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Tennessee higher education leaders express support of higher standards for K-12 education

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (Feb. 11, 2015) – Presidents of all 13 of Tennessee’s community colleges held a press conference at the state capitol today to emphasize their support for continuing Tennessee’s commitment to higher K-12 academic standards that prepare students for college study.

They were joined by a contingent of presidents from Tennessee public universities, directors of Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology, and leaders of the Tennessee Board of Regents, the state university and community college system.

Citing concerns regarding college- and career-preparedness, the group stressed the need for high school graduates to have a strong base of knowledge and skills needed to perform college-level work.

“As community college presidents, we want to see every student who arrives on our campuses ready to succeed and thrive in a higher education environment,” said Anthony Wise Jr., president of Pellissippi State Community College. “It’s especially important in light of the new Tennessee Promise program, which is opening the doors to higher education to so many Tennessee students.”

More than 58,000 current Tennessee high schools seniors have applied for the Tennessee Promise program, which offers two years of community or technical college tuition-free. Many of those students are expected to enroll this fall in one of Tennessee’s 13 community colleges or colleges of applied technology across the state. The program is part of Gov. Bill Haslam’s Drive to 55 initiative, which aspires to raise the percentage of the state’s population holding some form of higher education credential.

Wise and other presidents cited the need for remedial work by incoming freshman as evidence of the critical need for higher K-12 standards. In the fall of 2014, nearly 70 percent of full-time freshman in Tennessee’s community colleges required learning support in order to perform college-level work.

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“Studies have shown that students who require remedial work in college are far less likely to complete their studies and earn a certificate or degree,” Wise said. “It’s vital that students obtain the skills they need to succeed in college before they step on campus and not need to spend valuable time learning material they should have already mastered.”

Data from ACT Inc., the college admissions exam nearly every Tennessee high school students takes, backs up Wise’s statements. According to ACT, only 30 percent of Tennessee seniors in 2014 met benchmarks for college readiness in math. Only 59 percent met the benchmarks in English, and only 19 percent demonstrated college-readiness in all four tested areas, which include science and reading as well. Further analysis by ACT reveals that students with a composite score of 18 or below currently have only a 35 percent chance of completing an associate or bachelor’s degree within six years.

The presidents urged Tennessee lawmakers to maintain or even further strengthen educational standards to ensure future student success, pointing out that the state had already seen improvement in the four years since the current standards were adopted. Tennessee has been recognized for making the highest gains in the country on math and English scores.

“Our students have shown that as our expectations rise, so does their performance. Tennessee must not turn back now and lose our momentum,” Wise said. “Every student deserves the opportunity to fulfill their promise, and we owe it to them to ensure they have the skills and knowledge to do so.”

The higher education leaders concluded their press conference by signing a letter to Education Commissioner Candice McQueen supporting higher standards for college readiness.

“We must work harder to close this preparation gap, and we believe continued implementation of higher academic standards are our best hope for accomplishing this,” the letter stated. “The standards currently in place were developed with college and career readiness as the end goal, and higher education faculty in Tennessee and many other states had a hand in their development. We support Governor Haslam’s commitment to review the standards and hope that any changes will only further enhance college readiness.”

The Tennessee Board of Regents is among the nation’s largest higher education systems, governing 46 post-secondary educational institutions. The TBR system includes six universities, 13 two-year colleges and 27 colleges of applied technology, providing programs across the state to about 200,000 students.

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CONTACT: Monica Greppin-Watts, communications director
Tennessee Board of Regents
(615) 366-4417 or (615) 767-7865 (mobile)
monica.greppin-watts@tbr.edu