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THEC Launches Expanded Statewide College Access and Outreach Strategy with GEAR UP Funding

NASHVILLE, TN – June 30, 2025 – The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) is launching a comprehensive effort to expand and align college access resources and initiatives across the state, with a focus on supporting students, families, and educators in communities that are historically under-resourced and have lower college-going rates.

This new area of work—supported by the [seven-year GEAR UP TN](#) grant from the U.S. Department of Education awarded in 2024—aims to strengthen Tennessee’s college-going culture by coordinating statewide outreach strategies, communications, and partnerships across all regions. Emphasis will be placed on reaching students early in their academic journeys and providing consistent support through high school graduation and beyond.

In addition to increasing postsecondary access, this initiative is designed to support Tennessee’s workforce and economic development priorities. By helping more students access and complete a college credential aligned to high-demand career pathways, THEC’s efforts will help ensure communities across the state have a talent pipeline that meets both regional and statewide labor market needs.

Key components of the initiative include:

- Deploying three regional College Access Outreach Coordinators in East, Middle, and West Tennessee, each working with 10–15 high schools and their feeder middle and elementary schools annually.
- Enhancing statewide college access messaging and communications through CollegeforTN.org.
- Identifying and addressing service and resource gaps in college access programming across the state.
- Establishing a Tennessee College Access Advisory Committee to align stakeholders and share best practices.

- Hosting an annual Tennessee College Access Conference to convene educators, organizations, and advocates committed to improving postsecondary access.

To lead this work, THEC is pleased to announce that Suzette Telli, Director of College Access Alignment, will now oversee the Statewide Services Team for College Access and Outreach. In this role, Telli will be responsible for coordinating stakeholders, supervising key team members and guiding the implementation of college access strategies statewide.

“This initiative represents a major step forward in ensuring that all Tennessee students—regardless of geography or background—have access to the tools, guidance, and support needed to pursue higher education,” said Dr. Steven Gentile, Executive Director of THEC. “By building stronger partnerships, aligning resources, and reaching students earlier, we’re laying the foundation for a more connected and college-going culture across the state.”

Together, this team will focus on the delivery and alignment of college access programming, including THEC’s flagship initiatives Advise TN and GEAR UP TN, as well as expanding statewide communication and outreach campaigns designed to engage students and families more effectively.

For more information on Tennessee’s college access initiatives, visit www.CollegeforTN.org.

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The Tennessee Higher Education Commission was created in 1967 by the Tennessee General Assembly. The Commission develops, implements, evaluates postsecondary education policies and programs in Tennessee while coordinating the state’s systems of higher education, and is relentlessly focused on increasing the number of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential.