieve a more appropriate student-to-advisor ratio of 250 students to one advisor (recommended ratio for high school counseling by the American School Counseling Association). Currently, there are schools that have as many as 500 students assigned to one advisor. This change will allow for higher quality and individualized college and career student advising. Additionally, the proposed budget improvement allows THEC to adjust advisor salaries to an increased market competitive level, allowing THEC to continue to identify and retain high-quality staff focused on providing high-quality, high-impact student services.

Alignment to THEC Strategy: The *Master Plan Update 2020* highlights Advise TN as a strategy to expand access to higher education and clearly articulates the state’s aim to increase college-going across distressed portions of the state and FAFSA filing statewide. Prior to the pandemic, the overall college-going rate at Advise TN schools increased while the state average decreased. Sixteen Advise TN high schools have performed better than the rest of Tennessee when comparing Class of 2021 college-going to pre-program data. Two examples include Lake County (a distressed county) and Van Buren County (an at-risk county). Both counties saw increases in college-going over the last five years, 27 and 13 percentage points, respectively. The state experienced a decrease of 11 percentage points over the same period.

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Initiative: HBCU Success and Tennessee Promise Summer Bridge Programs

Bureau: Access and Outreach

Division: HBCU Success & College Access and Success Division

Request: \$1,125,000 (recurring)

In 2019, THEC provided one-time funding to Tennessee’s five residential undergraduate Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) to establish or expand an existing summer bridge program. The programs offered college-level coursework and instruction to academically prepare incoming first-year students, resulting in an accumulated 945 credit hours towards graduation by all participants. A portion of this FY24 request (\$625,000) would build on the success of that pilot program by offering the opportunity for the five institutions to submit proposals for funding of similar student success-based programs on an ongoing basis.

The second portion of this request (\$500,000) will provide recurring funding to the Summer Bridge Program and the Summer Institute, two summer bridge programs currently operated by tnAchieves on a nonrecurring state grant. The Summer Bridge Program is a three-week academic program open to any Tennessee Promise student seeking to begin college more academically and socially prepared. Free to students, the program is effective in familiarizing students with college by exposing them to professors and building a peer cohort. The Summer Institute, a targeted six-week, credit-bearing program that amplifies Southwest Tennessee Community College’s Summer Bridge Program, helps TN Promise students eliminate need and earn nine credit hours upon program completion. The grant provides a last-dollar scholarship to offset summer tuition and mandatory fees. Both TN Promise Summer Bridge and the Summer Institute increase the likelihood of seamless student enrollment from high school to postsecondary education.

Alignment to THEC Strategy: The components and goals of the HBCU Success Summer Bridge program are explicitly mentioned in the *2015-2025 Master Plan* (reducing the gap in racial postsecondary attainment; cross-sector [public and private HBCU] contribution to the Drive to 55); the *Master Plan Update 2020* (emphasizing

specific student success best practices); and the *Strategic Financial Plan* (participation leads to earlier financial aid intervention to ensure TSAA access to the most-likely eligible populations; reducing time-to-degree through summer coursework; and the capability of development of innovations such as partnership with Department of Human Services to provide access/awareness of federal benefits).

The Tennessee Promise Summer Bridge Programs align with the *Readiness and Access* priorities outlined in the *Master Plan Update 2020*. The *Master Plan Update 2020* states that improving the number of students who graduate from high school prepared for postsecondary education should be a priority of the agency's work. The document goes on to state that THEC/TSAC staff will work to increase college-going, especially in Tennessee's most economically distressed communities. Nearly all (99%) students who attend the Tennessee Promise Summer Bridge program enroll in higher education. Of those that enroll, 67 percent persist from fall to fall (compared to a 50 percent benchmark), and 21 percent graduate within three years (compared to a 26 percent benchmark). Among the students who participated in Summer Institute in 2021, 100% eliminated the need for remedial education and 100% earned nine credit hours upon program completion. All Summer Institute students enrolled in college. Sustaining these two programs support THEC's strategic vision for ensuring more students are successful in attaining a degree or credential.

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Initiative: Navigate Reconnect
Bureau: Access and Outreach
Division: Adult Learner Initiatives
Request: \$760,000 (recurring)

Navigate Reconnect is the regionally-based outreach and student support arm of the Tennessee Reconnect initiative and grant program, providing institution-neutral college navigation services to adult Tennesseans who want to return to or enroll in postsecondary education for the first time. Navigators support with enrollment processes, answer questions as trusted advisors, and serve as the hub of navigating on-campus resources and off-campus 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 request includes: adding five Reconnect Navigators to improve Navigator capacity and decreasing the average Navigator-to-student ratio from 600 to one to 425 to one (recommended ratio by the national Graduate Network); increasing Navigators salaries to improved market competitive levels; and implementing a mass texting platform to effectively and efficiently communicate with interested students.

