



# TENNESSEE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION

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## REGULAR CALENDER ITEM: III.

**MEETING DATE:** January 28, 2022  
**SUBJECT:** College Access and Success Division Update  
**ITEM TYPE:** Informational  
**ACTION RECOMMENDATION:** NA

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### BACKGROUND

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission's College Access and Success Division aims to create and implement resources and initiatives to significantly increase the number of Tennessee students who enroll and succeed in higher education. The Divisions work is divided into two work streams: direct services and statewide services.

### DIRECT SERVICE PROGRAMS

#### **Advise TN**

*Funding Source: State appropriation*

Driven by the belief that every student has the potential to attend and thrive in postsecondary education, Advise TN was created to increase the number of Tennesseans who access and succeed in higher education. By partnering with high schools to provide college advising services, Advise TN serves over 12,000 junior and senior students across Tennessee. Thirty-three Advise TN college advisors are embedded in 30 partner high schools that have articulated their strong commitment to building a college-going culture. All partner high schools had a college-going rate below the state average, based on a three-year average, at the time of their selection. Partner high schools were selected through a competitive proposal process. College advisor services are rooted in research and best practices sourced from Tennessee and around the nation. As part of a statewide network of college access professionals, Advise TN college advisors collaborate with school counselors, community partners, local nonprofits, and the State of Tennessee to build capacity around college access.

#### **GEAR UP TN**

*Funding Source: Federal grant (GEAR UP TN)*

In September 2017, THEC received a \$24,500,000, seven-year Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant to significantly increase the number of low-income students prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP, a seven-year discretionary grant program, aims to increase the number of low-income, first-generation students enrolling and succeeding in college. The current grant marks the third state GEAR UP project funded in Tennessee designed to:

- increase the academic performance and preparation for postsecondary education,
- increase the rates of high school graduation and enrollment in postsecondary education,
- increase GEAR UP students' and their families' knowledge of postsecondary education options, preparation, and financing.

Tennessee's GEAR UP program, operating under the name GEAR UP TN, provides direct services to a cohort of students, the Class of 2023, attending direct service middle and high schools. Cohort services began when students were in seventh grade and will continue through the cohort's first year of postsecondary education. GEAR UP TN also provides services to students in the senior class of participating high schools each grant year.

GEAR UP TN grant services include providing financial aid information and application assistance, encouraging enrollment in rigorous and challenging coursework, and improving the number of students who graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education. The project serves approximately 6,000 students each year.

GEAR UP TN direct-service schools for the 2017 project were selected through a competitive application process that began in January 2018. To be eligible, high schools were required to meet two requirements: 1. have a college-going rate at or below the state average, based on the most recent three years of data supplied by THEC and have at least 50 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Following a proposal review and interview process, THEC selected direct-service middle and high schools located in 15 school counties: Anderson, Bradley, Campbell, Davidson, Fayette, Haywood, Henry, Jackson, Johnson, Lincoln, Meigs, Overton, Polk, Robertson, and Shelby.

## **STATEWIDE SERVICES**

The College Access and Success Division provides leadership to a range of services and initiatives to increase the number of Tennessee high school students who enroll and succeed in higher education. This work includes specific initiatives (i.e., CollegeforTN.org, Path to College Events, and Tennessee Electronic Transcript Exchange). The work also includes the development of resources (i.e., The Next Guides, Adulting 101, Dual Enrollment Grant Program Guide, etc.), professional development (i.e., webinars, regional meetings, etc.), and the deployment of statewide college access and success marketing campaigns.

### **CollegeforTN.org**

*Funding Source: Federal grant (GEAR UP TN)*

CollegeforTN.org was first launched in 2005 as an online career and college exploration portfolio tool. A redesigned version of the site was launched in fall 2021. The goal of CollegeforTN.org is to provide Tennesseans with the information needed to make informed college and career choices. To this end, CollegeforTN.org will address four areas of focus:

- serve as the central hub in Tennessee for college access and success information and resources,
- provide students and families a robust set of career, college, and financial aid tools, information, and resources,
- provide online college access and success resources for educators and others who help students develop and implement their college and career plans,
- serve as the branded, one-stop-shop for all THEC/TSAC student- and educator- facing information and resources.

### **Path to College Events**

*Funding Source: Federal grant (GEAR UP TN)*

Path to College Events are four statewide events designed to create and foster a college-going culture in Tennessee schools. The four Path to College Events are TN College Application and Exploration Month, TN FAFSA Frenzy, TN Signing Day, and College and Career Planning Night.

- **College Application and Exploration Month**, held each fall, aims to build excitement and enthusiasm around the college application process and provide every graduating senior with the opportunity to apply to college.
- **TN FAFSA Frenzy** provides free information and assistance to Tennessee families applying for financial assistance for higher education.
- **Signing Day** encourages high schools to devote one day to celebrate their seniors who are continuing to postsecondary education and build educational aspiration among underclassmen through a school-wide assembly or pep rally where each senior's college choice is announced and celebrated.
- **College and Career Planning Night** encourages high schools to host an after-school event for high school juniors and their parents where information about the college search, college application process, and financial aid are discussed. Students and their parents are expected to leave College and Career Planning Night with a clear idea of how to continue their college search process over the summer and complete the application and enrollment process the following year.

To support Path to College Event implementation, the College Access and Success Division creates and disseminates resources, guides, and collateral materials to educators, school counselors, and college access professionals. In recent years, the Division has expanded resources for use in elementary and middle schools. Additionally, THEC staff host webinars with college access professionals and school counselors focused on how to maximize the impact Path to College Events have on student outcomes.

### **Transcript Exchange**

*Funding Source: Tennessee Lottery*

The Tennessee Electronic Transcript Exchange streamlines the process for Tennessee students to transmit high school and higher education transcripts. The Transcript Exchange, implemented in partnership with the National Student Clearinghouse, provides a Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) compliant portal that allows for the secure transmission of education records as opposed to sending FERPA-protected student records via regular mail. The Exchange streamlines the process for high school counselors and registrars to exchange transcripts with higher education institutions and other entities, like the NCAA Eligibility Center and NAIA Eligibility Center, both within Tennessee and outside the state. There is no cost to Tennessee high schools or students to use the Exchange. Notably, the Exchange provides GPA data to FAST, the electronic grants and scholarships system used to administer the application, payment, and reporting process of state financial aid, to determine eligibility for Tennessee financial aid programs. The electronic transfer alleviates the need for school staff members to manually submit student data.

The Tennessee Electronic Transcript Exchange also allows higher education institutions to exchange transcripts with other higher education institutions and employers in a secure, efficient manner. There is no charge to Tennessee postsecondary institutions to participate in the postsecondary-to-postsecondary exchange. Additionally, there is no charge to Tennessee college students to send electronic transcripts to Tennessee institutions that participate in the Exchange.

During the 2020-2021 academic year, Tennessee students sent over 40,000 transcripts using the Tennessee Electronic Transcript Exchange. Currently, over 172 high schools have completed the steps for full implementation of the current exchange, and 47 Tennessee higher education institutions are set up to receive electronic high school transcripts using the Electronic Transcript Exchange. Enrollment at these 47 institutions represents 79 percent of the students enrolled at Tennessee postsecondary institutions.