

Perspectives

Community College
Leadership for the
21st Century

SEPTEMBER 2019

www.ferris.edu/alliance

In a world where we have failed to increase college graduation rates, debt-free higher education would at least remove some of the risk of going to college.

- Mark Huelsman

Free-college programs are wise to take a new approach to college affordability. They seek to support low-income students but also to actually transform the systems where those students are educated.

- Sara Goldrick-Rab & Michelle Miller-Adams

**Doctorate in
Community College
Leadership**

**Empowering graduates
to advance
community colleges
towards excellence
and community
responsiveness through
exemplary leadership.**


**FERRIS STATE
UNIVERSITY**

**ENROLLING NOW FOR
THE NEXT COHORT**

The Tennessee Promise - A Focused Look Back Five Years Later

Jerry L. Faulkner, PhD

President
Volunteer State Community College
Gallatin, Tennessee

In 2015, Tennessee became the first state in the nation to offer free college tuition to recent high school graduates. The history of the Tennessee Promise and the nuances of the requirements have been largely lost in the headlines. With the fifth cohort of students beginning college this fall, it is interesting to look back at the origins and to review the results of this bold effort.

With the fifth cohort of students beginning college this fall, it is interesting to look back at the origins and to review the results of this bold effort.

Background and Requirements of the Tennessee Promise

In 2013, then Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam announced a statewide initiative called The Drive to 55. Following a statewide listening meeting with business and industry leaders about workforce needs, Governor Haslam recognized that by the year 2025, 55% of the state's workforce would need a post-secondary credential. At that time only 32% of Tennesseans had a credential, and there were estimated to be in excess of 900,000 individuals with some college but no degree or certificate.

The annual State of the State address is an opportunity for the Governor to announce new initiatives. At the address in January 2014, Governor Haslam announced the Tennessee Promise as a major effort to meet the aspirations of the Drive to 55. The TnPromise, as it came to be known, was the provision of five semesters of last-dollar, tuition scholarship funds for every high school graduate beginning with the class of 2015. TnPromise dollars were available after federal and state scholarships and after the state-lottery-funded Hope Scholarship were applied to tuition costs.

The idea for TnPromise originated in Knox County in 2009 when Haslam was mayor of Knoxville. Local businessman Randy Boyd approached Haslam and the county mayor, Mike Ragsdale, with the idea of raising funds from private donors to cover tuition for Knox County high school

graduates to be able to attend the local community college. It was to be called Knox Achieves. Initiated in 2008, Knox Achieves showed dramatic increases in the college-going rate. A 2015 study by Carruthers and Fox found Knox Achieves participants were 24.2% more likely to go to any college and 29.6% more likely to go to a community college. The concept eventually spread to 27 Tennessee counties and became known as Tennessee Achieves or TnAchieves.

When Boyd became a special assistant to the Governor, the two brought most of the aspects of the privately funded TnAchieves to the publicly funded TnPromise. The public funding would provide last-dollar scholarship funds for the pursuit of a two-year associate degree or a diploma or certification through the state's Colleges of Applied Technology. While the public community colleges were the main provider of associate's degrees, a handful of universities that offered two-year degrees also qualified.

The funding proposal for TnPromise was one of the aspects of the program that made it easy to move through the Tennessee General Assembly. There were to be no tax dollars used to fund the program. Instead, funding came from the earnings on a \$312 million lottery trust account. Some in the state were critical of TnPromise because the \$312 million was transferred from the trust for the lottery-funded Hope Scholarship.

The funding proposal for TnPromise was one of the aspects of the program that made it easy to move through the Tennessee General Assembly.

To create "skin in the game," applicants and recipients must complete eight hours of community service in advance of each semester enrolled. Service must be unpaid, performed for a legitimate community service organization, not supervised by a family member, and not associated with a religious effort. Later, an option was added to allow job shadowing and unpaid internships to count toward the requirement.

