Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury

Office of Research and Education Accountability

# Tennessee Reconnect Grant Evaluation

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# Contents


3 Introduction

3 Research methods

5 The Tennessee Reconnect Grant

17 Tennessee Reconnect by the numbers

26 Outcomes: Credit accrual, retention, and credential attainment

38 Common challenges

41 Evidence from other studies

43 Conclusions

47 Considerations

51 Endnotes

52 Appendix A: Sample Reconnect application

54 Appendix B: Sample Reconnect success plan

# Introduction

In 2017, the General Assembly created the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, giving adults an opportunity to earn an associate degree or certificate free of tuition and mandatory fees. Since fall 2018, Tennessee residents have been enrolling in community colleges, eligible public universities, and private institutions using the grant.

To be eligible for Tennessee Reconnect, an individual must not have previously earned an associate or bachelor's degree, must qualify as an independent student on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or be at least 23 years of age, fill out a Reconnect application, participate in a success plan, maintain a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA, and maintain continuous part-time enrollment (i.e., at least six credit hours in the fall and spring semesters).

State law requires the Comptroller's Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) to review, study, and determine the effectiveness of Tennessee Reconnect every four years.[A] OREA published its first evaluation in February 2022. This is OREA's second statutorily required evaluation of the grant. The evaluation includes data from fall 2018 through summer 2024.

This report explains how Tennessee Reconnect works, shows who is served by Tennessee Reconnect, examines how Tennessee Reconnect impacts student outcomes, and provides considerations for interested parties.

# Research methods

## Tennessee Reconnect vs. TCAT Reconnect

All references to Reconnect in this evaluation refer specifically to the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, which is distinct from the TCAT (Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology) Reconnect Grant. Tennessee Reconnect targets adult students pursuing associate degrees and certificates. TCAT Reconnect targets adult students pursuing technical diplomas and certificates at Tennessee's Colleges of Applied Technology. Both grants are funded by the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship (TELS) program. *Tennessee Code Annotated* (*TCA*) 49-4-944(k) requires OREA to evaluate the Tennessee Reconnect Grant.

## Definitions

### *Students*

In this report, four groups of students are defined based on their Reconnect eligibility and receipt of the Reconnect grant: applicants, zero-dollar Reconnect students, last-dollar Reconnect students, and non-Reconnect students. The four groups are defined as follows:

- **Applicant:** an individual who filed a Reconnect application. Applicants may become Reconnect students (either zero- or last-dollar), never enroll, or fail to meet other eligibility criteria and not become Reconnect students.
- **Zero-dollar Reconnect student:** an individual who met all eligibility requirements for Reconnect but had the full cost of tuition and mandatory fees covered by other sources of gift aid.[B]
- **Last-dollar Reconnect student:** an individual who met all eligibility requirements for Reconnect and received the Reconnect grant.

[A] *TCA* 49-4-944(k).

[B] Some state agencies that produce research on Tennessee Reconnect use a broader definition of Reconnect students that includes adult/independent students who pursue associate degrees but did not meet all Reconnect eligibility requirements. For the purposes of this evaluation, OREA only includes students who met all Reconnect eligibility requirements.

- **Non-Reconnect student:** an individual who could have qualified for the Reconnect grant given their age or independent status on the FAFSA and who had not earned a disqualifying credential but did not apply or did not meet other eligibility requirements, such as enrolling in the minimum required six credit hours, or was not enrolled in a Reconnect eligible institution.

Two terms are used to differentiate among Reconnect students: zero-dollar and last-dollar. Both zero-dollar and last-dollar students met all eligibility requirements, thus were eligible to receive the Reconnect grant, but only last-dollar students receive grant funding. This is because zero-dollar students receive enough gift aid from other sources to cover the full cost of tuition and mandatory fees. (The Tennessee Reconnect Grant is a last-dollar scholarship, meaning it is applied to an eligible student's tuition and mandatory fees after all other gift aid is applied.) Nearly half of all Reconnect students are zero-dollar Reconnect students, with 48 percent of Reconnect students having never received grant funding. It is possible for Reconnect students to start as zero-dollar students and become last-dollar students. Among last-dollar Reconnect students, 20 percent start as zero-dollar students then become last-dollar students later in their time at college. This scenario occurs when those students' financial aid situation changes, meaning they lose some other form of financial aid, or if the cost of tuition and fees increase, causing previously sufficient grant aid to be insufficient to cover tuition and fees.

Zero-dollar Reconnect students are not subject to continuing eligibility requirements or terminating events until the first semester in which the student receives funding from the Tennessee Reconnect Grant (i.e., when they become a last-dollar Reconnect student). See more on page 10 regarding eligibility requirements.

Because 95 percent of last-dollar Reconnect students attended a community college, the analyses contained in this report largely focus on students enrolled in community colleges.

### *Credentials*

Credentials refer to the degrees and certificates that students can pursue and obtain at institutions of higher education. Reconnect may only be used in pursuit of an associate degree or academic certificate at an eligible institution. Academic certificates are based on credit hours and offered at community colleges and other non-technical colleges and universities.[C] Certificates can be either sequential or terminal. Sequential certificates can be obtained as a part of a pathway to another certificate or degree in the same program of study. Terminal certificates are the highest possible credential in a program of study.

- **Associate degree:** an academic credential which requires roughly 60 credit hours (generally taking two years to complete if a student attends full time or four years if part time).
- **Long-term certificate:** an academic credential which requires 24 or more credit hours (generally taking one to two years to complete if a student attends full time or two to four years if part time).
- **Short-term certificate:** an academic credential which requires 23 credit hours or less (generally taking three months to one year to complete if a student attends full time or three months to two years if part time).

However, some Reconnect students go on to obtain degrees and certificates beyond the associate level. For example, a student may obtain a bachelor's degree from a four-year university after obtaining an associate degree at a community college.

When calculating the total number of credentials conferred as a result of the Reconnect grant, OREA counts any credentials last-dollar Reconnect students earn, including degrees beyond an associate degree, after having

[C] Technical certificates and degrees are based on training hours rather than credit hours.

received the Reconnect grant.[D] OREA made this decision because it considers any coursework a last-dollar Reconnect student completed as contributing to future credentials (like a bachelor's or master's degree).

### Data

The data OREA used to complete this report comes from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC). OREA analyzed financial aid data from fall 2018 through summer 2023 and credential data from fall 2018 through summer 2024. This report utilizes the additional year of credential data for students who were enrolled as a Reconnect student (including both last-dollar and zero-dollar students) prior to the end of the summer 2023 semester.

### Interviews

OREA conducted interviews with THEC and the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) and with faculty and staff at all 13 of Tennessee's community colleges. Interviews with faculty and staff at community colleges were conducted in two groups: student-facing staff and administrative staff. Interviewees were allowed to select which group best fit their role. The interviews with community college administrators took place during the spring and summer semesters of 2025. OREA used interviewees' observations and hands-on knowledge of the grant to further contextualize the Reconnect student experience.

## The Tennessee Reconnect Grant

The following section provides a comprehensive overview of how the Reconnect grant operates, including its funding, eligibility requirements, participating institutions and how much it costs to attend those institutions. It also addresses recent policy changes and the reasons non-Reconnect students do not become grant recipients.

### How does Tennessee Reconnect work?

Tennessee Reconnect is a last-dollar scholarship funded through the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship (TELS) program for adults to pursue certificates and associate degrees at public community colleges and eligible private institutions and public four-year universities for up to five consecutive years. As a last-dollar grant, Tennessee Reconnect is applied to a student's tuition and mandatory fee balance after other sources of gift aid, like federal Pell grants and state-funded merit scholarships, are applied.[E] Tuition and mandatory fees are charges applied to students' accounts that are required for enrollment and are charged to all students.

Reconnect does not cover "non-mandatory fees" which include fees charged for specific courses, online classes, labs, and programs. Required materials like textbooks and supplies are also not covered by the grant. While these costs are required for some programs of study, these fees are classified as non-mandatory and are not covered by the grant. Students can pay for them using personal funds, student loans, or other sources of financial aid. See Exhibit 1 for examples of mandatory and non-mandatory fees.

According to state law,[F] the Tennessee Reconnect Grant shall not exceed the cost of tuition and mandatory fees charged to all students for coursework leading to completion of an eligible program of study (academic certificates and associate degrees) at an eligible institution less other gift aid, which shall be credited first to a student's bill for tuition and mandatory fees. While tuition is the same at all of Tennessee's community colleges, the exact amount of Reconnect grant dollars a student receives varies because of the grant's last-dollar nature.[G] Students who qualify for the Reconnect grant can receive grant funding anywhere between

[D] Students may obtain more than one credential throughout their academic career. As such, the total number of credentials is not equal to the number of students who receive a credential.

[E] Merit scholarships use academic attainment as the primary eligibility criteria. For example, to qualify for the Tennessee HOPE Scholarship, eligible students must obtain a score of 21 or higher on the ACT or 1060 or higher on the SAT and have at least a 3.0 GPA in high school.

[F] *TCA* 49-4-944(b)(4).

[G] Tuition is the same at all of Tennessee's community colleges, but mandatory fee costs can vary by community college.

zero dollars up to the full cost of tuition and mandatory fees based on how much of the student's tuition and mandatory fees are covered by other sources of gift aid.[H]

**Exhibit 1: What is a mandatory fee?**

| Mandatory fees (covered by Reconnect) | Non-mandatory fees (not covered by Reconnect) |
|---|---|
| International education fees | Online/eCampus course fees |
| Student government fees | Course fees |
| Student activity fees | Program fees |
| Technology access fees | Lab fees |
| Program service fees | Exam fees |
| | Parking fees |
| | Supply fees |
| | Liability insurance fees |
| | eTextbook/Online access fees |

Source: OREA analysis of community college fees.

Tennessee Reconnect is similar to the Tennessee Promise Scholarship because they are both last-dollar scholarships intended to help students obtain a postsecondary credential, but the two scholarships have different eligibility criteria and serve different populations. The focus population of Tennessee Reconnect is adult students (age 23 years or older or qualifying as independent on the FAFSA) who either return to postsecondary education or enter for the first time. The focus population of Tennessee Promise is recent high school graduates who enter higher education immediately after graduating from high school.

Tennessee Promise requires full-time enrollment and is available to students for five semesters or eight trimesters, while Tennessee Reconnect requires part-time enrollment, minimally, and is available to students for up to five years. Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect can both be used at community colleges and eligible public universities and private institutions, while only Tennessee Promise can be used at TCATs.[I] Tennessee Promise students are also required to complete 16 hours of community service each year while there is no community service requirement for Reconnect students.

### *Navigate Reconnect*

Navigate Reconnect is a state-funded program that provides guidance and assistance to adult learners in Tennessee, including Reconnect students. All Tennessee adults are eligible for Navigate Reconnect services free of charge, even if they do not become Reconnect students. Navigate Reconnect staff, called "Navigators," are based in regions across the state. They help adult students explore college options, answer questions about financial aid and the enrollment process, and provide additional supports once students are enrolled. Navigators also connect adult students with local resources such as childcare and affordable transportation options, make direct referrals to campus contacts (e.g., financial aid, admissions, academic advising), and provide encouragement throughout the process. Reconnect students may work with a Navigator but are not required to do so.

More information on Navigate Reconnect, including results from a study published by the University of Tennessee's Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research can be found on pages 41-42.

[H] The continuing eligibility requirements only apply to Reconnect students who receive grant funding (i.e., last-dollar Reconnect students). Zero-dollar Reconnect students are not subject to continuing eligibility requirements until the first semester in which the student receives funding from the Tennessee Reconnect Grant (i.e., when they become a last-dollar Reconnect student). In the event a zero-dollar student becomes a last-dollar student, the student is not required to reapply for the Reconnect grant so long as he or she filed the FAFSA annually.
[I] While Tennessee Reconnect cannot be used at TCATs, TCAT Reconnect can be used at TCATs.

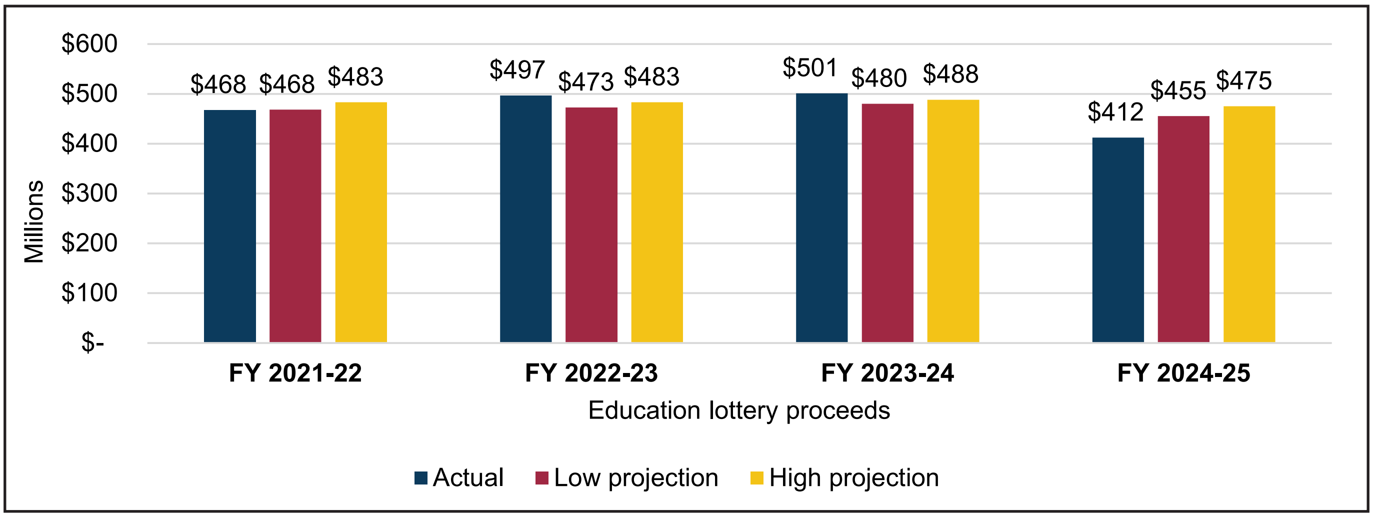
## How is Tennessee Reconnect funded?

Reconnect is one of many Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship (TELS) funded programs. The TELS programs provide financial assistance for Tennesseans to attend in-state postsecondary institutions, including all public and some private schools. The programs are funded through lottery proceeds. A TELS recipient must be a Tennessee resident, file the FAFSA, and be admitted to an eligible postsecondary institution, among other eligibility criteria. TELS programs are administered by the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC) and include the Hope Scholarship, Tennessee Promise, Tennessee Reconnect, TCAT Reconnect, Wilder-Naifeh, and the Dual Enrollment Grant, among others. From FY 2014-15 until FY 2025-26, surplus lottery revenues above what is required to fund TELS programs were deposited into the Promise Endowment Fund.

In November 2024, the Tennessee Education Lottery Corporation estimated that lottery for education proceeds would be less in FY 2024-25 (between $455 million and $475 million) than they were in FY 2023-24 ($501 million) with modest increases in projections for FY 2025-26 through FY 2028-29. While projections for FY 2025-26 through FY 2028-29 indicate potential growth in lottery proceeds, the anticipated short-term decline starting in FY 2024-25 highlights potential pressures on available funds for TELS programs.

For additional context, in 2021 the Tennessee Education Lottery Corporation projected FY 2024-25 proceeds between $493 million and $516 million while current projections are between $455 million and $475 million. As such, lottery revenue has not grown at the Tennessee Education Lottery Corporation's expected rates.

**Exhibit 2: TELS proceeds versus projections FY 2021-22 through FY 2024-25**

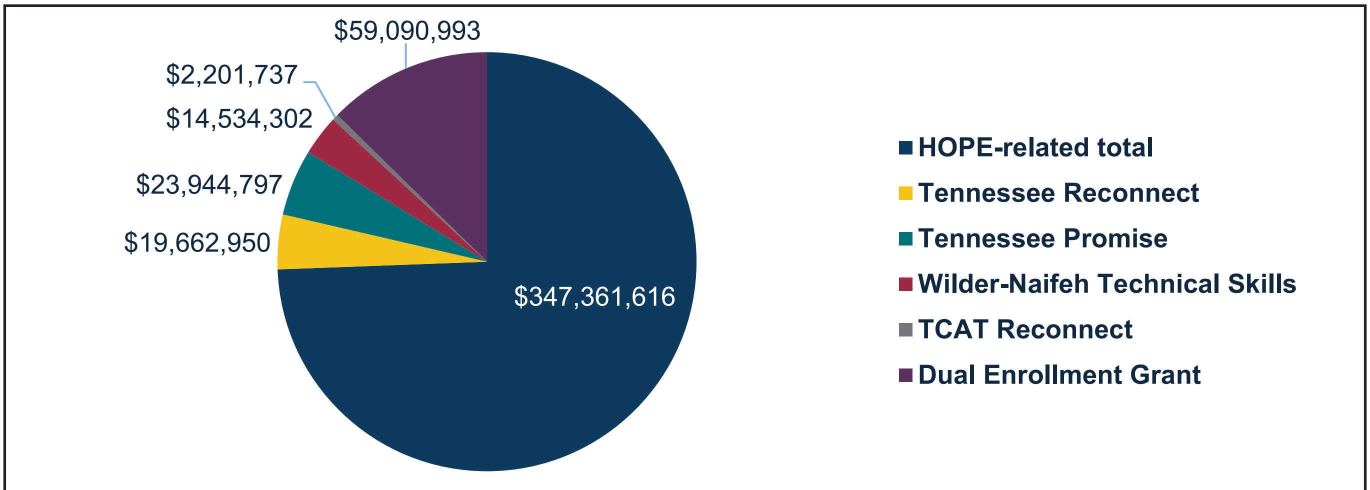



Source: Tennessee Education Lottery Corporation estimates, 2021 through 2025.

It is important to understand these funding dynamics because decreased lottery proceeds can directly impact TELS programs, including Reconnect. A reduction in lottery revenue could constrain the state's flexibility to expand existing programs or introduce new initiatives without reallocating resources. These projections provide helpful context for any forthcoming considerations that involve utilizing or expanding TELS funding.

Tennessee Promise scholarships are funded from the Tennessee Promise Endowment Fund. Promise expenditures are presented alongside TELS expenditures in Exhibits 3 and 4 for program cost comparison purposes.