Alignment to THEC Strategy: The *Master Plan Update 2020* identifies outreach to adults through the Navigate Reconnect and Reconnect Ambassador efforts as a best practice and sets a goal to collaborate with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development (DLWFD), Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Correction (TDOC) to ensure adults have access to resources needed to pursue their college goals. In response to that goal, Navigate Reconnect has reached out to 738,000 Unemployment Insurance applicants in partnership with DLWFD, 3,186 of whom have applied for the Reconnect Grant as a result. Navigate Reconnect has also served nearly 1,800 incarcerated learners, with numbers growing monthly. Increasing our capacity to serve more adult Tennesseans, to reach out to and communicate with them more effectively and efficiently aligns with THEC's vision for its Future of Work, as detailed in the *Master Plan Update 2020*. While adult college enrollment has declined as a result of the pandemic, Navigate Reconnect receives

200-300 new inquiries from prospective adult learners monthly, indicating a sustained interest in pursuing a postsecondary credential when “the time is right.”

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Initiative: Director of Data Strategy
Bureau: Policy, Planning and Research
Division: Research and Strategy
Request: \$150,000 (recurring)

This new position, the Director of Data Strategy, would oversee data strategy, improving understanding and usability of the data collected on a semi-annual basis from systems. The position would convene institutional research (IR) and registrar staff, participate in system-level IR meetings, and review data dictionaries for accuracy and clarity through a policy lens. This role will elevate Research and Strategy reporting practices by streamlining and automating queries and incorporating validation checks to improve efficiencies and maximize staff time for new analyses and research needs. In addition, this role will facilitate the design and guidance of large-scale data projects and support the agency’s efforts to measure key performance indicators. Finally, this new position would serve as a translator and connector between policy and data systems, synthesizing and streamlining existing practices in consistent and efficient ways.

Alignment to THEC Strategy: This position will formalize an important but often unrealized part of the work connecting our agency priorities and initiatives to the data we collect. The position would reinforce THEC’s efforts to manage a premier student information system (per Tenn. Code Annotated §49-4-903(c)), serving as a bridge between THEC data end-users and the well-established Information Systems team, allowing policymaking end-users to push new policy initiatives informed by data. Most specifically, the creation of this role will enhance THEC’s ability to craft goals and measure success in Master Plan (MP) metrics (as required by Tenn. Code Annotated §49-7-202(d)(1)), especially new metrics, by identifying gaps in the data system and where data may need to improve or change. This new position will foster conversations between THEC and data originators, increasing awareness of our MP measures and facilitating institution buy-in on MP goals. Finally, this role will help foster data maturity across THEC/TSAC, maximizing familiarity with the data we have available and empowering staff to use it.

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Initiative: Reverse Transfer Program
Bureau: Academic Affairs and Student Success
Division: Academic Affairs
Request: \$310,000 (recurring)

In FY 2014, the State of Tennessee provided one-time funding to develop a statewide Reverse Transfer system. Reverse transfer is defined as a process that allows a student who completed a minimum of 15 hours at a community college and transferred to a participating Tennessee four-year public or private institution to combine college credits from both institutions and apply them toward an associate degree. Reverse Transfer is uniquely aligned with Tennessee’s statewide goal of increasing the educational attainment level of its citizens. The development of the Reverse Transfer System has been very successful with the awarding of over 5,500 associate degrees since 2015. To ensure the continued success of the program, this request for Reverse Transfer would permanently fund contracted services, dedicated server space and one staff position.

Alignment to THEC Strategy: The Complete College Tennessee Act set the stage for legislation, passed by the General Assembly in 2012, to authorize reverse articulation and transfer agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions. Reverse transfer is referenced in Tenn. Code Annotated § 49-7-150:

The community colleges of the board of regents system are authorized and encouraged to enter into reverse articulation or reverse transfer agreements with the universities of the board of regents and the University of Tennessee systems and with private institutions of higher education that are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The universities of the board of regents and the University of Tennessee systems are authorized and encouraged to enter into reverse articulation or reverse transfer agreements with the community colleges of the board of regents system.

Since that time, Reverse Transfer has been a critical component in the Master Plan and is a prominent feature in the *2015-2025 Master Plan* as it, “enables eligible students to receive a first associate’s degree that accurately reflects their educational attainment and allows them to compete more successfully in higher education and the workforce” (p. 29). Additionally, the *Strategic Financial Plan* highlights the importance of reverse transfer: “The formula currently incentivizes institutions by rewarding successful transfer outcomes and reverse articulated associate degrees” (p.20).