TnPromise also incorporated the strict requirements of TnAchieves. To qualify for the grant, there were firm deadlines for initial application through the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC), FAFSA filing dates, required team meetings, and community

(continued on page 4)

EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

While the complexion of postsecondary learners has been changing in recent years, we have also seen rising tuition costs and increasing levels of college debt borne by the vast majority of students. In an effort to mitigate this financial burden, broaden access, and help create an educated workforce, a number of states have embraced the concept of “Promise programs” – free or debt-free college programs. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Irene Elksnis Geisler, PhD

History Instructor
Glen Oaks Community College
Centreville, Michigan

Education traditionally has been understood as the single most important means of success in society. However, scholars identify multiple social and economic obstacles to this realization. Notably, increasing levels of college debt borne by students have been linked to public policy implemented in a way that perpetuates income differences. In an effort to lessen some of the financial burden of college debt, numerous states are adopting free or debt-free college programs.

In 2005, the Kalamazoo Promise made history as the first free-college program intended to be a catalyst for encouraging human capital investments. Since then, multiple studies have been launched to ascertain its impact. While some experts point to encouraging results in enrollment, increased academic achievement, and credentials attainment, findings also suggest that minority and lower-income groups do not experience the same positive effects as White, Asian, and higher-income students (Billings, 2019). Markedly, scholars warn that promise programs could have the effect of contributing to further inequality if students from high-income households are attending already high-quality schools (LeGower & Walsh, 2017). That said, researchers note strong outcomes for women (Bartik, Hershbein, & Lachowska, 2017).

In an effort to lessen some of the financial burden of college debt, numerous states are adopting free or debt-free college programs.

Today, women hold 57% of bachelor’s degrees from colleges and universities nation-wide (AAUW, 2019; Brennan, 2018). Yet, females are still earning an estimated 80% of male wages (BLS, 2019). In fact, research suggests that women need more degrees to make the same amount of money as male counterparts. And, while Black women have been described as the most educated demographic in America (Kenney, 2018), Black Americans earn about 75% of Caucasians in median hourly earnings. Consequently, females disproportionately take on more student loan debt at every level of education (Brennan, 2018), as do members of racial and ethnic minorities (Lanza, 2016). Women represent two-thirds of the total student loans today (AAUW, 2019). Because women graduate with lower-paying jobs, it takes them longer to pay off student-loan debt significant to wealth building. The pace of repayment

(continued on page 6)

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

What impact on students and colleges are we beginning to see as a result of Promise programs?

Archie Thomas, MBA

Assistant Professor of Mathematics
Ivy Tech Community College
Kokomo, Indiana

Since the 2014 launch of the Tennessee Promise and the Obama administration’s spotlight on this concept, several states have executed or proposed their own adaptation of a debt-free college policy (Mishory, 2018). However, the idea of enacting a statewide “free college” policy was first accomplished in the state of Indiana by former governor Evan Bayh and the state legislature in 1990 (Kelchen, 2017).

Since the 2014 launch of the Tennessee Promise and the Obama administration’s spotlight on this concept, several states have executed or proposed their own adaptation of a debt-free college policy.

The Indiana 21st Century Scholars program was designed to ensure that all Indiana families would have access to an affordable college education for their children through an “early commitment” program that invites middle-school students to pledge to meet particular behavioral and academic standards throughout high school (Helfenbein, Hughes, and Smith, 2008). Upon graduation, the state guarantees a maximum of four years of grant aid that will cover tuition at a university or public college in Indiana (Helfenbein, Hughes, and Smith, p.1). All participants must be income-eligible and are required to complete a twelve-step program created to prepare students for college (Kelchen, p.2). This program exposes students to calculating the estimated cost of college, visiting campuses, and taking ACT or SAT exams. In addition, students are required to graduate with a college-preparatory high school diploma, grade-point average of 2.5, complete the FFSA, and remain a full-time student to receive funds (Kelchen, p.2).

Early research of this program revealed positive influences on future college endeavors, enrollment rates, and retention rates for its participants (Kelchen, p.3). Also the program became a model for increasing enrollment among low-income students, supported college readiness, and drove a focus on support services at the postsecondary level in an effort to improve student success (Helfenbein, Hughes, and Smith, p.34).

However, the results for completion were not so positive. One-third of the program’s participants in the 1999 cohort that enrolled in a public college completed within six years of high school graduation; yet more

(continued on page 6)



Irene Elksnis Geisler holds a PhD in History from Western Michigan University, MA in Organizational Management from Spring Arbor University and MLS in Women’s and Gender Studies from Eastern Michigan University. Her research interests include gender, nationalism, migration, and ethnicity. Irene is currently working on an EdD in Community College Leadership (DCCL) at Ferris State University. Her professional background includes fifteen years of administrative and teaching experience in higher education.