**Exhibit 3: Tennessee Reconnect is the fourth largest TELS expenditure (FY 2023-24)**

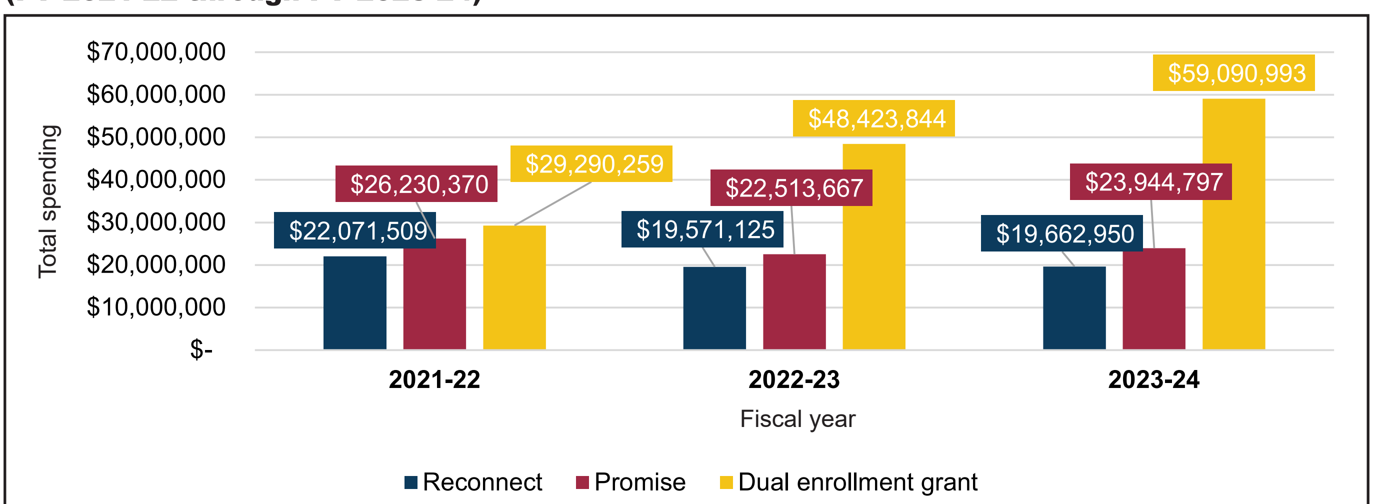



| Program | Students | Expenditure per student |
|---|---|---|
| HOPE-related total | 71,583 | $4,852.57 |
| Tennessee Reconnect | 7,828 | $2,511.87 |
| Tennessee Promise | 12,717 | $1,882.90 |
| Wilder-Naifeh Technical Skills | 11,522 | $1,261.44 |
| TCAT Reconnect | 1,918 | $1,147.93 |
| Dual Enrollment Grant | 50,211 | $1,176.85 |

Notes: (1) In this exhibit, the HOPE-related total includes traditional HOPE, Non-traditional HOPE, the General Assembly Merit Scholarship (GAMS), Aspire, and the HOPE Foster Care Grant. There are additional lottery funded scholarships not included in this exhibit, such as the Helping Heroes Grant and the Middle College Scholarship. (2) This exhibit includes last-dollar Reconnect students and excludes zero-dollar Reconnect students. As a result, the number of Reconnect students represented in this exhibit may differ from figures reported elsewhere.
Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation, Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship Program 2024 Annual Report.

HOPE-related spending made up the largest share of education lottery spending in 2023-24, followed by the Dual Enrollment Grant, as detailed in Exhibit 4. The number of students served by each lottery scholarship follows the spending pattern: HOPE-related programs serve the greatest number of students, followed by the Dual Enrollment Grant, Tennessee Promise, the Wilder-Naifeh Technical Skills Grant, and Tennessee Reconnect. Expenditure per student varies across programs due to differences in award amounts and what other forms of aid are available to students. Although Reconnect and Promise are both last-dollar scholarships, Reconnect students have higher average aid amounts per student ($2,511.83 versus $1,882.67). This difference may result from more Promise students qualifying for additional aid, like the HOPE scholarship.

**Exhibit 4: Three-year trend for Reconnect, Promise, and the Dual Enrollment Grant (FY 2021-22 through FY 2023-24)**



| Year | Program | Students | Expenditure per student |
|---|---|---|---|
| FY 2021–22 | Tennessee Reconnect | 8,925 | $2,473.00 |
| | Tennessee Promise | 13,796 | $1,901.30 |
| | Dual enrollment grant | 31,626 | $926.14 |
| FY 2022–23 | Tennessee Reconnect | 7,804 | $2,507.83 |
| | Tennessee Promise | 12,847 | $1,752.45 |
| | Dual enrollment grant | 41,709 | $1,160.99 |
| FY 2023–24 | Tennessee Reconnect | 7,828 | $2,511.87 |
| | Tennessee Promise | 12,717 | $1,882.90 |
| | Dual enrollment grant | 50,211 | $1,176.85 |

Note: This exhibit includes last-dollar Reconnect students and excludes zero-dollar Reconnect students. As a result, the number of Reconnect students represented in this exhibit may differ from figures reported elsewhere.
Source: Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation, Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship Program 2024 Annual Report.

Over the three-year period from FY 2021-22 to FY 2023-24, total expenditures for the Dual Enrollment Grant more than doubled from approximately $29.3 million in FY 2021-22 to $59.1 million in FY 2023-24. Tennessee Promise expenditures remained relatively steady, ranging from about $22.5 million to $26.2 million. Tennessee Reconnect funding also held steady at just under $20 million from FY 2022-23 to FY 2023-24 after declining from about $22.1 million in FY 2021-22. The Dual Enrollment Grant's growth is particularly notable as it is clearly becoming a popular TELS program and takes up a greater share of TELS funding.

## How much does it cost to attend Tennessee's community colleges?

About 95 percent of Reconnect students attend community colleges. Reconnect covers the cost of tuition and mandatory fees at community colleges or up to the average cost of tuition and mandatory fees at community colleges at other eligible institutions (i.e., eligible private institutions or public four-year universities).

In academic year 2025-26, the average cost of tuition and mandatory fees at Tennessee's community colleges was $2,292 per semester for in-state students enrolled in 12 credit hours. Part-time students taking the minimum number of credits required to retain Reconnect eligibility (six credit hours) at community colleges were expected to pay, on average, $1,146 in tuition.

In the 2025-26 academic year, mandatory fees ranged from $146 to $174 per semester and did not vary based on the number of credits attempted by the student. Non-mandatory fees at community colleges, which are not covered by the Reconnect Grant, are another substantial cost incurred by Reconnect students, depending on their courses and/or program of study. These fees are concentrated in courses taken online or in the health and science, engineering, music, and art fields. (See exhibit 1 for a list of mandatory and non-mandatory fees.) They can vary in cost and are often assessed per credit hour.

For example, a $25 per credit online course fee is applied to all online courses. If a student takes six credit hours online, the student will be required to pay an additional $150 (i.e., $25 fee multiplied by 6 credit hours, or $150) on top of tuition and mandatory fees to remain enrolled in the online course. As online courses have become more popular since 2020, more students are responsible for paying fees associated with taking online or e-Campus courses. As another example, nursing students may be required to pay course fees at $25 per credit hour, nursing exam fees (which can be hundreds to thousands of dollars), and liability or malpractice insurance fees at up to $75 per semester. From fall 2018 through summer 2024, 14 percent of last-dollar Reconnect students received a credential in nursing.

## Who is eligible to receive Tennessee Reconnect?

To be eligible for Tennessee Reconnect, an individual must meet the criteria listed in Exhibit 5. Broadly speaking, the criteria ensure a participating student qualifies as independent on the FAFSA or is age 23 or older, does not have a degree, and meets academic standards.

**Exhibit 5: Requirements for students participating in TN Reconnect, as of the 2025-26 academic year**

| Initial eligibility requirements | Continuing eligibility requirements |
|---|---|
| Determined to be a Tennessee resident pursuant to TBR guidelines | Maintain residence in Tennessee |
| Cannot have earned an associate or bachelor's degree previously | Cannot have completed an associate degree or terminal certificate or passed 5 years since beginning to receive the Reconnect grant |
| Submit a FAFSA application | Resubmit a FAFSA application annually |
| Qualify as an independent student on the FAFSA or turn 23 years old before January 1 during the academic year when initially enrolled | Enroll at an eligible postsecondary institution (see Exhibit 9 to see all eligible institutions) |
| Fill out and submit the Reconnect application by June 30 of the academic year in which the student is enrolled | Enroll in classes that lead to completion of an eligible program of study |
| Enroll at an eligible postsecondary institution (see Exhibit 9 to see all eligible institutions) | Maintain a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA (for all semesters after beginning to receive the Reconnect grant) at the end of each academic year (calculated after the summer semester each year) |
| Enroll in classes that lead to completion of an eligible program of study | Minimally maintain continuous part-time enrollment (i.e., at least six credit hours in the fall and spring semesters) |

Notes: (1) Reconnect students are not required to maintain part-time enrollment during the summer semester or if the student's postsecondary institution does not offer sufficient coursework in the student's program of study in a given semester. (2) The continuing eligibility requirements only apply to Reconnect students who receive grant funding (i.e., last-dollar Reconnect students). Zero-dollar Reconnect students are not subject to continuing eligibility requirements until the first semester in which the student receives funding from the Tennessee Reconnect Grant (i.e., when they become a last-dollar Reconnect student). (3) FAFSA applications are due by September 1 if a student first enrolls in the fall semester, March 1 if a student first enrolls in the spring semester, and May 1 if a student first enrolls in a summer semester. (4) Enrollment in the summer semester is not required to maintain grant eligibility.
Source: *TCA* 49-4-944 and TSAC rules.

Students who have earned an associate degree or higher are not eligible for Tennessee Reconnect, but those who have earned a certificate are eligible for the grant if they meet all other eligibility criteria.

A student must also qualify as independent on the FAFSA or be at least 23 years old prior to January 1 during the academic year to be eligible. This means that, in practice, a student can be 22 years old when they begin receiving the Reconnect Grant during the fall semester if they turn 23 on or before December 31 of that year. A student is considered independent if the student answers yes to any of the relevant questions on the FAFSA. The relevant questions include such topics as marital status, whether they are an active duty servicemember or veteran, and whether they are an emancipated minor, among others. See Exhibit 6 for the full list of questions to determine dependency.

**Exhibit 6: Answering yes to any of these questions on the FAFSA results in a student being considered an independent student for the purposes of financial aid (2025-26 academic year)**

| |
|---|
| Were you born before January 1, 2002? |
| As of today, are you married? |
| At the beginning of the 2025-26 school year, will you be working on a master's or doctorate program? |
| Are you currently serving on active duty in the U.S. armed forces for purposes other than training? (If you are a National Guard or Reserves enlistee, are you on active duty for other than state or training purposes?) |
| Are you a veteran of the U.S. armed forces? |
| Do you have children or other people (excluding your spouse) who live with you and who receive more than half of their support from you now and between July 1, 2025, and June 30, 2026? |
| At any time since you turned age 13, were you an orphan? |
| At any time since you turned age 13, were you a ward of the court? |
| At any time since you turned age 13, were you in foster care? |
| Are you or were you a legally emancipated minor, as determined by a court in your state of residence? |
| Are you or were you in a legal guardianship with someone other than your parent or stepparent, as determined by a court in your state of residence? |

Source: Federal Student Aid Office of the U.S. Department of Education.

Prospective participants create an account and complete the Reconnect application through the TSAC website. The application asks questions about previous college enrollment, socioeconomic status, demographics, and perceived barriers to college success. The application also asks if students intend to work while enrolled in college, if they have dependents, their preferred course delivery and schedule (e.g., online, evenings, etc.), and whether they have reliable access to transportation and internet. See Appendix A to view a copy of the Reconnect application.

Upon submission, the application generates a personalized success plan for applicants based on the students' responses. The success plan is immediately available to the applicant and includes instructions regarding the next steps toward enrollment, contact information for regional Navigators, campus information at their intended institution (including available resources and support), links to information on degree programs, other sources of financial aid, and more. The creation of the success plan fulfills the statutory requirement[J] for students to participate in a college success program. A sample success plan can be seen in Appendix B.

To remain eligible for the grant, Reconnect students must maintain a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA after they begin to receive Reconnect funding. Cumulative GPAs are calculated at the end of the summer semester each academic year. Participating students must enroll in at least six credits each fall and spring semester to remain eligible for the grant. Enrollment in the summer semester is optional and not required to maintain grant eligibility.

Additionally, Reconnect students who enroll in the summer do not have a minimum number of credits they must take to remain eligible. Reconnect students are also not required to maintain part-time enrollment if the student's postsecondary institution does not offer sufficient coursework in the student's program of study in a given semester. These eligibility requirements apply only to last-dollar Reconnect students. Zero-dollar Reconnect students are not subject to continuing eligibility requirements until the first semester in which the student receives funding from the Tennessee Reconnect Grant.

### *Reasons non-Reconnect students do not become Reconnect students*

Non-Reconnect students miss a significant opportunity to earn a credential free of tuition and mandatory fees, and the state misses the opportunity to incentivize credential attainment. OREA looked at application data, FAFSA filing rates, and the number of credit hours attempted to determine why non-Reconnect students do

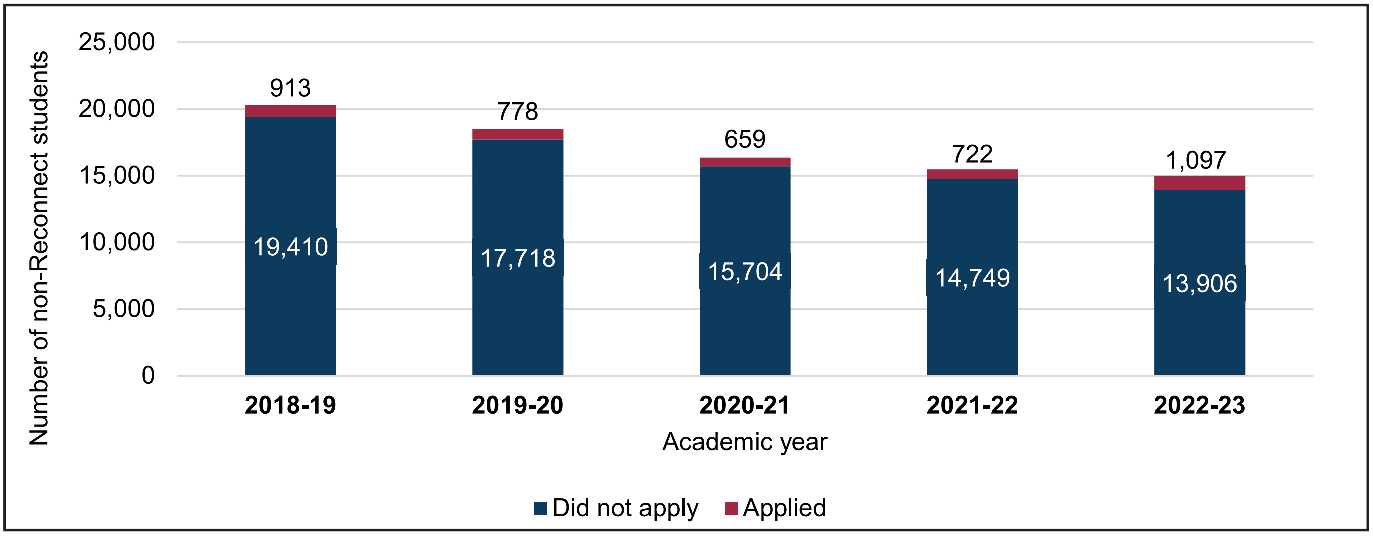
[J] *TCA* 49-4-944(c)(7).

not become Reconnect students. The minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA is not required unless students receive the Reconnect grant, so OREA omitted GPA from its review of non-Reconnect students. While students could be disqualified for failing to file the FAFSA or not maintaining enrollment in six credit hours, OREA treated these factors separately and did not analyze how often those disqualifications overlapped.

OREA used a combination of enrollment and application data to determine whether a non-Reconnect student filed a Reconnect application for the academic year in which they were enrolled.

## *Over 90 percent of non-Reconnect students did not fill out an application*

**Exhibit 7: Each year over 90 percent of non-Reconnect students did not file a Reconnect application, fall 2018 – summer 2023**



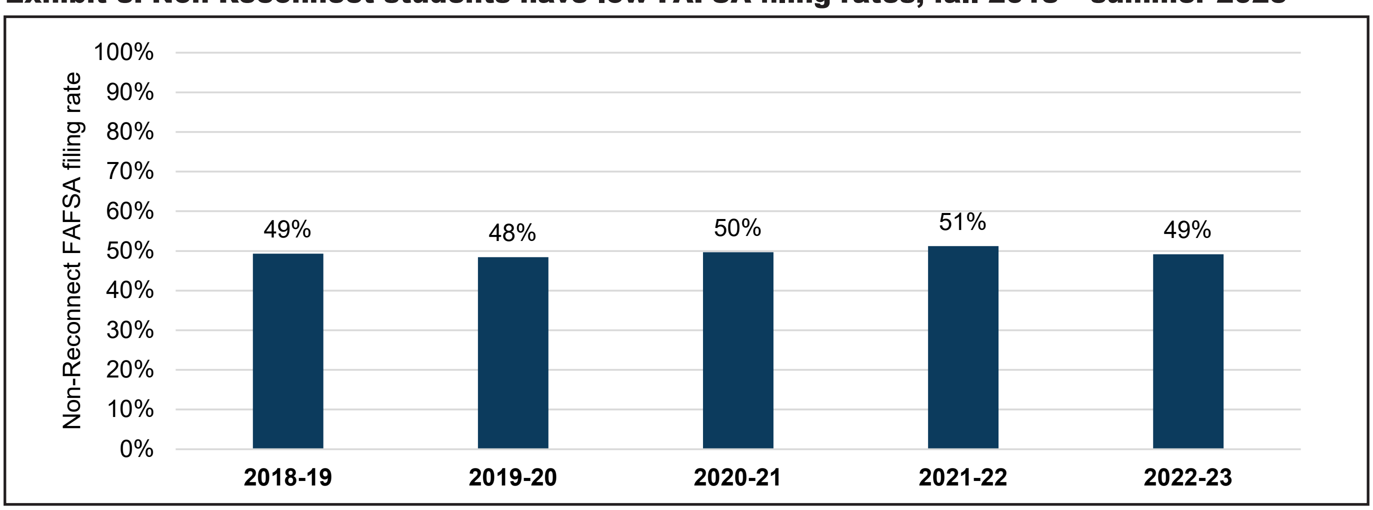

Note: Non-Reconnect students are double-counted across years but not within years. This exhibit does not reflect the distinct count of non-Reconnect students, identified by OREA as 50,975 unique non-Reconnect students enrolled from fall 2018 through summer 2023.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC enrollment and application data.

