

TBR | The College System of Tennessee

Reimagining the Community College Experience

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Summary

Like open-access systems across the U.S., TBR is facing a multi-pronged challenge of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent enrollment loss, student retention and graduation, and alignment between academic programs and workforce needs that lead to well-paying jobs and careers. This concept paper lays out a broad framework for a reimagined community college experience for students that addresses those challenges. This framework attempts to outline a concept, an approach to thinking about these challenges and potential solutions differently. Therefore, it does not attempt to wrestle with implementation challenges or to have all the details worked out at this juncture. Instead, it seeks to prompt a conversation about contemporary challenges and contemplate a student experience that better fulfills [TBR's Strategic Plan](#).

This concept paper takes a direct and unflinching look at student outcome data and the alignment between academic programs and workforce needs. It then reimagines the community college experience around broad parameters, including extensive pre-college career advising, a first semester workforce-ready certificate, contextualized general education courses, and reengineered transfer pathways. These changes are conceived to produce dramatically higher student success rates and better program alignment that addresses workforce needs.

Background and Purpose

One of the long-standing pursuits of the TBR system, which is part of the [2015-2025 Strategic Plan](#), is a strong connection between academic programs and workforce development. Preparing students for careers and promoting their economic mobility requires constant attention to economic trends, workforce needs, and the content of academic programs. This dynamic is not limited to certificates and workforce training programs. The role of community colleges in preparing students with associate degrees designed to transfer to a university helps propel them on their journey to a bachelor's degree and beyond.

At TBR community colleges, this alignment between academic programs and workforce development is reflected in their "dual mission." Colleges both prepare students for transfer to a university through the associate degree and provide workforce training options for students through applied associate degrees, certificates, and a variety of non-credit activities. This dual mission is operationalized in various ways, most clearly in the panoply of credentials conferred across the community college sector (52 percent in general transfer associate degrees (AA or AS), 26 percent in applied associate degrees (AAS), and 22 percent in short- and long-term technical certificates). Furthermore, the workforce development mission takes form in the outcomes-based funding formula, with non-credit workforce training contact hours being one of the eleven outcomes from which state appropriations are calculated. In 2021, community colleges performed 883,000 workforce training contact hours.

Community colleges occupy a unique role in Tennessee higher education by fulfilling this dual mission in service of students and their communities. Campus ingenuity and hard work, combined with state-level policy, have put Tennessee on the path to meet its Drive to 55 educational attainment goal as community colleges have made sustained and important progress in improving student success over the past decade. Community colleges have produced a record number of credentials over the last few years while doubling graduation rates. There is, though, significant work to be done to improve student success, and the COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened the need for higher education to find creative ways to serve students, communities, and business and industry. In particular, TBR colleges have experienced sharp enrollment declines over the last two years that, as of now, show no real signs of abating. Enrollment of both adult students and recent high school graduates has declined, and Tennessee's 2021 college-going rate has fallen to pre-Tennessee Promise levels ([THEC, 2022](#)). Given broader economic trends, such as rising wages and inflation, community colleges will need a renewed focus on ensuring that programs have value and appeal to students who are seeking well-paying jobs ([CCRC, 2021](#)).

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, longitudinal student success improvements, ongoing challenges of TBR's work as an open-access system, and the evolving needs of the state's economy coalesce to produce an opportunity and an urgent need to reflect on the strategic direction and the future of the community college. Doing so demands a thorough understanding of present challenges and an honest reckoning with the realities of student retention, graduation, transfer, and labor market outcomes.

Taking Stock of Current Trends

To begin their college career, students at Tennessee community colleges must select a program of study. Most students select the transfer pathway and the pursuit of an Associate of Arts or Associate of Science (AA/AS) degree. Currently, 76 percent of first-time freshmen are pursuing University Parallel studies or other degrees designed to transfer to a university. However, many students select general transfer programs when they are uncertain about their preferred program of study, and University Parallel programs have emerged as the default choice.

While that path remains appropriate for many students' interests and skills, it may not be the most appropriate training for a critical mass of jobs, nor is it consonant with the current state of a large swath of the Tennessee economy ([National Skills Coalition, 2020](#); [THEC, 2021](#); [TNECD, 2021](#)). A majority of jobs in Tennessee require training that falls between a high school diploma and a four-year degree, but only 49 percent of Tennesseans have access to the skills training required to work in these fields ([National Skills Coalition, 2020](#)). In Tennessee, seven of the fifteen highest-demand occupations require an associate degree or sub-associate certificate ([Tennessee Department of Labor & Workforce Development, 2020](#)). Furthermore, as more data on education and wage outcomes becomes available, many of the best pathways to student success and in-demand jobs flow through applied fields and certificate programs. Some heretofore healthy pathways via transfer degrees are no longer as rewarded in the labor market.

Current TBR data bears this out. Given TBR's [open-access mission](#), many students are academically underprepared for college coursework ([TBR, 2021](#)). TBR colleges have creatively and valiantly done tremendous work to mitigate these challenges. However, the freshmen graduation rate for the most recent freshman cohort is 26 percent. Furthermore, of each 100 freshmen who begin at community college, 24 leave after the first semester, while another 25 students leave after the second semester. Among those who leave after their first semester, 66 percent accumulated zero credit hours. In other words, nearly half of each freshman class does not return for a second year of education. Many students leave with no progress made toward a credential. These success rates are even more troubling for low-income and Black students, with only 23 percent of low-income students and 13 percent of Black students graduating.

Extending the analysis beyond graduation and retention rates, many students find transfer to a university and a bachelor's degree to be difficult, even though the Tennessee Transfer Pathways (TTPs) provide an effective means of ensuring that community college credits earned are not lost in the process:

- Among students who enrolled as first-time freshmen at Tennessee community colleges in 2015, only 29 percent ever transferred to a four-year university (regardless of whether they completed a TBR credential).
- Only 15 percent of community college freshmen ever earn a bachelor's degree.
- Bachelor's degree attainment rates were slightly higher for community college students with ACT composite scores above 21. However, even among community college students who had ACT composite scores of 29 and above, which indicates strong academic preparation, only 34 percent attained a bachelor's degree.

TBR community colleges' annual credential production, where roughly half of the awards are earned each year are in general transfer programs and half are in workforce-ready applied associate degrees and certificates, in theory, ought to align with the broad needs of the economy as well as student interests and preparation. Consider, though, that the labor market has provided a different perspective:

- Community college graduates from AA and AS transfer programs who do not attain a bachelor's degree are less likely to be employed in Tennessee and earn lower wages than graduates of other programs (TBR, 2022). Three years after graduation, 42 percent of AA/AS graduates were observed in TN employment data compared to 58 percent of graduates from applied associate programs and 61 percent of certificate completers.
- Graduates from workforce-focused programs at community colleges earn significantly more than AA/AS graduates who do not transfer to a university or attain a bachelor's degree. In the third year after departing college, the average graduate of applied associate programs earned 48 percent more (\$13,000 per year) than the average AA/AS transfer program graduate who did not transfer to a university. Certificate completers earned 36 percent more (\$9,600 per year) than AA/AS graduates who did not transfer to a university.
- Employment outcomes are especially strong for graduates of applied associate degree programs in healthcare-related fields. Adult students who returned to college and graduated from programs in Health Professions realized a 70 percent increase in wages compared to their earnings before their return to college. Five years after re-enrolling at college, these graduates earned \$16,500 more each year than they earned before re-enrolling. However, similar students who graduated from AA/AS programs saw only a 26 percent increase in wages over the same period, which translates to an increase of \$5,600 in annual wages. In fact, wage returns for AA and AS graduates were comparable to those of students who enrolled but did not graduate (TBR, 2022).