Archie Thomas, MBA, serves as an Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Ivy Tech Community College in Kokomo, Indiana. His passion is to design and implement student success initiatives that will aid in the empowerment of under-resourced students. He received his Master’s in Business Administration from Indiana Wesleyan University in Marion, Indiana, and is currently pursuing his doctorate degree in the Ferris State University Doctorate in Community College Leadership program (DCCL).

NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

While the complexion of postsecondary learners has been changing in recent years, we have also seen rising tuition costs and increasing levels of college debt borne by the vast majority of students. In an effort to mitigate this financial burden, broaden access, and help create an educated workforce, a number of states have embraced the concept of “Promise programs” – free or debt-free college programs. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

A Successful Promise: Community College Efforts to Improve Student Outcomes

Erica Lee Orians, PhD

Executive Director
Michigan Center for Student Success
Lansing, Michigan

Arguably the first college promise program was created in Kalamazoo, Michigan and since then local promise programs and state-level free community college programs have spread across Michigan and the United States. Among the major higher education financial assistance programs (GI Bill, Pell grants, student loan programs), they represent another significant investment in increasing higher education enrollment. In my work at the Michigan Center for Student Success, I work with 28 diverse community colleges, many of which are serving students funded by Michigan’s Promise programs or one of several locally supported free college programs. While these programs have varying eligibility requirements, they all have resulted in more students with diverse needs joining our campus communities. I’ve spent considerable time considering the existing and potential impacts of promise programs.

In theory, promise programs encourage some students to enroll in a community college who otherwise would have enrolled in a university.

Promise Programs Support the Not Quite Pell-eligible Students.

Community college tuition has effectively been “free” for Pell grant recipients for decades, but not all needy students are eligible for a Pell grant. Promise programs really help the population of students who are not quite eligible for the Pell grant. I have been deeply impacted by the [ALICE Project](#), supported by the Michigan Association of United Ways, which offers a glimpse into the financial circumstances of families who live above the Federal Poverty Level but below the basic cost of living in Michigan. The ALICE household survival budget illustrates that tuition is not a realistic expense in an ALICE family budget. These are the families that truly benefit from a promise program where other scholarships and grants just can’t fill the gap.

Promise Programs Expand Opportunities to Transfer. In theory, promise programs encourage some students to enroll in a community college who otherwise would have enrolled in a university. These students still want to earn a bachelor’s degree, so community colleges are building stronger transfer pathways, expanding course offerings to meet the needs of more transfer students, offering more transfer advising, and communicating better information about transfer options through websites like www.mitransfer.org.

Promise Programs Should Prompt a Focus on Student Support Services. Promise programs typically cover the cost of tuition and fees, but these programs do not provide resources for any additional student

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

What impact on students and colleges are we beginning to see as a result of Promise programs?

support services. At virtually all the community colleges that serve promise students, we have learned that eliminating the financial barrier to college doesn’t address barriers to success once students enroll. Community colleges have vastly expanded supports in academic advising, orientation, first-year experience courses, tutoring and supplemental instruction, career exploration, transfer planning, and connecting with public benefits and community-based services.

Promise Programs Should Accelerate Developmental Education.

Promise programs are likely to encourage more academically underprepared students to enroll who need additional supports in mathematics, English, reading, and other gateway courses and our current developmental education programs are ineffective. Community colleges are revising placement practices by adopting a multiple measures placement approach, shifting developmental courses from a sequential model to a co-requisite model where students are enrolled in a college-level course concurrent with a course designed to address developmental needs, and changing optional tutoring to mandatory supplemental instruction.

Promise programs are likely to encourage more academically underprepared students to enroll who need additional supports in mathematics, English, reading, and other gateway courses and our current developmental education programs are ineffective.

Promise Programs Should Expand Opportunities for Adults.