In each year shown in Exhibit 8 (2018-19 through 2022-23), over 90 percent of non-Reconnect students did not file a Reconnect application.

## *About half of non-Reconnect students did not file the FAFSA*

Furthermore, non-Reconnect students demonstrate modest FAFSA filing rates.

**Exhibit 8: Non-Reconnect students have low FAFSA filing rates, fall 2018 – summer 2023**




Source: OREA analysis of THEC data.

From fall 2018 through summer 2023, about half of all non-Reconnect students did not file the FAFSA. These students are not only ineligible for the Reconnect grant; they cannot receive any form of state or federal aid without filing the FAFSA.

During their first semester of enrollment between fall 2018 and summer 2023, between 15 and 16 percent of non-Reconnect students enrolled in fewer than the minimum six credit hours required.

In summary, not filling out the Reconnect application contributes most to non-Reconnect students' ineligibility followed by low FAFSA filing rates and enrolling in less than six credit hours.

### *Reconnect-eligible institutions*

Reconnect may be used at any of Tennessee's 13 community colleges, all of which offer certificates and associate degrees, or an eligible public university or private institution that offers such credentials. As of the 2024-25 academic year, two public universities and 19 private institutions are eligible for Reconnect.

**Exhibit 9: TN Reconnect can be used at 34 institutions, 2025-26 academic year**

| Public community colleges | Public universities | Private institutions |
|---|---|---|
| Chattanooga State<br>Cleveland State<br>Columbia State<br>Dyersburg State<br>Jackson State<br>Motlow College<br>Nashville State<br>Northeast State<br>Pellissippi State<br>Roane State<br>Southwest<br>Volunteer State<br>Walters State | Austin Peay State<br>Tennessee State | Baptist Health Sciences University<br>Bethel University<br>Bryan College<br>Carson-Newman University<br>Cumberland University<br>Freed-Hardeman University<br>John A. Gupton College<br>Johnson University<br>King University<br>Lane College<br>Lee University<br>LeMoyne-Owen College<br>Lincoln Memorial University<br>South College<br>Southern Adventist University<br>Trevecca Nazarene University<br>Tusculum University<br>Union University<br>Welch College |

Note: Reconnect students enrolled in a public university or private institution receive up to the average cost of tuition and mandatory fees at community colleges.
Source: TN Reconnect website.

The Tennessee Reconnect grant can be used at any of the 34 institutions listed in Exhibit 9. However, most (95 percent) last-dollar Reconnect students enrolled in a community college between fall 2018 and summer 2023. The remaining 5 percent of last-dollar Reconnect students attended private universities and colleges or eligible public four-year universities.[K]

### *Terminating events*

Once a Reconnect student becomes a last-dollar student (i.e., begins to receive grant funding), the student retains grant eligibility until one of the following occurs:

- the student earns an associate degree or terminal certificate;[L]
- five years have passed since the student began receiving the Reconnect grant, excluding approved leaves of absence;

[K] Less than 1 percent of Reconnect students were enrolled at an eligible public four-year university.
[L] A terminal certificate is the highest possible credential in a program of study. A sequential certificate, by contrast, is not. Sequential certificates can be obtained as a part of a pathway to another certificate or degree in the same program of study. Reconnect students who earn sequential certificates remain eligible for the Reconnect grant.

- the student fails to maintain a minimum cumulative 2.0 GPA as measured at the end of the academic year (i.e., at the end of the summer semester);
- the student does not enroll in at least six credit hours each fall and spring semester at an eligible institution of higher education, unless the student has an approved leave of absence;[M] or
- the student does not refile the FAFSA annually.

The five-year period of grant eligibility does not begin when a student applies for, or even becomes eligible to receive, the Reconnect Grant. A Reconnect student's five years of eligibility begins only once they receive their first dollar from the grant (i.e., the student's five years does not start until they become a last-dollar student). Students who apply for but do not receive Reconnect dollars because their tuition and fees were covered by other aid (i.e., zero-dollar students) are not subject to these terminating events excluding receipt of an associate degree or terminal certificate.

According to state law,[N] a student who ceases to be eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant at any time may not regain eligibility.

## Exceptions to the grant requirements

TSAC rules create two exceptions to the grant requirements: earning a sequential certificate does not terminate grant eligibility, and students may be granted a leave of absence for extenuating circumstances.

### *Students may earn sequential certificates and remain eligible for Reconnect*

Students enrolled in some associate degree programs may earn one or more certificates as part of their course of study. These are called sequential certificates, and they are awarded after the completion of certain courses that are part of the program of study's requirements. Under Reconnect guidelines, a student may remain eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant after receiving a sequential certificate that is part of their chosen program of study. By contrast, a student who completes a certificate that represents the highest possible credential within a program of study, also known as a terminal certificate, is no longer eligible for the Reconnect Grant.

### *Students may request a leave of absence for extenuating circumstances*

Provided that all other requirements have been met, students can be exempt from the grant's part-time and/or continuous enrollment requirements if granted a medical or personal leave of absence for reasons including, but not limited to the following: illness of the student, illness or death of an immediate family member, extreme financial hardship, fulfillment of a religious commitment, or fulfillment of required military service. Each postsecondary institution's Institutional Review Panel (IRP) considers requests for personal and medical leaves of absence. If an institution's IRP denies a student's request, the student may submit an appeal to TSAC.

## Reconnect changes in recent years

Since OREA published its initial *Tennessee Reconnect Grant Evaluation* in February 2022, several changes have been made to grant eligibility both in legislation and rule.

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[M] Students may be granted a medical or personal leave of absence for reasons including, but not limited to the following: illness, a family member's illness or death, extreme financial hardship, fulfillment of a religious commitment, or fulfillment of required military service. Each postsecondary institution's Institutional Review Panel (IRP) considers requests for personal and medical leaves of absence. If an IRP denies a request, the student may appeal to TSAC.
[N] *TCA* 49-4-944(e).

### *Legislative update to minimum age*

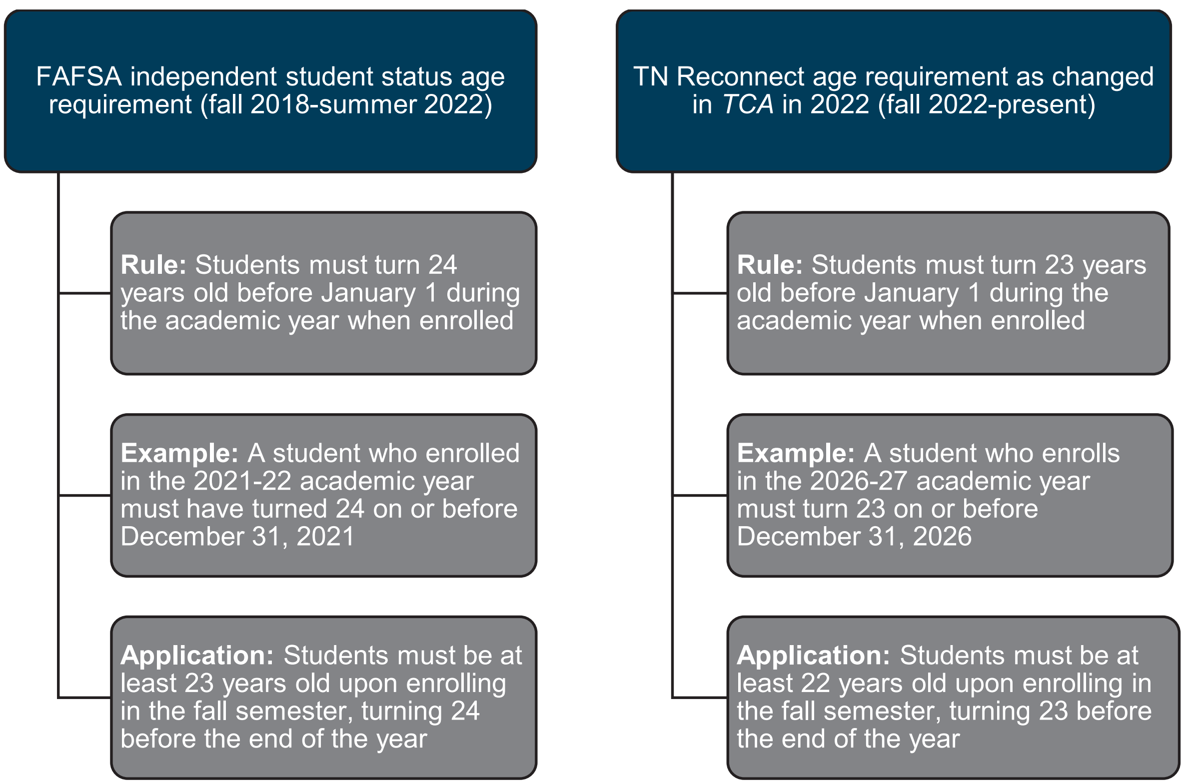
In the 2022 legislative session, the General Assembly amended the eligibility requirements for Tennessee Reconnect in state law to require that eligible students "be at least twenty-three (23) years of age by January 1 of the academic year in which the student enrolls in courses leading to completion of an eligible program of study, or [as was previously required] be an independent student as determined by the FAFSA."

Prior to this change, eligible students had to qualify as independent students on the FAFSA. The FAFSA includes a series of yes/no questions that determine if an applicant qualifies as an independent student; one such qualifying criterion is being at least 24 years old before January 1 during the academic year in which the student is enrolled. (See Exhibit 6 for a full list of FAFSA questions that determine status as an independent student.) The change to state law created an additional option: students are eligible if they are either at least 23 years old before January 1 during the academic year in which they enroll in an eligible program of study, or classified as independent on the FAFSA.

In practice, the legislative change to Reconnect's eligibility criteria allows students who are 22 at the start of the academic year in the fall who turn 23 on or before December 31 to qualify for Reconnect, even if FAFSA still categorizes them as dependents.

This change went into effect beginning in the 2022-23 academic year.

**Exhibit 10: The 2022 change lowered the minimum age to qualify for Reconnect**

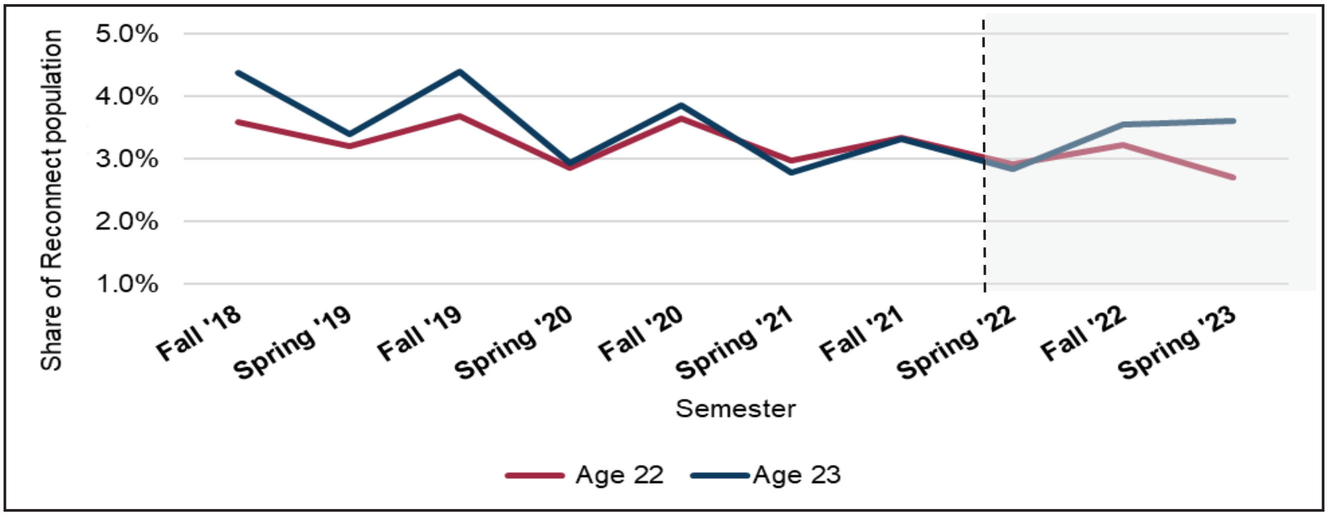



Source: OREA analysis of FAFSA independent status requirements and Reconnect eligibility in *TCA* 49-4-944.

Exhibit 11 shows the share of 22- and 23-year-old Reconnect students each fall and spring semester before and after the policy change. The black line in Exhibit 11 between the spring 2022 and fall 2022 semesters denotes when the change went into effect. Despite a slight increase in the share of 22- and 23-year-olds in fall 2022 (from 2.9 and 2.8 percent to 3.2 and 3.6 percent, respectively) the share of 22- and 23-year-olds in fall 2022 was still lower than historical highs in fall 2019 (3.7 and 4.4 percent, respectively).

Before the age-based eligibility change, 22- and 23-year-olds typically qualified for Reconnect based on their independent status on the FAFSA. While some individuals in this age group who did not meet the FAFSA independence criteria may have benefitted from the General Assembly's decision to lower the age threshold, the policy change does not appear to have meaningfully increased their representation in the population to date. It is possible that the impact of the policy will become more apparent over time, particularly as more enrollment data becomes available and awareness increases. There may also be a lag between policy adoption and enrollment behavior.

**Exhibit 11: The share of 22- and 23-year-old Reconnect students did not substantially change after policy implementation in fall 2022**




Note: Figures include both zero-dollar and last-dollar Reconnect students. Summer semesters are excluded because summer enrollment is optional.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid data.

In September 2022, TSAC updated its administrative rules related to Reconnect. These updates adjusted some of the rules for the grant's application process, eligibility, and terminating events. TSAC streamlined the application process by removing the requirement that Reconnect students reapply for the grant every year, maintaining only the initial application requirement. OREA's 2022 Reconnect evaluation found that nearly a third of Reconnect students (30 percent) lost eligibility because they failed to refile the annual application. With the rule change, no students lose eligibility for that reason. Additionally, TSAC added a requirement that the annual application deadline must be published on its website.

The 2022 rule change also adjusted and clarified the circumstances under which a student is not required to maintain at least part-time enrollment. The rule change clarified that a student is not required to maintain part-time enrollment during the summer semester or if the student's postsecondary institution does not offer sufficient coursework in the student's program of study in a given semester.

Additional 2022 rule changes clarified that students are no longer eligible for Reconnect upon completion of the requirements to obtain a credential, even if a student does not receive the credential in the semester. For example, a student who completes the coursework for an associate degree in the fall semester but does not receive the degree until a later semester is no longer eligible to receive the Reconnect Grant after the fall semester ends.

# Tennessee Reconnect by the numbers

The following section provides a data-driven overview of Tennessee Reconnect participation and trends. It highlights patterns in applications, enrollment, and student demographics. The data also sheds light on annual expenditures and how they align with enrollment shifts over time. In addition, perspective from community college administrators help contextualize these trends.

## Reconnect application and enrollment trends

From the fall 2018 semester through the summer 2023 semester, 128,101 individuals submitted Reconnect applications. Of those, 66,672 applicants met the eligibility criteria and became Reconnect students. Among Reconnect students, 34,400 (51 percent) received funding through Reconnect (i.e., last-dollar Reconnect students) while the remaining 32,272 (48 percent) had their tuition and mandatory fees covered by other financial aid or scholarships (i.e., zero-dollar Reconnect students).

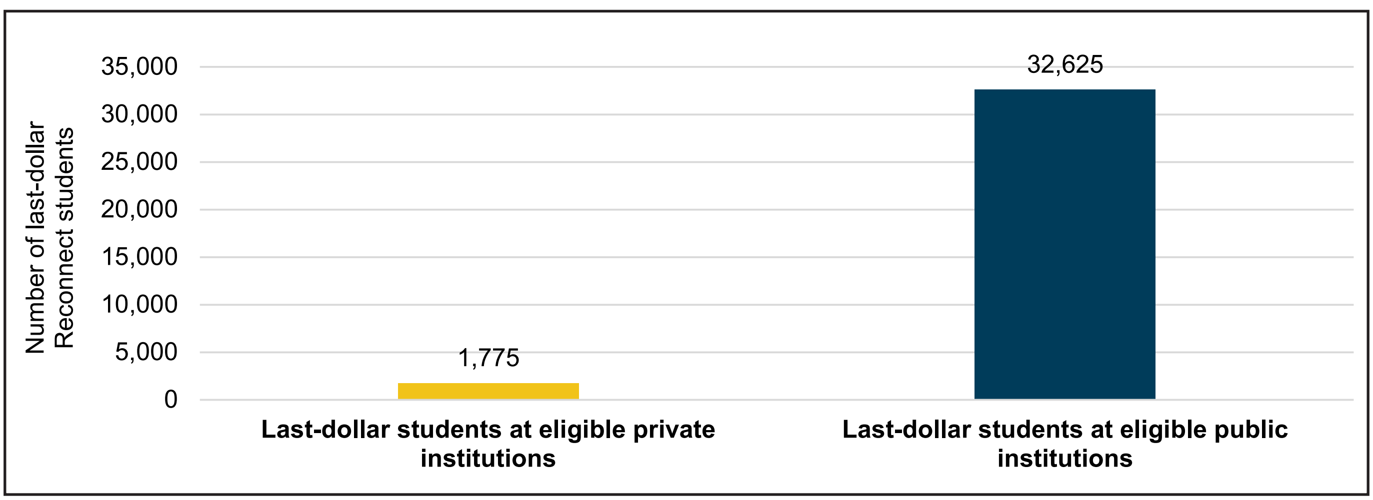
OREA determined that another 50,975 community college students could have qualified for the Reconnect grant given their age or independent status on the FAFSA, but either did not apply or did not meet other eligibility criteria. OREA used these students, referred to as non-Reconnect students, as a comparison group for Reconnect students.

OREA identified several reasons non-Reconnect students don't become Reconnect students. In the first five years of the program (2018-19 through 2022-23), over 90 percent of non-Reconnect students did not fill out a Reconnect application. OREA also found that across the same time frame, between 48 and 52 percent of non-Reconnect students did not file the FAFSA each year. Additionally, between 15 and 16 percent of non-Reconnect students did not enroll in at least six credit hours.

### *Most (95 percent) last-dollar Reconnect students enrolled in a community college*

Most last-dollar Reconnect students attended public institutions, as shown in Exhibit 12. Of the 34,400 last-dollar Reconnect students, 95 percent enrolled in a community college, 5 percent enrolled in an eligible private institution, and the remaining less than 1 percent enrolled in an eligible public four-year university.

