Summary
Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect have made it possible for many Tennesseans to pursue a college degree or credential tuition free. But removing the financial obstacles to higher education isn’t enough. We’ve also been working hard to ensure that all students who enter college then complete college.

This emphasis on completion made a profound impact on student success. Graduation rates at Tennessee community colleges have increased significantly over the last seven years, from 14% to 25%.

The improvements in student success have impacted thousands of Tennesseans, but Tennessee community colleges still have a long way to go to promote success equitably for each student.

Calculating the Graduation Rate

What is a cohort? Graduation rates start with a cohort of students. Each fall, colleges identify students who are seeking a degree, are enrolled in at least twelve credit hours (full-time students), and have enrolled in college for the first time after graduating from high school (first-time students). The students in this group are called the first-time, full-time (FTFT) freshman cohort.

How do we calculate a graduation rate? Once a cohort is established, colleges follow the success of these students. While there are many metrics of success, the graduation rates reported by TBR reflect the number of students in the cohort who earned a certificate or degree from a Tennessee community college within three years of entering college as a FTFT freshman.

Increasing Graduation Rates

In Fall 2017, over 19,000 students enrolled at Tennessee community colleges as members of the first-time, full-time cohort. By summer 2020, after three years, 4,914 of these students had earned a degree or certificate.

Graduation Rates at Community Colleges

This represents a significant increase in three-year graduation rates for Tennessee community colleges, from 14% of students who started in 2010 to 25% of students who started in 2017. Since the 2017 cohort was larger than the 2010 cohort, the increase in graduation rates reflects an even larger increase in the number of new Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential. After three years, nearly 5,000 students from the 2017 cohort had graduated, compared to 2,103 from the 2010 cohort.

Beyond the Graduation Rate

Many Tennessee community college students take more than three years to graduate. In fact, at the three-year mark, 10% of students from the 2017 cohort had not yet graduated but were still enrolled at a TBR community college. Additionally, 11% had transferred to another postsecondary institution before graduating, and 26% had graduated from a TBR college or another institution.
Key Facts About Graduation Rates

1 Graduation rates at every TBR community college has increased since 2010.

Motlow led the community colleges in graduation rates for the fifth year in a row when 33% of the 2017 cohort graduated within three years. However, all thirteen community colleges have seen significant increases in graduation rates over the past seven years.

Tennessee has outpaced other states.

The growth in graduation rates at TBR colleges has outpaced the growth in most other states. From 2011 to 2014, Tennessee’s community college graduation rates saw a larger percentage point increase than all states in the South except for West Virginia and Mississippi.

2 We still have work to do to promote equitable student success.

Although graduation rates have risen across the system, gaps exist between graduation rates for white students compared to students of color. Community colleges would have needed to graduate an additional 614 Black students from the 2017 cohort in order to close this gap.

3 Many students continue to earn degrees and certificates after three years.

For students in the 2010 cohort, the graduation rate grew from 14% after three years (nine semesters) to 22% after six years (18 semesters). However, as the figure below shows, students who began in fall 2010 took ten years (30 semesters) to achieve the same graduation rate (25%) that students in the 2017 cohort achieved in only nine semesters.