Most promise programs are designed for recent high school graduates, but more states and communities recognize the need to support adult learners. In Michigan, there are [about 100,000 high school graduates each year](#), but there are [over 2 million adults](#) (age 25-64) without a credential. Adult students may be attracted to shorter-term programs with more immediate labor market outcomes. As we think about serving more adult learners, colleges are building capacity in short term programs, modifying course schedules to meet the flexible needs of working adults, or developing alternative pathways to a degree.

(continued on page 6)

Erica Lee Orians, PhD, is the Executive Director of the Michigan Center for Student Success. The Center is focused on building state-level capacity to support campus-based innovations and creating a tighter link between practice, research, and policy to promote student success. Erica has worked in higher education for more than 20 years. She previously held positions at the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) at the University of Utah, The Ohio State University, Miami University-Middletown campus, and the Columbus College of Arts and Design. Erica earned her PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy from the University of Utah. Her dissertation focused on benchmarking and efficiency among rural community colleges. She earned her MA in Higher Education and Student Affairs and her BA in History from The Ohio State University.



QUICK TAKES
Highlights
from the Field

Recommendations for Providing Community Colleges with the Resources They Need by the Century Foundation

Community colleges are routinely under-resourced and often fall short of their promise, with only 38 percent of students completing a degree or certificate within six years. New evidence demonstrates that money spent wisely on community colleges can yield a payoff to taxpayers more than three times the cost. It is imperative to establish the actual cost of a community college education; this report offers recommendations to best estimate that cost and help inform policymakers. Access this work here: <http://bit.ly/2IL0ZZG>

Policy Design Matters for Rising "Free College" Aid

by Jen Mishory and Peter Granville

Since the onset of the Tennessee promise scholarship five years ago, a number of other states have enacted similar financial aid programs under the "free college" banner. While these tuition guarantees come at a critical time, getting the program design right is increasingly important. This report estimates that recently enacted promise programs comprise nearly one-quarter of the growth in state public student aid since 2015, and provides a close look at current state efforts. Access this work here: <http://bit.ly/2kdiEJO>



Published by the Alliance for Community College Excellence in Practice, Ferris State University, Doctorate in Community College Leadership Big Rapids, Michigan

EDITORIAL STAFF

Jeanne Bonner, PhD, Editor
Mara Jevera Fulmer, EdD, MFA, Design & Production Editor

To send comments or receive a copy of this publication, please contact us at: ccallian@fsu.edu

The Tennessee Promise... (continued from page 1)

service. Missing any of the above meant permanent disqualification from the TnPromise. Students receiving the scholarship must be full time and must be enrolled continuously. They must also achieve and maintain a 2.0 GPA by the end of the first year.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of TnAchieves and the subsequent TnPromise was the pairing of each student with a volunteer mentor. Some 9,000 adults from across the state are recruited and paired with 5 - 10 high school seniors each. Because a high percentage of TnPromise applicants are the first in their family to attend college, they needed a caring adult to encourage them in their journey toward and through college. Mentors complete an online application and are subject to a clean background check. Mentors are required to complete a one-hour training session and meet with their assigned students twice a year, and are encouraged to have contact with students at least every two weeks. It is not a requirement that a mentor know all there is to know about college, but rather that they are an encouraging voice for the students. Many mentors go on to develop continuing relationships with their mentees.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of TnAchieves and the subsequent TnPromise was the pairing of each student with a volunteer mentor.

The final piece of the puzzle and the one that made TnPromise possible was the public-private partnership to manage the communication with students, recruit and train mentors, arrange team meetings, track community service hours, and verify eligibility. In the beginning, counties across the state were allowed to choose the private partner that would work with their high school students. The majority chose TnAchieves as their partner. Still privately funded, TnAchieves is now the partner for 90 of Tennessee's 95 counties.

Four-year colleges and universities were muted in their comments on the TnPromise. Clearly it is hard to oppose a program that brings more students to higher education, but there were certainly internal discussions about how the TnPromise might impact their freshmen enrollments.

Opposition

The TnPromise was not without criticism. Because the \$312 million endowment to fund TnPromise came from reserve lottery funds originally held in reserve to support the Tennessee Hope Scholarship, some feared that the TnPromise would lead to the downfall of the Hope. The legislatively-mandated reserve for the Hope was at \$110 million, and the transfer did not reduce the amount below the set limit. Others pointed to the fact that the

Hope is merit based using GPA or ACT scores as award standard, while the TnPromise had no achievement requirements to initially receive the scholarship. (Students must maintain a 2.0 college GPA to retain TnPromise.) It was, some said, taking money away from students who had good grades and giving it to students who had not done well and were unlikely to graduate.

Four-year colleges and universities were muted in their comments on the TnPromise. Clearly it is hard to oppose a program that brings more students to higher education, but there were certainly internal discussions about how the TnPromise might impact their freshmen enrollments. Of the 9 public universities in Tennessee, six saw small declines in their 2015 freshman class. The concern was moderated somewhat by a change in the Hope Scholarship. In 2014 companion legislation, the Hope Scholarship for freshmen and sophomores was reduced by \$500 per year down to \$3,500, while the scholarship for juniors and seniors was increased by the same amount to \$4,500. For the universities, there was also the prospect of increasing numbers of transfer students.

Still others opined that the TnPromise would do little to help first-generation, low-income, or non-white students. Because it was a last-dollar scholarship, students with low Expected Family Contributions and/or Adjusted Gross Income would receive no TnPromise dollars. Their tuition costs would be covered by existing Federal and State dollars.

State officials managing TnPromise expected 20,000 high school seniors to apply in the first year. A surprising 57,660 public and private students across Tennessee applied.

Results

State officials managing TnPromise expected 20,000 high school seniors to apply in the first year. A surprising 57,660 public and private students across Tennessee applied. Most school districts experienced application rates above 90%. In many schools, the administration just marched every senior down to the computer lab and walked them through the online process. The number of applicants has increased in each subsequent year reaching 64,420 in the current year.

FAFSA filing was the next requirement of the program. In the first year of implementation, the FAFSA filing rate increased by 9.1%. Tennessee had the largest increase in the nation. Subsequently, the filing rate increased to 81.7% of high school seniors, and Tennessee held the lead for highest filing rate until Louisiana made FAFSA filing a high school graduation requirement. Texas and Illinois have since followed suit.

Enrollment of TnPromise students at eligible institutions has increased each year since inception. In the first Fall 2015 cohort, 16,207 eligible students enrolled representing an almost 5,000 freshman increase. Cohort Four in Fall 2018 saw 18,054 TnPromise eligible students enroll. At Vol State in that first year, 1,444 TnPromise

(continued on page 5)

The Tennessee Promise... (continued from page 4)

eligible student enrolled. It is arguable that those students would have attended anyway, but the addition of TnPromise eligible students to the freshman class resulted in a college-wide increase of 846 students.

The three-year graduation rate for that cohort was 31% as compared to 12% for non-TnPromise students entering in Fall 2015.

Fall to fall retention of the first cohort of TnPromise students exceeded non-TnPromise students by 21% (65% vs 44%). Additionally, 5.1% of the Fall 2015 students earned a credential prior to Fall 2016. The 2016 cohort is doing even better with a 26% difference in fall to fall retention.

The Fall 2105 cohort completed their five semesters of eligibility at the end of the Fall 2017 semester. At that point 52.8% of TnPromise students had received a credential, transferred to another college or university, or were still enrolled. The three-year graduation rate for that cohort was 31% as compared to 12% for non-TnPromise students entering in Fall 2015.

There is work to be done in helping underrepresented students take advantage of the TnPromise.

Impact

The TnPromise has done little to increase the number of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Racial composition of first-time freshmen at Tennessee community colleges has remained relatively the same from Fall 2014 through Fall 2018. Black and Hispanic students are underrepresented in the Promise population, while white students are overrepresented. For the four cohorts of TnPromise students, first-generation students have accounted for an average of 37.1% of students. In the first three cohorts of TnPromise students at community colleges, the number of first generation students actually fell below Fall 2014 levels of enrollment. There is work to be done in helping underrepresented students take advantage of the TnPromise.

In the first year of TnPromise (Cohort 1 – 2015), there were approximately 3,600 additional new entrants into higher education. From a 2014 high school graduate college-going rate of 58.1%, TnPromise stimulated a 5.9% increase to 64%. Following the media blitz and hype of the 2015 launch, the rate has settled in around 63%, reflecting the “new normal.”

In 2015, first-year enrollment at four-year colleges and universities dipped 3.8% but has since mostly risen to pre-TnPromise levels. Overall, 2,586 students (16.5 percent) from the 2015 cohort enrolled at a four-year college or university, which includes students who began at a university as well as students who transferred to a university from a community college or TCAT. Data is still being gathered and analyzed to determine if colleges and universities have received the transfer bump portended by the TnPromise. Many colleges have ramped up their recruitment of transfer students including the establishment of scholarships for transfer students.

The TnPromise stimulated a national conversation about free college. What happened in Tennessee prompted President Obama to put forward a proposal to nationally fund the first two years of a community college education. The American College Promise continues as a discussion in the current Presidential primary campaigns on the Democratic side. Now some five years, later 30 other states have active

or proposed promise programs. Even cities like Birmingham, AL their version of a promise program.

But the most important change in conversation happened around the kitchen tables and living rooms of Tennessee. For the first time, economically disadvantaged students who may have never considered college as an option saw a pathway. These students probably would have qualified for full Pell and thereby free tuition but it was an unknown opportunity. When the Governor of the state goes on television and says, “You can go to college tuition-free,” that gets people’s attention. Because TnPromise was neither need-based nor merit-based, it negated some of the application hurdles that accompany other aid vehicles.

An unintended and unforeseen impact occurred in relation to community college foundations. Scholarship and grant solicitations were met with, “Why do you need my donation? Isn’t college free now?” As was the case around the state, at Vol State we launched a “We Still Need You,” campaign to help donors understand that it wasn’t free college, it was free tuition, and that there were other expenses that were not covered by TnPromise. As that message has resonated across the state, local efforts have emerged to cover those other expenses. In Metro Nashville a privately funded effort called Getting Results by Advancing Degrees (GRAD) was launched with \$450,000 to help cover books, class fees, and personal costs such as transportation and childcare. And back in the county that originated the idea of free college, Knox Promise has raised \$6.2 million to be received over the next three years. Knox Promise will offer completion grants, textbook stipends, dedicated completion coaches, and a unique summer support program to TnPromise eligible students.

For the first time, economically disadvantaged students who may have never considered college as an option saw a pathway. These students probably would have qualified for full Pell and thereby free tuition but it was an unknown opportunity.

Recent Developments

If every high school graduate in Tennessee attended college and obtained a credential, the state would still not meet the Drive to 55 goals. Again using the State of the State address, in 2017 Governor Haslam announced a huge expansion of a program called Tennessee Reconnect or TnReconnect. The program had previously been available only to students attending the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology. The proposal was to expand the last-dollar tuition scholarship to post- traditional students attending community colleges. This was essentially TnPromise for adults. Requirements were somewhat different in that there were no application or FAFSA filing deadlines, no community service requirement, and recipients could attend part-time. Students must be independent students and not already have a college degree. Tennessee became the first state in the nation to offer all citizens – both high school graduates and adults – the chance to earn a postsecondary degree or certificate free of tuition and at no cost to taxpayers. The application opened in February 2018 and there were 33,000 applicants with just under 15,000 actually enrolled by Fall 2018. Data is still being collected to determine how many of those were continuing students and how many were new or returning students attracted by the scholarship.

In 2018, the last year as Governor, Haslam met with the Tennessee Board of Regents Chancellor and the Community College Presidents to assess the progress of the Drive to 55. By 2016 the proportion of Tennessee’s

(continued on page 6)

The Tennessee Promise... (continued from page 5)

adult population with a postsecondary credential had risen to 40.7%. The state was on a trajectory to meet the goal of the Drive. Bolstered by the success of the TnPromise and the prospect of the TnReconnect, the Governor's office, Tennessee Board of Regents staff, and staff from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission set new goals for attainment that were 25% higher than the originals.

Tennessee became the first state in the nation to offer all citizens - both high school graduates and adults - the chance to earn a postsecondary degree or certificate free of tuition and at no cost to taxpayers.

Conclusion

The TnPromise and the subsequent TnReconnect have dramatically changed the college-going culture in Tennessee and is rippling across the U.S. Both programs are still relatively young and the ultimate results are still to be determined. Early signs are positive. There is certainly still work to be done to increase the participation of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. With all said and done, it is a great time to be in a community college in Tennessee.

References:

- Carruthers, C. and Fox, W. (2016). Aid for all: College coaching, financial aid, and post-secondary persistence in Tennessee. *Economics of Education Review* 51 (2016,) 97-112.
- Tennessee Higher Education Commission. (2018) *Articulation and Transfer Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/thec/research/redirect-research/all-other-reports/redirect-all-other-reports/articulation-and-transfer-report.html>
- Tennessee Higher Education Commission. (2019) *Tennessee Promise Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.tn.gov/thec/research/redirect-research/tn-promise-annual-report.html>

** Special thanks to Amanda Klafehn, Director of Research and Strategy, Tennessee Higher Education Commission for her assistance in gathering and verifying data.

Jerry Faulkner, PhD, began his tenure as Volunteer State Community College's 3rd president on May 15, 2012. Since his arrival at Vol State, President Faulkner has actively engaged the talent and insight of staff and faculty toward the fulfillment of a dynamic and forward-looking strategic plan that will guide the college into the future. Among the initiatives at the college are the launch of the ASN nursing program, a new degree program in Mechatronics, the establishment of a Middle College for high school students, and the implementation of the TnPromise and TnReconnect.



Dr. Faulkner started his public higher education administration career in 1994 at Chattanooga State Community College, where he first served as a biology faculty member, and in 2002 was selected as Department Head for Life Sciences and as Teacher Education Coordinator. Prior to arriving at Vol State, Dr. Faulkner served as the vice president for Academic Affairs at Cleveland State Community College. Dr. Faulkner also taught and served for a number of years as associate vice president for Academic Affairs at Tennessee Temple University before joining Chattanooga State.

Dr. Faulkner is a three-time recipient of the Sumner County Impact Award. He serves on the boards of several local agencies and is active in local civic clubs. The east Tennessee native earned his master's degree in 1987 and his doctorate in 1994 - both from the University of Tennessee.

Irene Elksnis Geisler, PhD (continued from page 2)

is particularly slow for Black and Hispanic women. Additionally, the pay-gap typically grows with age (Brennan, 2018). Lower career earnings result in greater disparity in retirement income.

Scholars suggest that promise programs have important but as yet under-studied and inconclusive results. Although research points to generally positive findings, student loan debt has continued to increase to \$1.4 Trillion nation-wide (Tatham, 2019). This translates to a 26% growth in the past 5 years. Current sources such as Lending Tree online (2019), report Americans are more burdened by student loan debt than ever before. Consequently, this draws attention to the multifaceted and often conflicting connections between education and social and economic success, and whether debt-free college programs may ultimately prove to constitute a solution to the growing societal challenges posed by student debt.

Archie Thomas, MBA (continued from page 2)

than half dropped out (Helfenbein, Hughes, and Smith, p.34). In addition many program participants continue to encounter added financial barriers that include the cost of books, housing, and living expenses, coupled with work and family responsibilities (Helfenbein, Hughes, and Smith, p.35).

On a more positive note, according to the Indiana Commission for Higher Education's 2018 report, recent reforms to the program are improving the on-time graduation rates of the participants by 13.8 percentage points. This improvement was attributed to Indiana's financial aid reform requiring students to complete at least 30 credit hours each year. The report also revealed that 29.8% of the participants graduate on-time, compared to 24.1% of other low-income students. Program participants attending two-year institutions are graduating at rate of 17.3%, representing a 14.6 percentage increase over the last five years.

A Successful Promise... (continued from page 3)

In the last five years, community colleges have shifted efforts from designing boutique programs that support a tiny percentage of students toward a redesign of the entire community college experience.

Community college faculty, staff, and administrators will recognize that these efforts impact more than the students supported by a promise program. They benefit all community college students and are part of a larger reform effort focused on increasing student success. In the last five years, community colleges have shifted efforts from designing boutique programs that support a tiny percentage of students toward a redesign of the entire community college experience. The national Guided Pathways movement, stimulated by the publication of *Redesigning American's Community Colleges*, has helped colleges adapt our open-access institutions into success-focused institutions. As Governor Whitmer and the Michigan Legislature consider investing in free-college programs (HB 4456, HB 4464; SB 267, SB 268), I expect that Michigan's community colleges will continue to adapt practices to serve a changing population of students.