**Exhibit 12: The majority of last-dollar Reconnect students attended a public institution, fall 2018 – summer 2023**



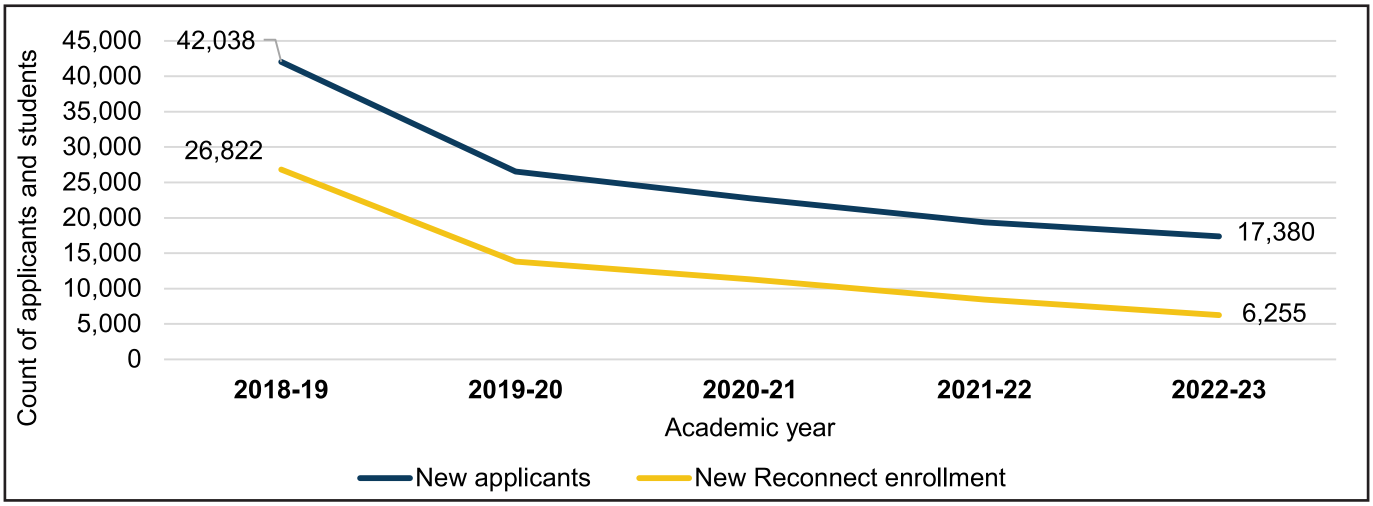

Note: The blue column on the right includes last-dollar Reconnect students who enrolled in a community college or eligible public university. A total of 32,540 last-dollar Reconnect students attended a community college and 85 attended an eligible public four-year university.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid data.

### *Reconnect enrollment has declined each year*

Exhibit 13 compares the number of new applicants (i.e., students applying to receive the Reconnect grant for the first time) and new Reconnect students (i.e., those who were not enrolled in the previous academic year) from 2018-19 through 2022-23. The number of new applicants and new Reconnect students decreased each year.

In the 2018-19 academic year, almost two thirds of new applicants yielded new Reconnect students. However, this yield in 2018-19 may have been driven in part by eligible students who were already enrolled in an eligible institution. In 2019-20, the second year of the grant, the yield rate was 52 percent. By 2022-23, the yield rate had declined to 36 percent. Although the requirement to reapply for the Reconnect grant each year was removed, the decline in the percentage of new applicants who become enrollees may point to other barriers in the enrollment process or external conditions affecting adult learners' ability to start or continue postsecondary education. Potential barriers are discussed on pages 39-40.

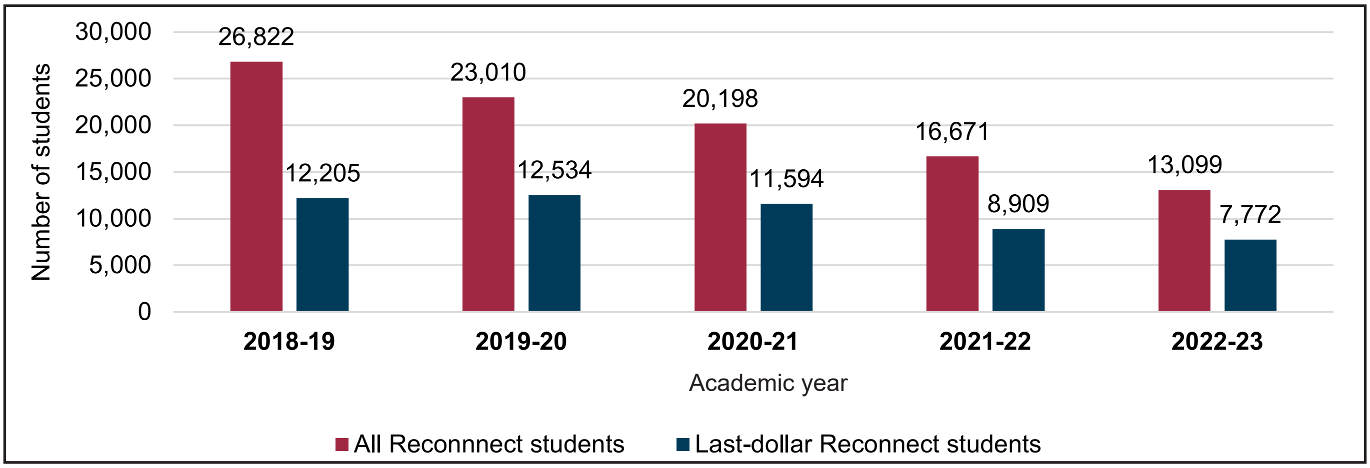
**Exhibit 13: New Reconnect applicants and New Reconnect enrollment declined annually, fall 2018 – summer 2023**




Note: New Reconnect enrollment includes zero- and last-dollar Reconnect students.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid data.

The total number of Reconnect students (i.e., new Reconnect enrollees as well as existing enrollees) also declined year over year as shown in Exhibit 14. In the 2018-19 academic year, 26,822 Reconnect students were enrolled. By 2022-23, the number enrolled had declined by more than half to 13,099. The number of last-dollar Reconnect students (i.e., those who receive Reconnect grant funds) also declined, although less sharply, remaining relatively stable in the first three years, with a slight increase in the second year to 12,534 students, before decreasing to 7,772 in 2022-23.

**Exhibit 14: Total Reconnect students and last-dollar Reconnect students have declined since implementation in fall 2018**




Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid data.

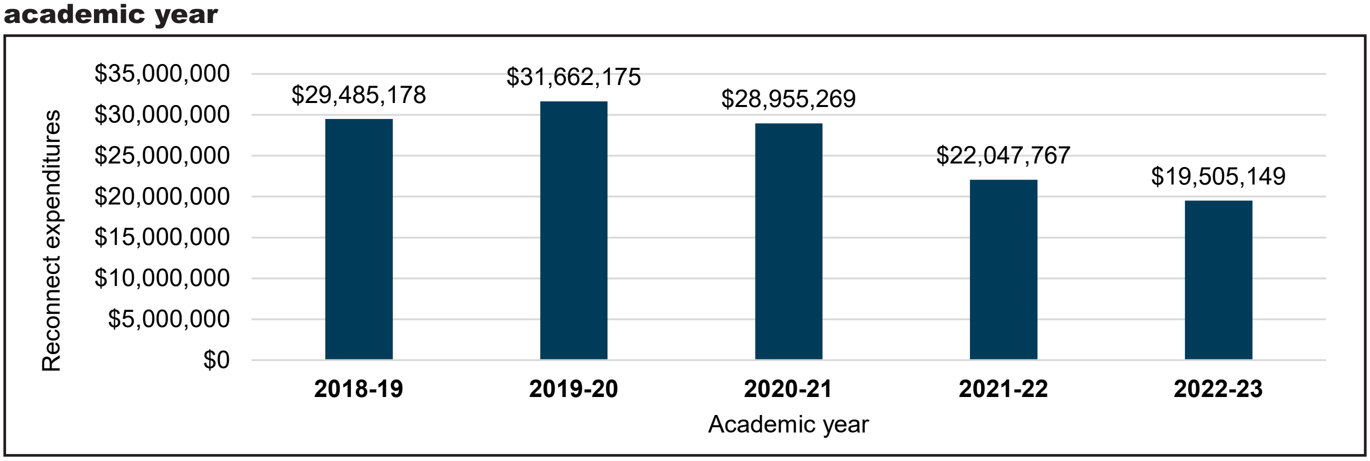
The decline in Reconnect students appears to have been driven by fewer zero-dollar Reconnect students enrolling. While total Reconnect enrollment declined by just over 51 percent, zero-dollar Reconnect student enrollment declined by 64 percent and last-dollar student enrollment declined by roughly 36 percent.

The decline in Reconnect enrollment mirrors a broader trend of declining community college enrollment. From 2018-19 to 2022-23, total enrollment at Tennessee's community colleges declined from just over 89,000 to roughly 72,000 students. Adult student enrollment also declined during this time, decreasing from 29 percent in fall 2018 to 26 percent by fall 2022.[O] In response to declining college-going rates statewide, THEC announced its "Momentum Year" initiative for 2023. The Momentum Year consisted of regional meetings, data-sharing, and best practice-sharing across the state. One of the Momentum Year's statewide goals was to increase adult enrollment through Tennessee Reconnect participation.

### *Annual expenditures mirror last-dollar student enrollment trends*

In total, $131.7 million in lottery funds were allocated to students under the TN Reconnect grant from fall 2018 through summer 2023. The total amount of funding allocated to Reconnect students has also decreased since the 2018-19 academic year. In the first year (2018-19), $29.5 million was allocated to Reconnect students. By the 2022-23 academic year, the allocation was $19.5 million. Overall, the amount of allocated funds decreased by roughly one-third. The one exception to the overall trend occurred in the grant's second year, when allocations increased.

**Exhibit 15: Total Reconnect expenditures declined by roughly one-third since the 2018-19 academic year**




Note: Figures are derived from raw financial aid data, not TELS expenditure reports, so figures may vary from prior exhibits.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid data.

[O] Data on adult student enrollment is available in THEC Fact Books, where adult students are defined as age 25 years or older.

The decline in Reconnect expenditures roughly follows the enrollment trends of last-dollar Reconnect students. There was a slight increase in expenditures and last-dollar student enrollment in 2019-20, then both expenditures and last-dollar students decline each year that followed.

### Community college administrator observations about enrollment trends

In interviews with OREA, community college administrators at six colleges pointed to the lack of statewide marketing of the Reconnect Grant as a reason for the substantial decline in Reconnect applications and enrollment over time. Administrators noted that the state's initial launch of the grant included a robust statewide marketing campaign, which two colleges' administrators specifically believed raised awareness and drove high levels of participation in the early years. However, administrators at four colleges reported that many prospective Reconnect students are now unaware that the grant still exists, attributing the decline in awareness to the absence of statewide marketing efforts. OREA heard similar observations from college administrators during interviews for its 2022 evaluation.

Multiple parties are responsible for converting applicants to enrollees. State agencies, through THEC and TBR, play a central role in setting policy, funding marketing efforts, and shaping broad public awareness. Institutions bear some responsibility for assisting students during the enrollment process. Reconnect Navigators play a role in guidance, too. Meanwhile, applicants themselves must take the final step to enroll and pay any additional costs not covered by the Reconnect grant or other gift aid, often while navigating competing work and family responsibilities.

Community colleges each make their own efforts to market and increase awareness of the Reconnect grant. These efforts include developing partnerships with employers, participating in job fairs and similar events, promoting the grant to parents of students at K-12 events, and providing promotional materials to entities like the local American Jobs Center.

Together these findings suggest that successful conversion from application to enrollment likely depends on aligned and sustained engagement from all three stakeholders: the state, the institutions, and the students.

## Reconnect student demographics

This section includes demographic information about Reconnect students. This provides an understanding of who would be affected by changes to the grant's eligibility requirements, if any are made, and who is benefiting the most from the grant's operation. This section addresses questions such as:

- What is the age, gender, and race of Reconnect students?
- What are students' financial backgrounds at the time of enrollment?
- What are students' academic backgrounds at the time of enrollment?
- Are Reconnect students first-generation college students?

### Half of Reconnect students are age 31 or younger

State law requires that Reconnect students must be 23 years old or older before January 1 during the academic year in which they initially enroll.[P] However, if students are classified as "independent" based on their FAFSA application, they are eligible at any age.

On average, Reconnect students were 33 years old when enrolling as a Reconnect student (both last-dollar and zero-dollar, from fall 2018 through summer 2023). However, half of Reconnect students were 31 years

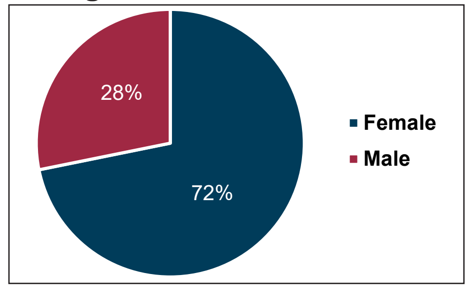
[P] Students may begin receiving Reconnect dollars if they are 22 years old but turning 23 prior to January 1 during the academic year.

old or younger and nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of Reconnect students were between the ages of 21 and 34. Most frequently, students began receiving the Reconnect grant at age 25. Overall, the average age of last-dollar Reconnect students was 32, while zero-dollar and non-Reconnect students were each on average 30 years old.

### Nearly three-quarters of Reconnect students are female

From fall 2018 through summer 2023, 72 percent of Reconnect students were female and 28 percent were male. Male students make up a larger proportion of last-dollar students than zero-dollar students by 9 percentage points, although the majority of last-dollar students were still female. When considering the gender of non-Reconnect students, most were female (62 percent) but there were more non-Reconnect students who were male, proportionally, compared to Reconnect students.

**Exhibit 16: Most Reconnect students were female, fall 2018 through summer 2023**

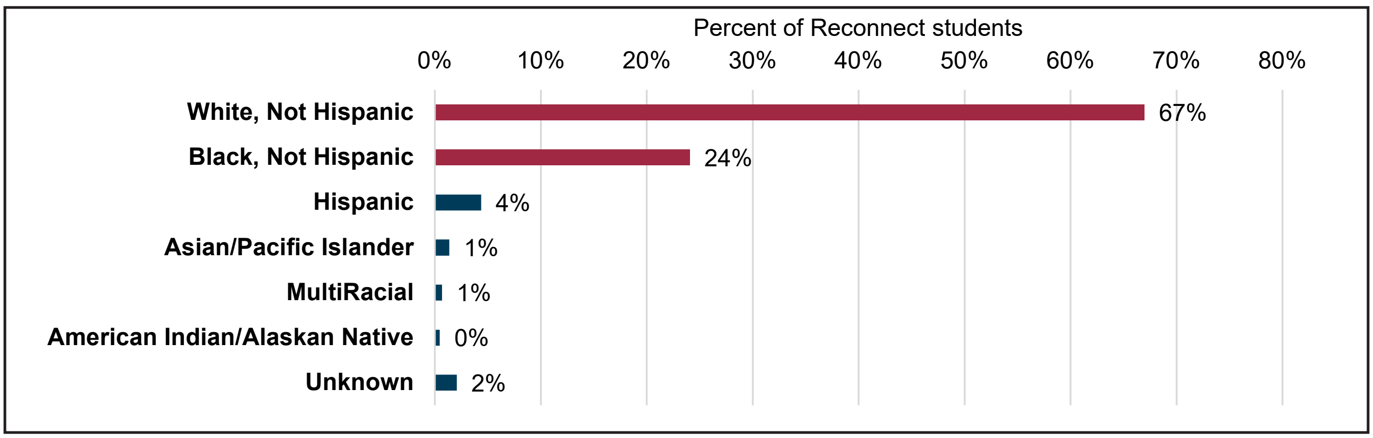



Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid data.

### About two-thirds of Reconnect students are White

From fall 2018 through summer 2023, approximately two-thirds (67 percent) of Reconnect students were White (non-Hispanic). Another 24 percent were Black (non-Hispanic). As such, non-Hispanic White and Black students together accounted for over nine in 10 Reconnect students. All other races and ethnicities accounted for 9 percent of Reconnect students, the largest portion being Hispanic (4 percent). More last-dollar Reconnect students were White (non-Hispanic) and fewer were Black (non-Hispanic) than zero-dollar Reconnect students. Non-Reconnect students largely reflected the racial demographics of Reconnect students.

**Exhibit 17: Reconnect students were predominantly White or Black, fall 2018 – summer 2023**




Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid data.

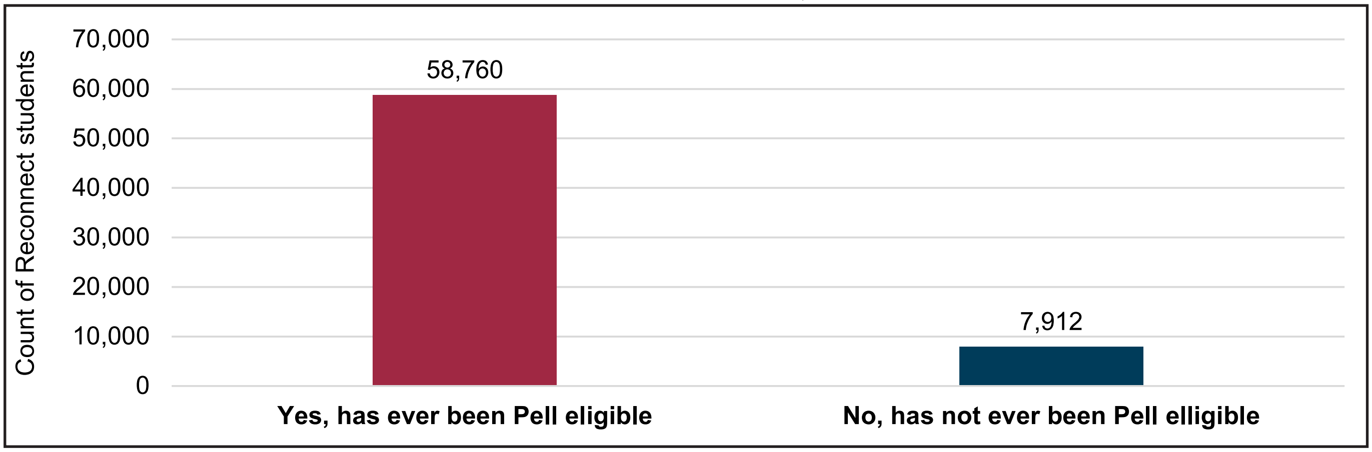
### Most Reconnect students are low-income, as determined by Pell eligibility

OREA used Pell eligibility as a proxy for Reconnect students' income level. Data showing the income of students was unavailable to OREA during this evaluation. To be Pell eligible, a student must demonstrate "exceptional financial need," as determined by the FAFSA. As such, students who qualify for the Pell grant are generally low-income.