Meanwhile, across Tennessee, the fastest-growing occupations and the most in-demand jobs are in fields such as health care (broadly defined), IT/cybersecurity/cloud computing, logistics and transportation, manufacturing, electric vehicles, and more. Various state agencies (ECD, Labor, THEC) annually produce reports that document the supply/demand dynamics across these industries, the totality of which points toward the glaring disconnect between the credentials that most students currently pursue and economic needs (THEC, 2021; TNECD, 2021). TBR colleges offer programs in these fields at all 13 community colleges, though as the current degree production numbers indicate, they are the minority of credentials earned (TBR, 2021). However, research shows that short-term, stackable credentials boost students' employment and wages (Meyer, Bird, and Castleman, 2020). The misalignment between academic programs/production and economic opportunities suggests an opening (and urgent need) to reimagine the community college in ways that could dramatically affect students, families, businesses, and communities.

What a Reimagined Future (Student or Community College Experience?) Could Look Like...

TBR is committed to supporting community colleges' dual mission by ensuring all students have the opportunity to pursue whatever pathway they choose, whether that be an associate degree for transfer to a university or a workforce-ready credential. The student's experience, though, could be reconceptualized by resequencing the coursework that students encounter and introducing a workforce-ready credential as their first and foundational experience.

To begin, students would encounter in-depth support for career exploration before enrolling. This intensive career advising would be designed to assist students in selecting a broad career area and would continue throughout students' educational careers. Then, upon enrolling, students would encounter a reimagined sequence of coursework. This course sequence, which would be in various fields identified by the college (e.g., IT, health science, business/accounting, logistics, etc.) that align with local and regional workforce needs, would allow a student to earn a certificate in their first semester, thereby preparing them in some capacity to enter the workforce and start a career. This certificate would also be the foundational building block for students by articulating into an AA, AS, or AAS degree. Any student could declare and pursue an associate degree. However, the first step in that journey would be a foundational, workforce-ready credential. These certificates, which will either articulate into an AAS, AA, or AS degree or provide a stand-alone credential that allows for transition into the workforce, will form the foundation of each student's first community college semester.

The second semester would either extend the workforce-related training through stackable certificates or introduce general education courses that build toward applied associate degrees or associate degrees designed to transfer to a university. As students build off the workforce certificate from their first semester and pursue associate degrees, colleges would offer English, math, and other courses that are part of the general education curriculum whose content would be contextualized in ways that link directly to the broad field that students pursued in their first semester. For example, a college could offer general education English courses that incorporate workforce-focused soft skills and connect to field-specific topics, issues, and writings.

Therefore, in the redesigned community college experience, students would encounter:

- Extensive and personalized pre-college career exploration, followed by in-depth career advising and soft skills development throughout a student's program of study.
- A workforce-focused certificate in the first semester, drawn from programs that align with the local/regional economy, to expand and enrich entry and exit points for students as they navigate and move between higher education and the labor force.
- An articulated transition into the second semester that extends the workforce-ready skills and/or adds general education courses that have been contextualized to a student's program of study and that injects workforce skills like communication and critical thinking into the student's pathway.
- Reengineered transfer pathways that stack students' skills and courses from the first two semesters into AA/AS/AAS degrees and/or TCAT programs.

Of course, TBR and colleges will need to consider many details in order to achieve the reimagined community college experience. These details, which extend beyond the scope of this concept paper, are

critical and will require design from colleges to ensure a seamless experience for students. Academic program offerings may need to be revised to create additional workforce-focused certificates or to embed these certificates into associate degree programs. Faculty members will play an essential role in the development of academic programs as well as the contextualization and sequencing of general education coursework. The capacity of student advisors and success coaches will need to extend to encompass ongoing, intensive career-focused advising. Colleges will also need to consider operational details related to student financial aid, credit articulation, and faculty course loads.

In summary, the community college experience for many students, which for most now begins with a daunting sequence of general education courses, would fundamentally change. Instead, the student's community college experience would begin with a foundational workforce certificate in a field linked to existing careers and workforce needs. These foundational credentials would provide a pathway to the workforce but would also then form the building blocks of an associate degree for those whose interests and skills lead them to continue that path. Such a reimagining of the community college experience would align TBR's education and training with the current economy and workforce needs, and it would provide a path to a credential and career.