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Initiative: Statewide Building Condition Survey
Bureau: Finance and Administration
Division: Capital Policy
Request: \$6,000,000 (nonrecurring)

This proposal would secure funding and retain a consultant team to conduct a statewide building condition survey of core Higher Education “Education and General” (E&G) buildings. It has been over a decade since the last state-wide survey was conducted by the TBR system. There have been recent surveys conducted by various institutions, such as the current UT survey of selected UT system facilities now in progress, and the TSU campus wide survey completed in 2020. Currently, standardized surveys are required by THEC to be conducted on a regular basis by physical plant staff, and also by consultants on a per building basis if the building is part of a capital outlay or maintenance request. The scope of work includes an evaluation of the conditions of major E&G buildings on a building system basis, consistent with standardized building evaluation practices. The building systems will be scored and prioritized for planned maintenance. System deficiencies will be documented with recommendations as to a timeline for upgrades, with broadly defined scope and estimated cost range for repairs. The scope of work will include an update of existing data in the THEC Physical Facility Inventory and Survey (PFIS) database for consistency of available data for building conditions across the state.

Alignment to THEC Strategy: A statewide building condition survey will aid THEC in meeting its statutory requirement (Tenn. Code Annotated §49-7-202(o)) of identifying capital investment needs ahead of its annual appropriation maintenance request. Further, in alignment with the *Strategic Financial Plan*, the building condition survey builds on the plan’s *foundation* of “fund[ing] and distribut[ing] capital maintenance to campuses based on aggregate age, size, and use of facilities” (p. 25) by ensuring the state has updated PFISs data for determining maintenance needs per facility.

Attachment A: FY 2023-24 Proposed THEC Strategic Initiatives

Initiative	Bureau	Division	Recurring	Nonrecurring	Initiative Description
Advise TN	Access and Outreach	College Access and Success	\$925,000	\$0	Advise TN is a college advising and capacity building program administered by THEC. This budget request will allow the Advise TN program to increase the number of advisors available to serve students, allow for higher quality and individualized student advising, and allow THEC to increase advisor salaries to market competitive levels to better identify and retain high quality staff focused on providing high-quality, high-impact student services.
HBCU Success and Tennessee Promise Summer Bridge Programs	Access and Outreach	HBCU Success & College Access and Success Division	\$1,125,000	\$0	A portion of this request (\$625,000) would build on the success of the 2019 Historically Black Colleges and Universities pilot Summer Bridge program by offering the opportunity for the state's five undergraduate HBCU institutions to continue similar student success-based programs on an ongoing basis. The second portion of this request (\$500,000) will provide recurring funding to the Summer Bridge Program and the Summer Institute, two summer bridge programs targeting TN Promise students, currently operated by tnAchieves on a nonrecurring, state-funded grant.
Navigate Reconnect	Access and Outreach	Adult Learner Initiatives	\$760,000	\$0	This request will add five Reconnect Navigators to improve Navigator capacity; increase Navigators salaries to market competitive levels; and implement a mass texting platform to effectively and efficiently communicate with students.
Director of Data Strategy	Policy, Planning and Research	Research and Strategy	\$150,000	\$0	This new position would oversee data strategy, improving understanding and usability of the data collected on a semi-annual basis from systems; would facilitate the design and guidance of large-scale data projects and support the agency's efforts to measure key performance indicators; and would serve as a translator and connector between policy and data systems, synthesizing and streamlining existing practices in consistent and efficient ways.
Reverse Transfer Program	Academic Affairs and Student Success	Academic Affairs	\$310,000	\$0	In FY 2014, the State of Tennessee provided one-time funding to develop a statewide Reverse Transfer system. The Reverse Transfer System has been very successful with the awarding of over 5,500 associate degrees since 2015. In order to ensure the continued success of the program, this request for Reverse Transfer would permanently fund contracted services, dedicated server space and one staff position.
Statewide Building Condition Survey	Finance and Administration	Capital Policy	\$0	\$6,000,000	This request seeks to secure funding and retain a consultant team to conduct a statewide facilities condition survey of core Higher Education "Education and General" (E&G) buildings. The scope of work includes an evaluation of the conditions of major E&G buildings on a building system basis, consistent with standardized building evaluation practices. The building systems will be scored and prioritized for planned maintenance. System deficiencies will be documented with recommendations as to a timeline for upgrades, with broadly defined scope and estimated cost range for repairs.
Total			\$3,270,000	\$6,000,000	