For this analysis, a student is considered Pell eligible if they have been eligible to receive Pell grants at any time during their college enrollment, even before they became a Reconnect student. However, having ever qualified for the Pell grant does not mean a Reconnect student was eligible for and received the Pell grant as a Reconnect student. Some previously Pell-eligible Reconnect students may no longer demonstrate "exceptional financial need" while others who still demonstrate "exceptional financial need" have exhausted their lifetime Pell award amount (i.e., six years of full-time enrollment) or failed to meet Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP), rendering them ineligible for the Pell grant.

Overall, from fall 2018 through summer 2023, 88 percent (58,760) of Reconnect students ever qualified as Pell eligible. The remaining 12 percent of Reconnect students never qualified as Pell eligible. Thus, most Reconnect students have been classified as low-income at some point as a college student. When comparing last-dollar and zero-dollar Reconnect students, 13 percentage points more zero-dollar students had ever been Pell eligible compared with their last-dollar counterparts. About 4 percentage points fewer non-Reconnect students had ever been Pell eligible. However, like Reconnect students, most non-Reconnect students had also been Pell eligible at some point (84 percent of non-Reconnect students were ever Pell eligible).[Q]

**Exhibit 18: Most Reconnect students were low-income, fall 2018 – summer 2023**



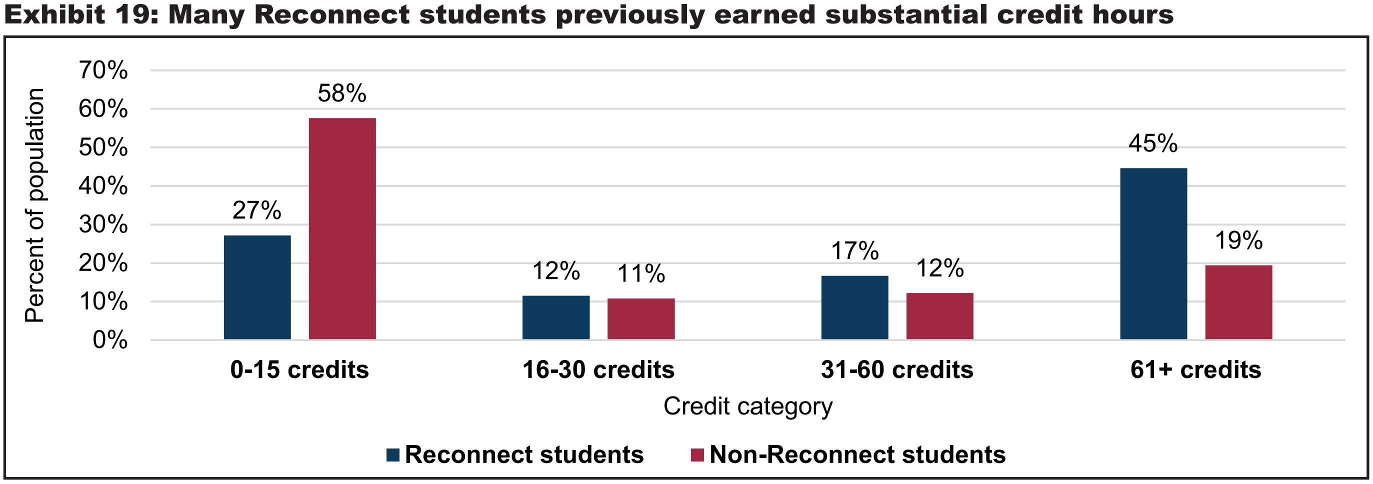

Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid data.

While a majority of all Reconnect students from every race had been Pell eligible, Black and multi-racial Reconnect students were slightly more likely to have been Pell eligible than the average Reconnect student (which includes all Reconnect students of every race and ethnicity). Similarly, female Reconnect students were also slightly more likely to have ever been Pell eligible than the average Reconnect student (which includes all Reconnect students from both genders).

### *Nearly half of Reconnect students had previously earned more than 61 credit hours*

To qualify for the Reconnect grant, otherwise eligible students may not have earned an associate or bachelor's degree. This means that some Reconnect students may have been previously enrolled in college without completing a degree. Such Reconnect students have previously earned college credits that may apply toward their program of study. Generally, the more credit hours a Reconnect student previously completed reduces the number of credit hours he or she must complete before earning a credential.

**Exhibit 19: Many Reconnect students previously earned substantial credit hours**




Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid data.

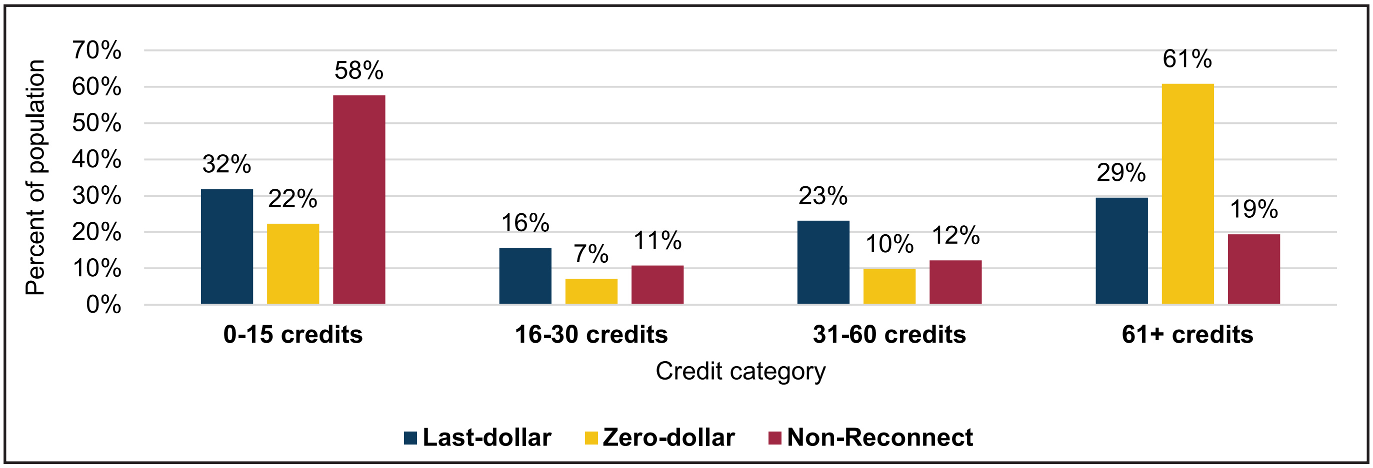
[Q] Pell eligibility status was available for 42,968 of the 50,975 non-Reconnect students. As such, the 84 percent of non-Reconnect students who were ever Pell eligible is based on the 42,968 for whom OREA confirmed Pell eligibility status.

Nearly half of Reconnect students (both zero-dollar and last-dollar) enrolled with 61 or more credit hours already earned, suggesting that a significant portion of these students returned to college after having considerable college experience in the past. This contrasts with non-Reconnect students, only 19 percent of whom enrolled with 61 or more credit hours previously completed.

There are several reasons a student can accumulate 61 or more credit hours and still not obtain an associate degree, most of which require 60 credit hours. Some students may have withdrawn before completing final program requirements due to personal choice, academic disruptions, or financial disruptions. It is also possible that students accumulated credits over time through stop-start enrollment without structured advising or the momentum needed to finish a credential. Others may have changed majors or institutions having earned credit hours across multiple degree pathways resulting in the misalignment of previously earned credit hours.

On average, Reconnect students enrolled with slightly more previously accrued credit hours (30 hours) compared to non-Reconnect students (27 hours). The median starting credit hour total for Reconnect students (22 hours) was also nearly triple the median for non-Reconnect students (six hours).

**Exhibit 20: Zero-dollar students enrolled with more credit hours than last-dollar students**




Source: OREA analysis of THEC data.

Exhibit 20 compares the previously earned credit hours for last-dollar, zero-dollar, and non-Reconnect students. Notably, 61 percent of zero-dollar students entered with 61 or more credit hours compared to 29 percent of last-dollar students. More than half of non-Reconnect students (58 percent) enrolled with 15 or fewer credits.

Last-dollar students entered with a higher average (33 credit hours) and median (26 credit hours) of previously accrued credits, compared to zero-dollar students (average 24 hours; median 15 hours).

Both the mean and median values for prior-earned credits are presented. The mean, or average of all credit hours, can be skewed by students with unusually high or low prior credits. The median represents the middle value in the data – the point at which half of students have fewer credits and half have more – and therefore provides a clearer picture of the typical student than the average.

When students enrolled played a factor, too: 38 percent of the Reconnect students (both last-dollar and zero-dollar) who entered with 61 or more credits did so during the fall 2018 semester, the first semester Reconnect was available. A portion of these students may have already been enrolled and opted in to Reconnect toward the end of their program of study. Regardless of last-dollar or zero-dollar status, the density of Reconnect students with 61 or more credit hours may point to heightened demand among near-completers who view Reconnect as an opportunity to finish earning their credential.

### *Nearly half of Reconnect students are first-generation college students*

Students are classified as first-generation students when they are the first generation in their family to attend a college or university (i.e., their parents did not attend). First-generation students are more likely to require financial and programmatic support to succeed in higher education.[1] Almost half (49 percent) of Reconnect students were the first generation in their family to attend college. Comparatively, 43 percent of non-Reconnect students were first generation.

Hispanic and White Reconnect students had the highest proportion of first-generation college students compared to other races and ethnicities (American Indian and Alaskan Native, Asian and Pacific Islander, Black, and Multi-racial Reconnect students). A higher percentage of female Reconnect students were first-generation college students compared to male Reconnect students.

### *Over half of Reconnect students work full time, have dependents, and prefer online courses*

Prospective Reconnect students fill out a survey as part of their application. The survey includes questions about the students' education level, employment, and dependents, among other items. The survey is used to generate a personalized Reconnect Success Plan that connects students to their regional Navigator and campus resources and fulfills Reconnect students' statutory[R] obligation to participate in a college success program. OREA used this application survey information to better understand students' backgrounds.

In 2023, the majority of new Reconnect students (85 percent) reported some form of employment while enrolled and 57 percent of Reconnect students planned to work full time while enrolled. Additionally, 57 percent of Reconnect students reported having dependents.

The survey also captures students' preferred course delivery methods. Community colleges offer a wide variety of course delivery options, including online, hybrid, evening, and traditional in-person daytime classes. In the survey, weekday daytime classes were the most preferred option. From 2020 onward, online learning became the dominant choice.

### *Participating institutions*

Exhibit 21 shows Reconnect student enrollment and Reconnect grant amounts for all 13 community colleges, where most Reconnect students (95 percent) enrolled from fall 2018 through summer 2023. During this time, there were six community colleges where over 5,000 Reconnect students enrolled: Southwest (7,688), Nashville State (6,719), Pellissippi State (6,170), Volunteer State (6,066), Motlow State (5,661), and Chattanooga State (5,228). The remaining seven community colleges enrolled fewer than 5,000 Reconnect students.

[R] *TCA* 49-4-944 (c)(7).

**Exhibit 21: Pellissippi State, Nashville State, and Volunteer State enrolled the most last-dollar Reconnect students, fall 2018 – summer 2023**

| Community college | Total Reconnect eligible students from fall 2018-summer 2023 | Last-dollar Reconnect students from fall 2018-summer 2023 | Average Reconnect aid received by last-dollar students per semester from fall 2018-summer 2023 | Total Reconnect funding allocated to Reconnect students from fall 2018-summer 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Chattanooga State | 5,228 | 2,461 | $1,333 | $8,992,067 |
| Cleveland State | 1,987 | 1,238 | $1,532 | $4,816,463 |
| Columbia State | 3,493 | 1,575 | $1,354 | $5,804,885 |
| Dyersburg State | 2,075 | 1,316 | $1,313 | $4,495,235 |
| Jackson State | 3,297 | 1,505 | $1,361 | $5,633,659 |
| Motlow College | 5,661 | 3,137 | $1,467 | $13,280,617 |
| Nashville State | 6,719 | 4,147 | $1,403 | $15,647,155 |
| Northeast State | 3,693 | 1,965 | $1,384 | $7,590,108 |
| Pellissippi State | 6,170 | 4,206 | $1,401 | $16,686,161 |
| Roane State | 3,972 | 2,386 | $1,398 | $9,447,124 |
| Southwest | 7,688 | 2,801 | $1,345 | $9,268,519 |
| Volunteer State | 6,066 | 3,827 | $1,349 | $14,490,110 |
| Walters State | 3,102 | 1,976 | $1,442 | $8,033,942 |

Note: Average Reconnect aid received by last-dollar students was determined by calculating the average amount of Reconnect grant funding for each last-dollar student, then calculating the average across all such students.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid data.

The institutions where the most Reconnect funding has been spent were the community colleges where the most last-dollar students were enrolled: Pellissippi State ($16.7 million), Nashville State ($15.6 million), Volunteer State ($14.5 million), and Motlow State ($13.3 million). These four institutions were the only institutions where Reconnect funds totaled $10 million or more. Another 10 institutions received a total of between $1 million and $9.9 million through Reconnect funds. On average, across all institutions where a Reconnect student has attended, institutions received $3.1 million from Reconnect from fall 2018 through summer 2023. Among community colleges only, the average was $9.6 million.

Four of the five institutions with the highest average total Reconnect funding per last-dollar student were private institutions: John A. Gupton College ($5,392), Cumberland University ($5,001), Tusculum University ($4,486), and Bethel University ($4,449).[S] This could be due to various factors. The Reconnect grant only covers tuition and mandatory fees up to the average cost of community college tuition and mandatory fees for students enrolled in eligible private institutions. As such, if an eligible private institution has higher tuition than community colleges, then it is less likely that a student's full tuition and fees will be covered by other gift aid, leaving more costs to be potentially covered by the Reconnect grant. There are potentially additional factors. However, OREA was unable to determine which factors contribute most to higher amounts being paid to students attending eligible private institutions.

The public community colleges with the highest average total Reconnect funding per last-dollar student were Motlow State ($4,234), Walters State ($4,066), and Pellissippi State ($3,967). However, the average total Reconnect dollars received by last-dollar students at community colleges fell between $4,234 (Motlow State) and $3,309 (Southwest).

[S] The institution with the fifth highest average total Reconnect funding per last-dollar student was a community college: Motlow State ($4,234).

### *Community college administrator observations about Reconnect student demographics*

While Reconnect students are generally 23 years old or older, administrators at seven colleges also noted that there were often fundamental differences based on age, particularly between the Reconnect students who were in their 30s-50s and those in their 20s.

Older Reconnect students were typically those who had careers and families but wanted to reskill, pivot careers, or fulfill degree requirements to enter management with their existing employer. Nine colleges indicated that some of these students had already attended college at a younger age. Administrators at two colleges told OREA that some older students were returning to college because their employer encouraged them to do so. Six colleges said that other older Reconnect students decided to return to college, or begin attending, as their children left home or graduated from high school. Administrators at three colleges pointed out that older Reconnect students were also more likely to require technological assistance when initially returning to college.

Administrators at four colleges observed that younger Reconnect students typically missed the window to attend college with assistance from Tennessee Promise. One college added that, in recent years, these younger students were those who graduated high school during COVID-19 and either did not want to attend college online due to pandemic restrictions or did not do well when they attempted to do so. Younger students also typically entered the workforce after high school but decided to attend college after deciding they were unhappy with their job prospects.

Administrators at every college also noted that many Reconnect students were caregivers in some capacity. This could take the shape of parents caring for children, children caring for aging parents, or other similar circumstances.

# Outcomes: Credit accrual, retention, and credential attainment

To determine if the Tennessee Reconnect Grant is meeting its goal of increasing postsecondary credential attainment for participants, OREA examined credit accrual, retention, and credential completion for Reconnect students (zero- and last-dollar) compared to non-Reconnect students.

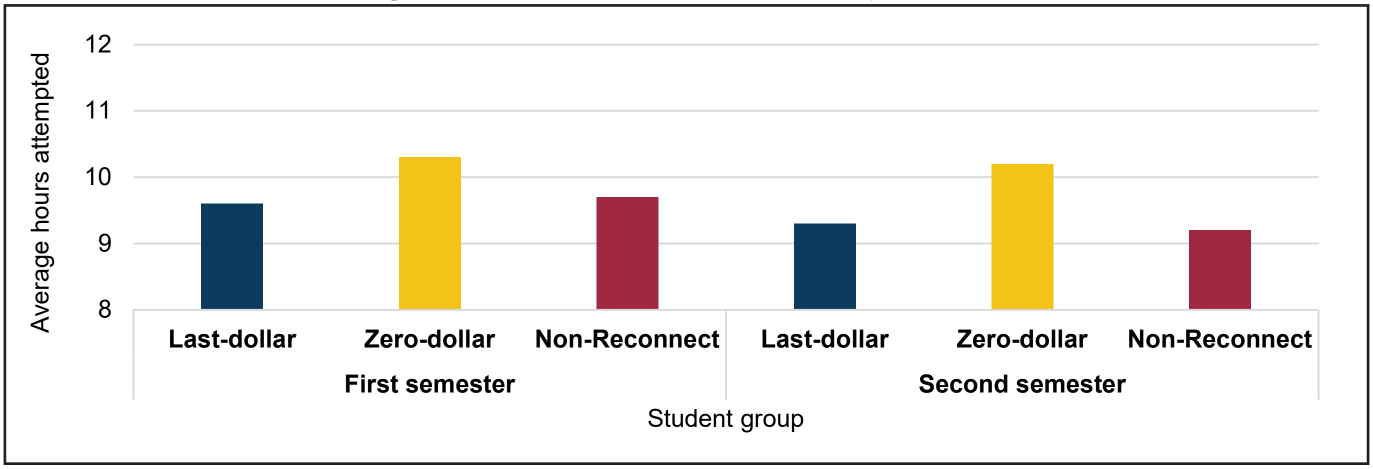
## Reconnect students attempted more credit hours, but non-Reconnect and zero-dollar Reconnect students completed more

Last-dollar Reconnect students must enroll in at least six credit hours per semester to maintain eligibility.[T] This analysis focuses on Reconnect and non-Reconnect students' attempted credit hours in the first two semesters of enrollment. These initial semesters are important for building momentum. By examining this early period, students are compared on a consistent timeline.

Exhibit 22 compares the average hours attempted in the first two semesters of enrollment by Reconnect students (both last- and zero-dollar) and non-Reconnect students from fall 2018 through summer 2023.

[T] If a Reconnect student enrolls in fewer than six credit hours, he or she loses eligibility barring any approved leaves of absence.

**Exhibit 22: Reconnect students attempt more hours than non-Reconnect students, while zero-dollar students attempt more than last-dollar students, fall 2018 – summer 2023**

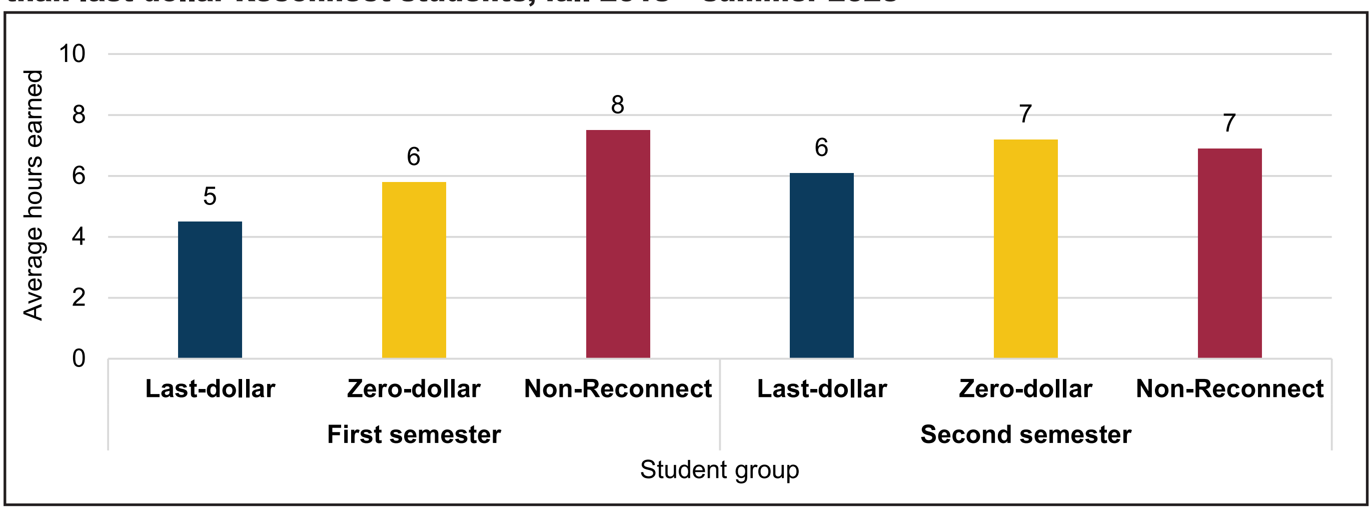



Source: OREA analysis of THEC data.

On average, Reconnect and non-Reconnect students attempted over nine credit hours during their first and second semesters, though zero-dollar Reconnect students attempted more hours on average than last-dollar students and non-Reconnect students. In the first two semesters of enrollment, zero-dollar students attempted over 10 credit hours while last-dollar and non-Reconnect students attempted fewer than 10 credit hours. While non-Reconnect students attempted the same number of hours as last-dollar students the first semester (9.7 hours), they attempted slightly fewer credit hours in the second semester (non-Reconnect students attempted 9.2 hours compared to 9.3 hours attempted by last-dollar Reconnect students).

Exhibit 23 compares the number of credit hours Reconnect and non-Reconnect students completed during the first two semesters of enrollment.

**Exhibit 23: Non-Reconnect and zero-dollar Reconnect students complete more credit hours than last-dollar Reconnect students, fall 2018 – summer 2023**




Source: OREA analysis of THEC data.

Last-dollar and zero-dollar Reconnect students attempted more credit hours during the first two semesters of enrollment, but non-Reconnect and zero-dollar students completed more credit hours on average. It is important to note that neither non-Reconnect nor zero-dollar students receive Reconnect grant funding; only last-dollar Reconnect students receive funding from the Reconnect grant. This dynamic suggests that last-dollar Reconnect students may be more likely to overextend themselves in an effort to maintain grant eligibility or take full advantage of available funding.

## Last-dollar students and students who initially enroll in a fall semester are more likely to remain enrolled

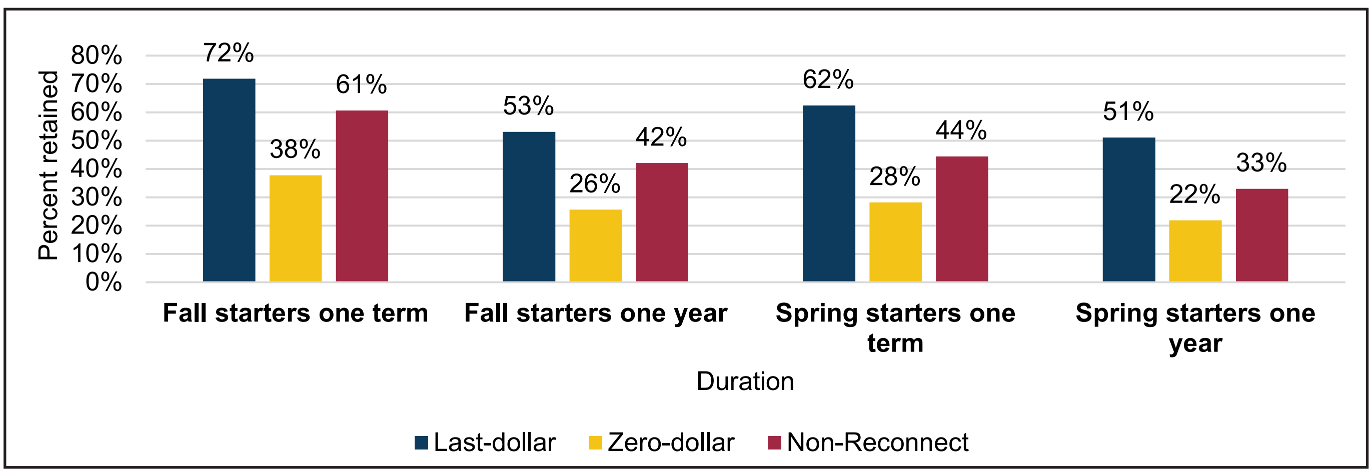
This analysis examines student retention (i.e., if a student re-enrolls in the next semester). To remain eligible for the Reconnect grant, last-dollar students must maintain continuous enrollment of at least six credit hours in the fall and spring semesters.[U] However, the following analysis includes any student who returned for a second or third semester regardless of whether he or she was still eligible for the Reconnect grant. For example, if a Reconnect student enrolled in fewer than six credit hours and lost grant eligibility but remained enrolled, that student is classified as retained. OREA included Reconnect students who lost eligibility but remained enrolled because they continued working toward a credential and had at least one semester supported by the Reconnect grant.

The retention analysis includes students who had not yet earned a credential (certificate or higher) and excludes those who had completed one, since students who have not yet graduated must continue to re-enroll to finish their credential. In other words, graduates are not misclassified as students who did not re-enroll.

More specifically, OREA defines retention as a student being enrolled in the semester immediately following their initial semester of enrollment and the semester a year after their initial semester of enrollment, regardless of the number of credit hours attempted. For example, a student who first enrolled in fall 2018 and then enrolled in spring 2019 is counted as retained for one semester. If that same student enrolled again in fall 2019, they are again counted as retained for one year.

Exhibit 24 compares retention for last-dollar, zero-dollar, and non-Reconnect students based on initial enrollment in the fall or spring semester. The analysis omits summer semesters because Reconnect students are not required to enroll in the summer to maintain continuous enrollment.[V]

**Exhibit 24: Last-dollar students are more likely to re-enroll than other student groups, especially when they initially enroll in a fall semester**




Source: OREA analysis of THEC data.

Overall, last-dollar Reconnect students are the most likely to re-enroll, followed by non-Reconnect students, while zero-dollar students are the least likely to re-enroll.

Among last-dollar students, those who started in the fall were more likely to persist – over 70 percent re-enrolled the following semester and nearly 55 percent remained enrolled one year later – compared to 62 percent and 50 percent, respectively, for last-dollar students who initially enrolled in the spring.

[U] Enrollment in the summer semester is optional and not required to maintain grant eligibility, though Reconnect students who enroll in the summer may enroll in fewer than six credits unlike fall and spring semesters.

[V] If a student earned a credential in a summer semester, however, that student is omitted from the analysis.

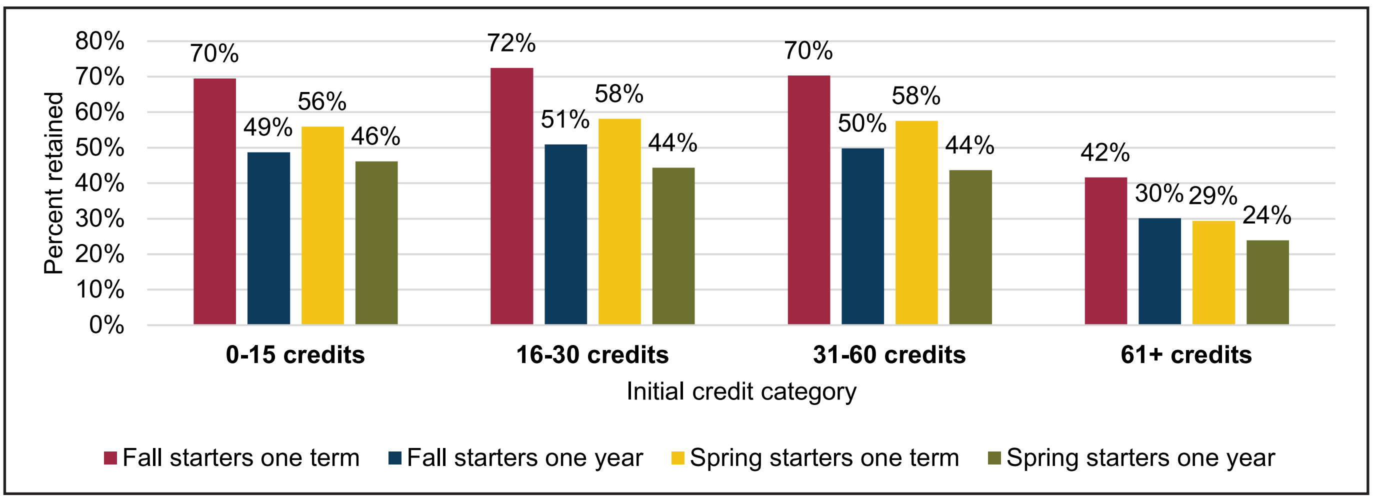
Among non-Reconnect students, retention rates range from 61 percent for those who began in the fall and re-enrolled the next semester to about 33 percent for those who began in the spring and remained enrolled one year later.

Zero-dollar students consistently have the lowest retention rates regardless of initial semester of enrollment. Absent additional information about these students, it remains unclear what drives the low retention rates for zero-dollar students. However, eligibility requirements may contribute in part. Since zero-dollar students are not subject to the continuous enrollment requirement until they become a last-dollar student, there is less incentive to re-enroll.

For all three groups (last-and zero-dollar and non-Reconnect students), students who initially enrolled in a fall semester were more likely to re-enroll after one semester and one year than those who began in the spring. Available data does not clarify the reasons that students who initially enroll in a spring semester are less likely to re-enroll than students who initially enroll in the fall. Students who initially enroll in the spring may stop temporarily during the summer and not return in the fall, either due to personal obligations, financial strain, academic fatigue, or another reason. Students may intend to re-enroll in the fall but lose momentum over the summer break. Even so, one-semester retention is better than one-year retention for all three groups regardless of students' initial semester of enrollment.

Exhibit 25 shows the percentage of students (last- and zero-dollar and non-Reconnect students) who remained enrolled one semester and one year later, identified by initial credit hours and whether the student began in the fall or spring semester.

**Exhibit 25: Fall starters demonstrate better retention after one semester regardless of initial cumulative credit hours**



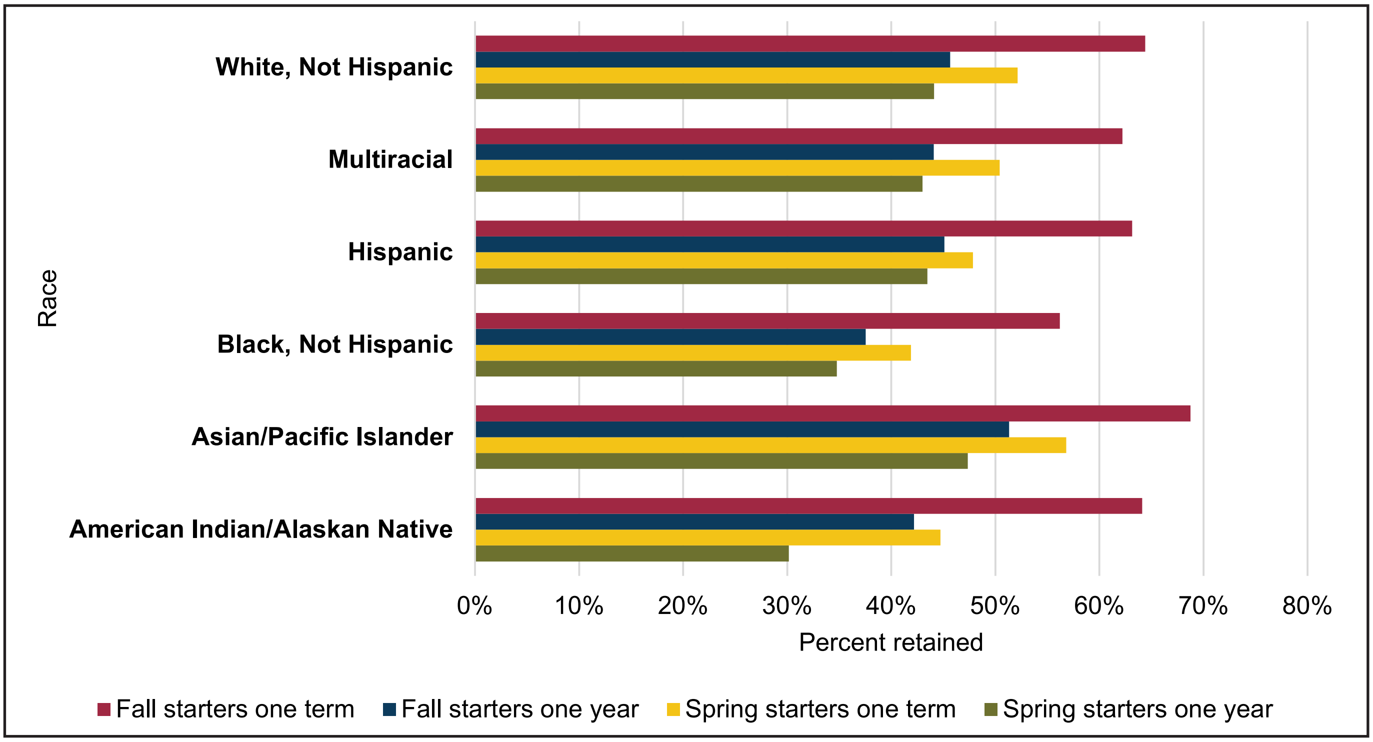

Note: All three student groups – last-dollar, zero-dollar, and non-Reconnect students – are included in this exhibit.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC data.

When examining the percentage of students who remain enrolled after one semester and one year based on initial cumulative credit hours, students who initially enroll in a fall semester (blue and yellow bars in Exhibit 25) are more likely to re-enroll than students who start in the spring (red and green bars in Exhibit 25), regardless of cumulative credit hours. Students who initially enroll in the spring are less likely to re-enroll than students who began in the fall, with both one-semester and one-year retention rates 10 to 20 percentage points lower than their fall-starting counterparts.

There are otherwise no distinct differences in retention across credit categories except for students who enter with 61 or more credits. These students are less likely to re-enroll one semester or year later, compared to students with fewer cumulative credit hours at the time of enrollment. While students who enter with 61 or more credits may already be near completion based on credit hour accumulation, they may face uncertainty about how to re-enter a degree pathway upon returning to higher education.

Exhibit 26 shows the percentage of students (last-dollar, zero-dollar, and non-Reconnect) who remained enrolled after one semester and one year identified by race/ethnicity and whether the students started in a fall or spring semester.

**Exhibit 26: Fall starters demonstrate higher retention rates across racial categories while Black students slightly underperform their peers**




Source: OREA analysis of THEC data.

Across all racial and ethnic groups, students who started in a fall semester (blue and yellow bars in Exhibit 26) demonstrated higher retention rates after one semester and one year than those who started in the spring (red and green bars in Exhibit 26). Black students exhibit the lowest one-semester and one-year retention rates among fall starters (blue and yellow bars in Exhibit 26).

## Credentials

Tennessee Reconnect provides a grant for eligible adult students to pursue certificates and associate degrees at public community colleges, eligible private institutions, and public four-year universities for up to five years. Once a terminal certificate or an associate degree is obtained, students are no longer eligible to receive the Reconnect grant.[W]

Reconnect students may begin at a community college with the intention of later transferring to another institution, such as a four-year university.[X] According to interviews with four community college administrators, these students often use the Reconnect grant to complete a certificate or associate degree before continuing their education elsewhere. Although Reconnect only covers tuition and mandatory fees for students who are pursuing a certificate or associate degree, the credits students earn in pursuit of those credentials can apply toward a bachelor's degree.

[W] Certificates can be either sequential or terminal. Sequential certificates can be obtained as a part of a pathway to another certificate or degree in the same program of study, while terminal certificates are the highest possible credential in a program of study.
[X] A student can use the Reconnect grant at an eligible four-year university or private institution so long as the student is pursuing a terminal certificate or associate degree. A student may not use the Reconnect grant to pursue a bachelor's degree or higher.

Additionally, some Reconnect students lose grant eligibility but remain enrolled in an eligible institution and continue to pursue eligible credentials (i.e., certificates and associate degrees). In both scenarios, former Reconnect students are no longer receiving the grant, yet they continue making progress toward earning a credential. In both regards, the Reconnect grant contributes toward increasing credential attainment.

As such, OREA's analysis of credential attainment includes all credentials earned by Reconnect students at any point after they became Reconnect students, unless otherwise noted. This can include eligible credentials (i.e., certificates and associate degrees) obtained while a student received the Reconnect grant as well as credentials of any level obtained (e.g., certificates, associate and bachelor's degrees, etc.) after students lost Reconnect eligibility and stopped receiving the grant. Analyzing all credentials Reconnect students ever received shows both the direct impact of Reconnect (i.e., the number of credentials earned while receiving Reconnect dollars) and the indirect impact of Reconnect (i.e., the number of credentials earned by students no longer receiving Reconnect dollars).

This analysis includes data from the first six years of the Reconnect grant: fall 2018 through summer 2024. Credential data was available through the summer 2024 semester while financial aid data was available only through the summer 2023 semester. OREA included the extra year of credential data in this analysis.[Y]

### *OREA's 2026 evaluation shows modest growth in total credentials earned*

OREA measured overall credential attainment for all Reconnect students (both last- and zero-dollar) and compared that rate to the OREA 2022 evaluation's findings. The calculation method used for the attainment rates presented here differ slightly between the two evaluations. The 2022 evaluation used attainment data from the first two academic years of the Reconnect grant (fall 2018 through summer 2020), tracked students who initially enrolled in the fall of 2018, and only included the credentials earned while students received the grant. The 2026 evaluation includes attainment data from fall 2018 through summer 2024, tracks attainment for all Reconnect students regardless of when they initially enrolled, and includes any credential earned regardless of whether it was earned during or after grant receipt.

OREA's 2022 report found that 4,075 (30 percent) of all Reconnect students (last-dollar students and zero-dollar students combined) who started in fall 2018 earned an associate degree or certificate (short or long-term) by summer 2020. Most of those students (3,613 or 27 percent) obtained an associate degree.

With an additional four years of attainment data, OREA's 2026 evaluation found that 18,354 (28 percent) Reconnect students (both last- and zero-dollar) regardless of when they initially enrolled earned an associate degree or certificate (short or long-term) as of summer 2024. Similar to what the 2022 evaluation found, most of those students (16,521 or 25 percent) obtained an associate degree.

Between OREA's 2022 and 2026 evaluations, the percent of Reconnect students who earned a credential declined by 3 percentage points and the percent of Reconnect students who earned an associate degree declined by 2 percentage points. However, the decline in the credential attainment rate may be partially due to the different scopes of measurement. The 2026 evaluation includes students for whom OREA only has one year of data (i.e., students who started in the 2022-23 academic year). Additionally, the students measured in the 2022 evaluation (i.e., those who first became Reconnect students in fall 2018) were among the largest Reconnect cohort and included students who were already enrolled when the Reconnect grant initially became available. Those already enrolled students may have been more likely to remain enrolled and complete a credential than new enrollees.

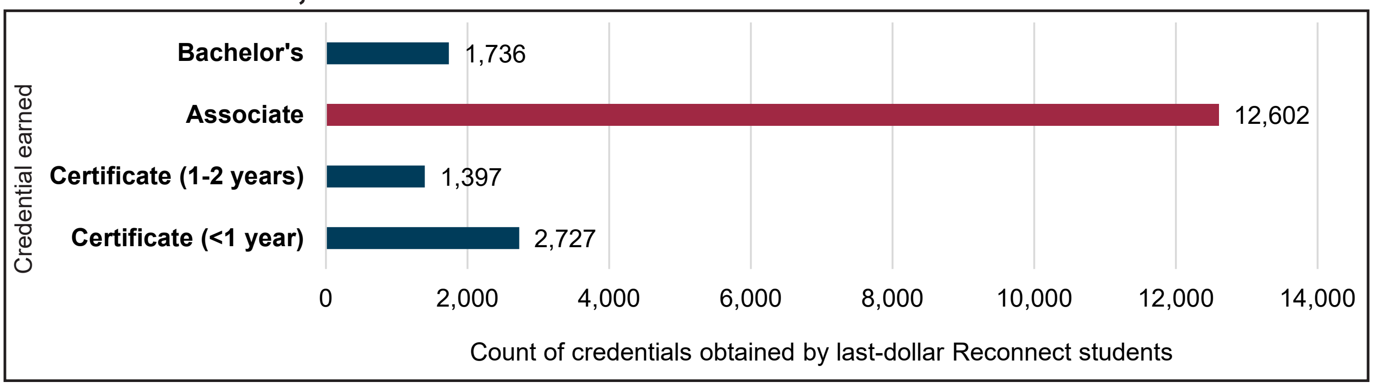
[Y] OREA used financial aid data to identify Reconnect-eligible students and their award amounts and credential data to determine which students earned credentials and the type(s) of credentials earned.

### *Approximately 40 percent of last-dollar Reconnect students earned a credential between fall 2018 and summer 2024*

In this analysis, OREA focused on credential attainment for last-dollar Reconnect students (i.e., students who received money from the grant). The attainment rates described here include all credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students – associate degrees and certificates earned while students were last-dollar Reconnect students and any credential earned by former last-dollar Reconnect students who lost eligibility and completed a credential after they stopped receiving the Reconnect grant.

In total, from the fall 2018 semester through the summer 2024 semester, 13,879 (40 percent) last-dollar students eventually received a credential (i.e., certificate, associate degree, bachelor's degree, or higher). Some of these students earned more than one credential. In total, last-dollar Reconnect students received 18,588 credentials from fall 2018 through summer 2024. Most commonly, these credentials were associate degrees (12,602 degrees or 68 percent of credentials) and short-term certificates (2,727 credentials or 15 percent).[Z] (See Exhibit 27.) When last-dollar students receive more than one credential they are most likely to receive an associate degree, short-term certificate, and long-term certificate. However, as last-dollar students earn additional credentials, they are more likely to receive associate or bachelor's degrees and less likely to receive a certificate.

**Exhibit 27: Associate degrees are the most commonly earned credential by last-dollar Reconnect students, fall 2018 – summer 2024**



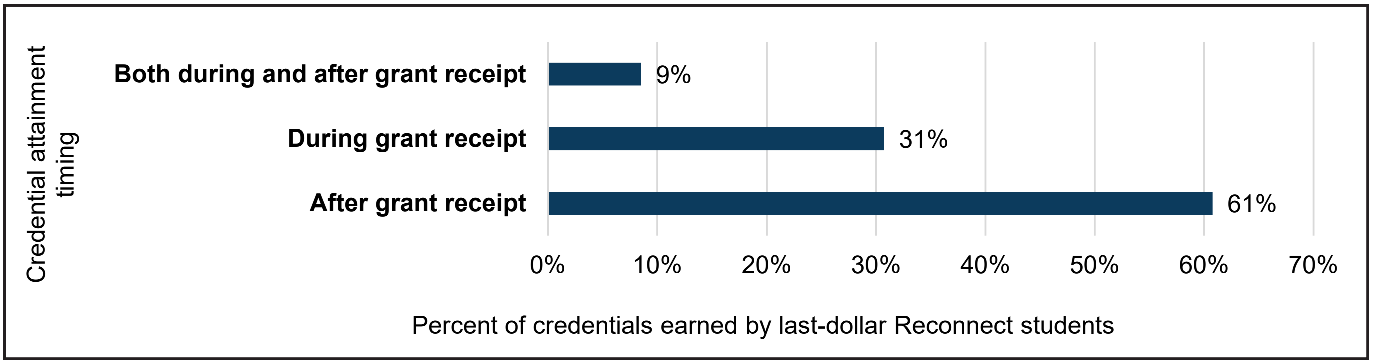

Notes: (1) This exhibit represents credentials earned, not the number of students who earned a credential. Students may be double counted if they earned multiple credentials. (2) This exhibit includes all credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students – certificates and associate degrees earned while students were Reconnect eligible as well as any credential earned by former last-dollar Reconnect students who lost eligibility and completed a credential after they stopped receiving the Reconnect grant. (3) Former last-dollar Reconnect students obtained 126 credentials beyond a bachelor's degree. These 126 credentials are not included in this exhibit.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC student award data.

Non-Reconnect students were less likely to receive a credential (30 percent) than last-dollar Reconnect students (40 percent) from fall 2018 through summer 2024. Non-Reconnect students also received proportionally fewer associate degrees but more Bachelor's degrees, long-term certificates, and short-term certificates, as a proportion of all credentials received by the students during the same time frame.

[Z] Short-term certificates generally take between three months and one year to complete. In contrast, long-term certificates generally take between one and two years to complete.

### *Most credentials were earned by former last-dollar Reconnect students after they became ineligible for the grant*

**Exhibit 28: Most credentials were earned after last-dollar Reconnect students stopped receiving the Reconnect grant**




Notes: (1) This exhibit represents credentials earned, not the number of students who earned a credential. Students may be double counted if they earned multiple credentials. (2) This exhibit includes any credential earned: sequential and terminal certificates, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and higher. (3) The "after grant receipt" percentage may be artificially inflated since there is one more year of credential data than there is enrollment and financial aid data. Credential data was available through the summer 2024 semester while enrollment and financial aid data was available through summer 2023.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC student award data.

Exhibit 28 illustrates the timing of credential completion for last-dollar Reconnect students relative to grant receipt. The analysis categorizes the over 18,000 credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students from fall 2018 through summer 2024 into three distinct time periods: during grant receipt (i.e., the student was eligible for the grant), after grant receipt (i.e., the student became ineligible for the grant), or both during and after grant receipt. This analysis includes any credential earned by a last-dollar Reconnect student including Reconnect-eligible credentials (i.e., sequential and terminal certificates, associate degrees), and non-Reconnect eligible credentials (e.g., bachelor's degrees or higher). Exhibit 28 excludes zero-dollar Reconnect students as they do not receive Reconnect grant funding.

Over 60 percent of credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students were earned after they stopped receiving the grant, while over 30 percent of credentials were completed during the time they received the grant. A smaller group, 9 percent, were completed by students both during and after their period of grant receipt.

The "both during and after grant receipt" group includes credentials received by last-dollar Reconnect students who earned a credential while receiving the Reconnect grant and those who lost grant eligibility either because they earned a terminal credential (i.e., terminal certificate or associate degree) or met another terminating event and then later earned a credential without Reconnect grant funding. The "during grant receipt" category includes last-dollar Reconnect students who earned a credential while receiving the Reconnect grant. Students in this category who earned a sequential certificate were still grant eligible and may still be enrolled, pursuing a terminal certificate or associate degree.

The "after grant receipt" category includes credentials awarded to last-dollar Reconnect students who lost eligibility for any reason, like dropping below the minimum six-credit hour requirement, for example, before earning any credential. Students in this category went on to earn a credential without funding from the Reconnect grant.

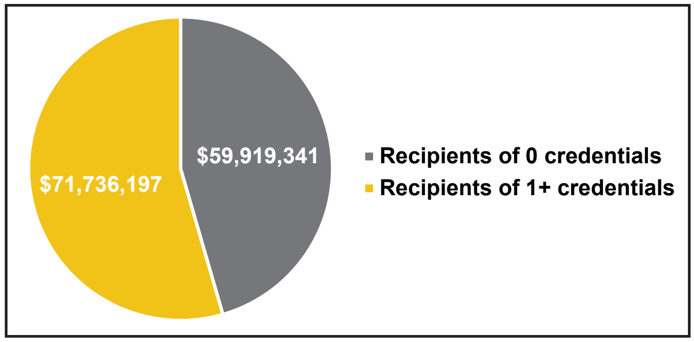
The analysis of credential timing demonstrates that most credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students (61 percent) were received by students as they persisted and completed credentials after they were no longer receiving Reconnect grant funds. This finding highlights that the Reconnect grant may serve as a catalyst for re-enrollment since many last-dollar Reconnect students persist and eventually obtain a credential even after their grant receipt ends.

### *Most Reconnect dollars were allocated to students who earned a credential*

From fall 2018 through summer 2023, a total of $131.7 million was allocated to last-dollar Reconnect students. Overall, 54 percent ($71.7 million) was allocated to students who had earned at least one credential, as of summer 2024, while 46 percent ($59.9 million) was allocated to students who had not completed a credential as of summer 2024.[AA]

Most last-dollar Reconnect students (60 percent) did not earn a credential between fall 2018 and summer 2024, while 40 percent (13,879 students) received a credential at some point after receiving Reconnect dollars. Among those students who received a credential, almost all received three credentials or fewer.

**Exhibit 29: Of the $131.7 million allocated to last-dollar Reconnect students from fall 2018 through summer 2023, 54 percent went to students who received a credential**




Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid and student award data.

From fall 2018 through summer 2023, the state allocated $7,083 per credential earned by last-dollar Reconnect students (i.e., $131,655,538 total Reconnect funds yielded 18,588 credentials). The average grant amount per credential ($7,083) exceeded the actual grant amount allocated to the 13,879 last-dollar Reconnect students who earned a credential. This is because about 60 percent of last-dollar students had not completed a credential as of summer 2024, which increases the cost per award incurred by the state. Last-dollar Reconnect students who earned a credential received an average of $5,169 from the Reconnect grant, or $1,436 per semester.

From fall 2018 through summer 2024, 42 percent of last-dollar Reconnect students at public institutions received a credential. Of those last-dollar students who attended a community college, 42 percent received a credential. At eligible four-year institutions 52 percent of last-dollar students received a credential (although the number of students is small for this group).The institutions that conferred the most credentials to all last-dollar Reconnect students from fall 2018 through summer 2024 were Pellissippi State (2,619), Nashville State (2,112), Volunteer State (2,071), and Motlow State (1,542). All other community colleges conferred between 700 and 1,400 credentials each. Eligible public universities each conferred fewer than 50 credentials to last-dollar students. (See Exhibit 30.)

[AA] This, and all other figures in this section, could change as students who are currently enrolled as last-dollar Reconnect students graduate after the examined time period. For example, a student who enrolled in fall 2022 may not have obtained a credential by summer 2024 but may still obtain a credential in spring 2025.

**Exhibit 30: Cleveland State, Walters State, and Northeast State had the highest percentage of last-dollar Reconnect students at community colleges who received at least one credential, fall 2018 – summer 2024**

| Community college | Credentials received by last-dollar Reconnect students from fall 2018-summer 2024 | Total last-dollar Reconnect students who received at least one credential from fall 2018-summer 2024 | Percent of last-dollar Reconnect students who received at least one credential from fall 2018-summer 2024 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Chattanooga State | 1,368 | 1,054 | 43% |
| Cleveland State | 1,329 | 669 | 54% |
| Columbia State | 819 | 688 | 44% |
| Dyersburg State | 939 | 563 | 43% |
| Jackson State | 756 | 625 | 42% |
| Motlow College | 1,542 | 1,266 | 40% |
| Nashville State | 2,112 | 1544 | 37% |
| Northeast State | 1,237 | 922 | 47% |
| Pellissippi State | 2,619 | 1,857 | 44% |
| Roane State | 1,214 | 1,030 | 43% |
| Southwest | 1,270 | 1,094 | 39% |
| Volunteer State | 2,071 | 1,521 | 40% |
| Walters State | 1,170 | 935 | 47% |

Source: OREA analysis of THEC student award data.

While various metrics can be used to measure institutional effectiveness as it relates to Reconnect (e.g., number of credentials conferred, percent of students receiving a credential, cost per credential conferred, etc.), these metrics did not yield consistent results. OREA was unable to determine what factors caused some community colleges to perform better than others. Community colleges generally reported similar, if not identical, efforts to recruit, retain, and graduate Reconnect students. Observationally, factors like Reconnect students' initial cumulative credit hours, overall enrollment size of the college, degree of urbanization, percent of students who are Pell eligible or first generation, and student race/ethnicity and age appear to have little impact on a community college's performance. As such, it is likely that some other unobserved factor, or combination of factors, contributes to a college's performance.

### *Receiving the Reconnect grant is positively associated with earning a credential*

OREA conducted correlation analyses to investigate the relationship between student groups and the likelihood they earned a credential. It is important to note that correlations are descriptive in nature and not predictive. In other words, they are not causal. The correlations contained here are between two variables only – student group and credential receipt – unless otherwise specified.

Among last-dollar and zero-dollar students, there is a somewhat positive and statistically significant correlation between receiving Reconnect grant dollars and earning a credential.[AB] This suggests that last-dollar Reconnect students were more likely to complete a credential than zero-dollar Reconnect students. In contrast, the correlation between being classified as a Reconnect student regardless of grant receipt (i.e., both last- and zero-dollar students) and credential attainment is very slightly negative, though also statistically significant due to the large sample size.[AC] Thus, when both last-dollar and zero-dollar Reconnect students are grouped against non-Reconnect students, they are slightly less likely to earn a credential.

[AB] Correlation coefficient of .2735, $p$-value less than .001.
[AC] Coefficient of -.0182 and $p$-value less than .001.

There are two implications of the difference between a positive and a negative correlation. First, the inclusion of zero-dollar students may dilute the overall relationship between grant receipt and credential attainment. Second, the data imply that zero-dollar students, while signaling some intent to enroll and persist by applying for Reconnect, may lack the financial incentive that last-dollar funding provides to continue meeting eligibility requirements until a credential is obtained.

With that knowledge, OREA compared last-dollar students to non-Reconnect students. Among last-dollar and non-Reconnect students, there is a very weak but statistically significant positive correlation between receiving the Reconnect grant and earning a credential.[AD]

OREA used a statistical method called a partial correlation to begin to control for other variables, namely initial cumulative credit hours. OREA's partial correlation looked at the relationship between student group and credential receipt when initial cumulative credit hours are taken into consideration. When initial cumulative credit hours are controlled for among last-dollar and non-Reconnect students, the correlation between receiving the Reconnect grant and credential attainment becomes slightly stronger.[AE]

Although the simple correlation between Reconnect program participation (both last-dollar and zero-dollar Reconnect students combined) and credential attainment is slightly negative, this relationship flips when controlling for students' initial cumulative credit hours and becomes very slightly positive.[AF] The switch from negative to positive suggests that when comparing students with similar levels of academic progress at the time of entry, Reconnect students are actually more likely to earn a credential than comparable non-Reconnect students.

This means that the relationship between grant receipt and credential receipt persists even after accounting for credit accumulation. It also suggests that initial cumulative credit hours do not independently relate to credential outcomes.

While the relationships examined here are statistically significant, they are generally weak in magnitude. Though the positive relationships are encouraging, these instances imply that grant receipt alone does not solely drive student success. The weakness of the relationships also indicates that initial credit does not strongly predict credential attainment. Taken together, student success appears to be shaped by a combination of influences, circumstances, and demographics.

### *Credentials earned by last-dollar students were concentrated in liberal arts, nursing, business, and emergency medical technology*

While evaluating the Reconnect grant, OREA did not have access to data specifying the program area for credentials. For example, OREA could not distinguish whether an Associate of Arts was in Accounting or Business Administration. However, available data indicated the general type of associate degree (e.g., Associate of Arts, Associate of Science) and the general field of study as identified by the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP), a nationally standardized system that categorizes academic programs by field of study. Although CIP code data is less precise than program-specific information, it offers valuable insight into broad patterns across Reconnect credentials.

Among last-dollar Reconnect students, the most common fields of study were Liberal Arts and Sciences/Liberal Studies (44 percent),[AG] Registered Nursing/Registered Nurse (14 percent), Business Administration and Management-General (6 percent), and Emergency Medical Technology/Technician-EMT Paramedic (5 percent). Together, these four fields account for more than 70 percent of all credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students, with the remaining 30 percent spread across all other CIP categories.

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[AD] Coefficient of .106.

[AE] Coefficient of .1233, *p*-value less than .001.

[AF] Coefficient of .091, *p*-value less than .001.

[AG] Credentials in the Liberal Arts and Sciences/Liberal Studies program area are largely preparatory to transfer to a four-year college or university.

The five most common fields of study for last-dollar, zero-dollar, and non-Reconnect students are shown in Exhibit 31. The top two credential fields are the same for all three student groups: Liberal Arts and Sciences/ Liberal Studies and Registered Nursing/Registered Nurse.

**Exhibit 31: The most common fields of study for last-dollar, zero-dollar, and non-Reconnect students earning a credential are Liberal Arts and Sciences/Liberal Studies or Registered Nursing/Registered Nurse, fall 2018 – summer 2024**

| Largest last-dollar credential fields of study | Percent of last-dollar credential recipients | Largest zero-dollar credential fields of study | Percent of zero-dollar credential recipients | Largest non-Reconnect student credential fields of study | Percent of non-Reconnect student credential recipients |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Liberal Arts and Sciences/Liberal Studies | 44% | Liberal Arts and Sciences/Liberal Studies | 44% | Liberal Arts and Sciences/Liberal Studies | 38% |
| Registered Nursing/ Registered Nurse | 14% | Registered Nursing/ Registered Nurse | 13% | Registered Nursing/ Registered Nurse | 10% |
| Business Administration and Management, General | 6% | Emergency Medical Technology/ Technician (EMT Paramedic) | 6% | Emergency Medical Technology/ Technician (EMT Paramedic) | 7% |
| Emergency Medical Technology/ Technician (EMT Paramedic) | 5% | Business Administration and Management, General | 6% | Criminal Justice/ Police Science | 5% |
| Health Information/ Medical Records Technology/ Technician | 2% | Child Development | 2% | Business Administration and Management, General | 3% |

Note: Table excludes credentials that do not correspond to a CIP code. This accounts for roughly 7 percent of credentials in each category.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC financial aid and student award data.

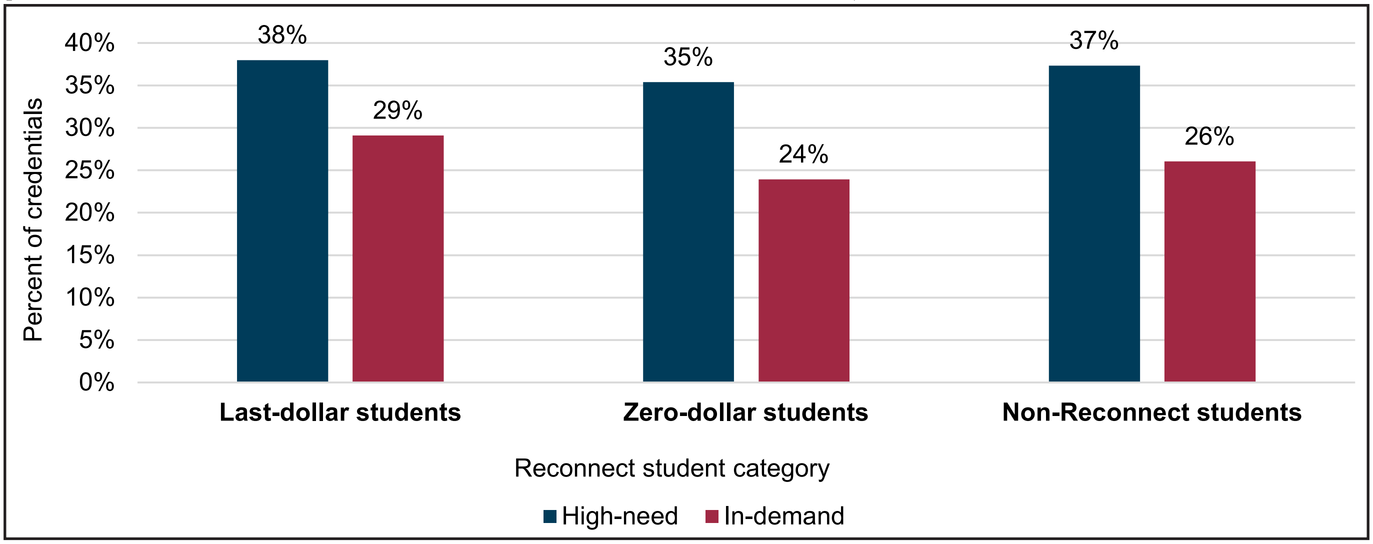
## *Last-dollar Reconnect students frequently earn credentials in high-need or in-demand fields*

Tennessee's outcomes-based funding formula (OBF) for state appropriations to institutions of higher education applies a workforce premium to certain CIP categories.[AH] Following OBF guidelines, OREA identified which credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students fall into these *high-need fields*.[AI] In addition, THEC, in conjunction with the Tennessee Departments of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD), Economic and Community Development (TDECD), Education (TDOE), and Finance and Administration, publishes a supply and demand report that identifies *in-demand fields* as based on job availability and wage thresholds.

From fall 2018 through summer 2024, 38 percent of credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students were in high-need fields and 29 percent were in in-demand fields. For comparison, non-Reconnect students earned a slightly lower percentage of credentials in high-need fields (37 percent) and slightly fewer in in-demand fields (26 percent). Zero-dollar Reconnect students earned fewer credentials in both categories: 35 percent in high-need fields and 24 percent in in-demand fields. (See Exhibit 32.)

[AH] The workforce premium CIP categories are Agriculture, Agriculture Operations and Related Science, Natural Resources and Conservation, Computer and Information Sciences and Support Services, Engineering, Engineering Technologies/Technicians, Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, Physical Sciences, and Health Professions and Related Clinical Sciences.
[AI] High-need fields include Agriculture, Natural Resources and Conservation, Computer and Information Sciences, Engineering, Engineering Technologies/ Technicians, Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, Physical Sciences, and Health Professions.

**Exhibit 32: Nearly four in 10 credentials received by last-dollar students were in a workforce premium area and three in 10 credentials were in demand, fall 2018 – summer 2024**




Source: OREA analysis of THEC student award data.

### *Administrator observations*

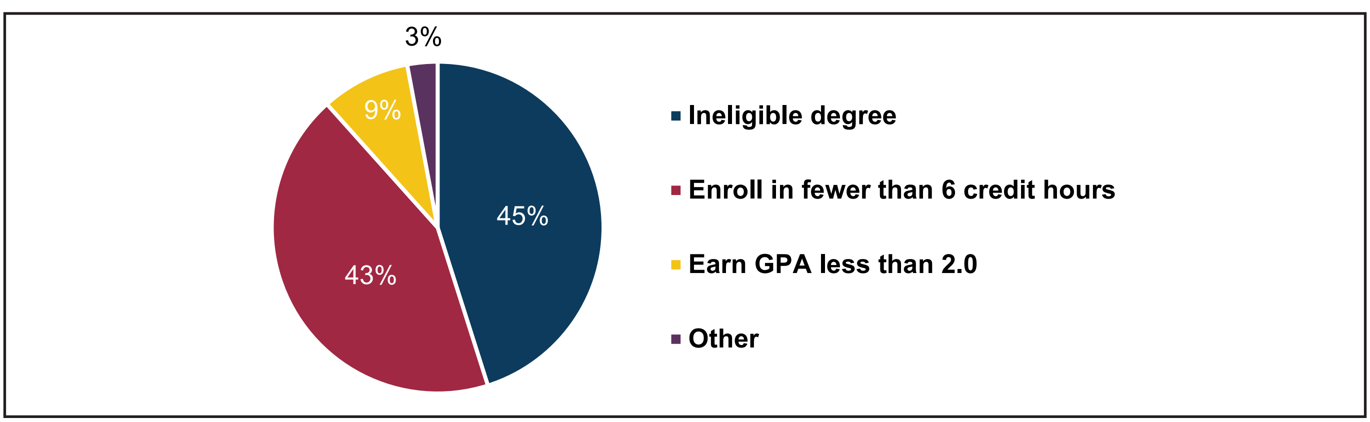
During interviews, administrators at community colleges noted that Reconnect students most frequently pursued credentials in certain fields. The fields that administrators most often cited include Healthcare and Nursing, Business and Accounting, Skilled Trades and Applied Technology (like mechatronics, HVAC, and welding), IT and Cybersecurity, and General Studies. Administrators at one college noted that students who choose General Studies may be more motivated by the symbolic value of a degree than by a specific career goal.

At six community colleges, administrators reported that, while Reconnect students have the option to pursue either a terminal credential to reenter the workforce quickly or a transfer pathway to a four-year institution, most choose the workforce-oriented route. Administrators at one community college also observed a trend by age: younger students were more likely to pursue the transfer pathway while older students more often prioritized credentials that support a quicker return to the workforce.

## Common challenges

Community colleges submit data to THEC on the reasons Reconnect students become ineligible for the Reconnect grant. This information is shown in Exhibit 33.

**Exhibit 33: Most Reconnect students lose eligibility because they enroll in a non-qualifying program or too few credit hours, fall 2018 – summer 2023**




Note: Reconnect students may be double counted if they failed to meet multiple eligibility criteria. The "Other" category includes reasons that do not fit into the first three categories, such as the student having previously earned a bachelor's degree.
Source: OREA analysis of THEC data provided by community colleges.

From fall 2018 through summer 2023, most Reconnect students lost eligibility because they were pursuing an ineligible credential or because they enrolled in fewer than six credit hours. Students who are ineligible because they pursue a degree other than a certificate or associate degree are still able to regain eligibility if they pursue a certificate or associate degree. Otherwise, students who lose eligibility because they enroll in fewer than six credit hours or do not earn at least a 2.0 GPA are not able to regain eligibility unless they submit an appeal and it is approved.

Adult learners returning to higher education face challenges that can hinder their progression through application and enrollment, retention and persistence, and completion. Some of these challenges apply not just to Reconnect students but to all adults entering or re-entering postsecondary education.

OREA categorized these challenges based on themes from interviews with community college administrators and student-facing staff.

## Financial and bureaucratic barriers

Students and community college administrators experience various financial and bureaucratic challenges and barriers. These range from issues related to the nature of last-dollar scholarships to problems obtaining transcripts for students who had previously attended college at other institutions of higher education.

### *Reconnect students often misunderstand what the Reconnect grant covers, leading to unexpected costs*

Even though tuition and mandatory fees are covered for last-dollar Reconnect students, unexpected out-of-pocket costs may deter students from enrolling or persisting. Despite advising from community college faculty and staff, some students still misunderstand how last-dollar scholarships work. Administrators at 11 community colleges indicated that students often struggle to understand the terminology and concepts of "last-dollar" assistance and "mandatory fees."

Students assume last-dollar means that Reconnect covers all costs down to the last dollar (making college free), rather than that their tuition and mandatory fees are covered after all other gift aid is applied to their balance. Students also interpret mandatory fees as any fee required to take a course or attend college rather than the specific set of institutionally defined fees eligible for Reconnect coverage. (See Exhibit 1 on page 6.) As a result, students may be surprised to find account balances not covered by the grant, and those balances must be covered out of pocket.

Community college administrators at eight colleges pointed to non-mandatory but required fees like online course fees, lab fees, and other course fees, as well as the cost of textbooks and other required materials (e.g., scrubs, equipment, and fees required in the nursing program) as major barriers to student success. Although these costs are essential for participation in specific programs, particularly in healthcare fields, they fall outside the definition of tuition and mandatory fees and therefore remain the student's financial responsibility.

### *Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) limits Pell access for some low-income students, forcing greater reliance on the Reconnect grant*

Administrators at nine community colleges told OREA that meeting federal Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements poses a challenge for low-income Reconnect students. To remain eligible for federal Pell grants, students must meet minimum academic standards, including maintaining at least a 2.0 GPA and completing a required number of credit hours each year. Students who struggled during prior college enrollment may return to school with low GPAs, making them temporarily ineligible for Pell until they improve their academic standing.

Although SAP status does not affect a student's eligibility for Reconnect, it can reduce their total financial aid. Students who are ineligible for Pell due to SAP must rely solely on Reconnect to cover tuition and mandatory fees, leaving them responsible for all additional required costs not covered by the grant.

If zero-dollar Reconnect students receive the Pell grant, however, they may have Pell grant money left over to pay for non-mandatory expenses after the costs of tuition and mandatory fees have been met. Should those students lose Pell eligibility due to SAP issues, they would convert to last-dollar students. In such an instance, money would no longer be available to cover non-mandatory expenses.

These findings affirm that Reconnect is functioning as intended by supporting students excluded from Pell eligibility. At the same time, they highlight that students with SAP issues may require additional support to persist and complete their programs.

### *Transcript retrieval requirements delay enrollment for some students*

To qualify for the Reconnect grant, applicants must obtain and submit official transcripts from all previously attended colleges, allowing institutions to verify that the student has not already earned an associate degree.

According to administrators at 11 community colleges, retrieving official transcripts poses a significant obstacle for applicants. In OREA's 2022 report, 86 percent of survey respondents at community colleges reported that transcript issues had delayed or prevented student enrollment. Faculty and staff at five colleges further noted in interviews conducted for this evaluation that transcript retrieval is especially burdensome for students who have attended multiple institutions or whose former schools have closed.

Although neither state nor federal law requires students to clear outstanding balances at former institutions, those institutions often withhold official transcripts until debts are paid. Thus, some students can only obtain and submit unofficial transcripts, which cannot be processed for Reconnect eligibility.

Colleges can waive the requirement to obtain previous transcripts under certain circumstances. Students must sign a statement attesting they have never previously completed an associate degree or higher. Doing so allows the student to enroll and receive the Reconnect grant, but any previously earned credits cannot be applied toward a credential.

## Most Reconnect students work or care for dependents while enrolled

Balancing education with adult responsibilities is perhaps the most pervasive challenge Reconnect students and adult students at large face. Based on student responses on the Reconnect application, many have jobs (85 percent of students in 2023) and children or other family members who are dependents (57 percent of students in 2023). During in-depth interviews conducted by TBR, adult students noted that juggling coursework with work and childcare was a barrier to staying in school. These findings align with information OREA heard during interviews with community colleges. Administrators at nine community colleges told OREA that work and family obligations frequently prevent prospective Reconnect students from enrolling and often lead currently enrolled students to lose eligibility.

## Scheduling and academic format

When and how adult students take their courses can impact their ability to enroll, persist, and succeed. Traditional class schedules (weekday mornings and afternoons) may conflict with work hours and rigid course delivery formats can be impractical for students with irregular schedules. During interviews with OREA, administrators at five community colleges reported that online coursework has become increasingly common in recent years, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Even prior to 2020, TBR observed that half of Reconnect students took at least one online course.

Faculty and staff at seven colleges also observe that many adult and/or Reconnect students take online classes out of necessity. Students choose online formats despite preferring in-person instruction or believing they would be more successful in a traditional classroom. TBR found that success for reconnecting students in online classes increased during 2020, the first year of the pandemic. However, TBR also noted that these improvements may reflect several variables: changes in the types of students enrolling in online courses, the kinds of courses being offered, the faculty assigned to teach the courses, or new institutional investments in online instruction and faculty training.

OREA interviews with community college faculty and staff revealed a range of perspectives on online learning outcomes. At six colleges, faculty and staff indicated that Reconnect students are generally less successful in online courses than in-person formats. Several noted that students tend to struggle more in certain subjects, like math and science, when taken online compared to humanities or general education courses. At one college, administrators attributed online course outcomes entirely to faculty effectiveness, suggesting that instructor quality matters more than delivery method. Regardless of these differences, faculty and administrators widely agreed that offering flexible course formats is essential to serving Reconnect students given the time constraints of work and family responsibilities.

# Evidence from other studies

TBR's Office of Policy and Strategy released an early outcomes report after the first year of implementation and a series of working papers examining returning adults' course-taking behavior, success rates, and support interventions. More recently, researchers at the University of Tennessee's Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research assessed the Navigate Reconnect initiative and its impact on enrollment and persistence. TBR, in partnership with behavioral science organizations, has also explored specific support strategies such as targeted text messaging, peer mentoring, flexible scheduling, and faculty engagement to improve adult student success. This section of the report summarizes these Tennessee-focused studies conducted by state agencies and includes information obtained through interviews OREA conducted with community college faculty and staff.

The studies summarized in this section use definitions of Reconnect students that differ from OREA's definition, detailed on page 3. Notably, OREA classifies Reconnect students based on their application behavior and financial aid receipt, whereas other existing research does not define Reconnect students the same way. The works referenced in this section define Reconnect students as any adult or independent student who returns to college after a gap in enrollment.

## Navigate Reconnect

Reconnect Navigators help adult students explore college options, answer questions about financial aid and the enrollment process, and provide additional support once students are enrolled. Navigators also connect adult students with local resources such as childcare and affordable transportation options, make direct referrals to campus contacts (e.g., financial aid, admissions, academic advising), and provide encouragement throughout the process. Reconnect students may work with a Navigator but are not required to do so. Navigators are available for all adult students, not just Reconnect grant recipients.

The Boyd Center found that between 2019 and 2021, 12 Navigators assisted nearly 11,000 Tennesseans to explore college options and take steps to enroll.[2] Students who interacted with a Navigator were more likely to persist and complete college credentials than students who did not: 55 percent of community college students who interacted with a Navigator were still enrolled two years later or had earned a credential in that time, while only 44 percent of those who did not interact with a Navigator had done the same.

Despite the Boyd Center's observed positive outcomes for Navigate Reconnect participation, community college faculty and staff have mixed assessments of Navigators. During interviews, OREA learned that some community colleges have strong professional relationships with the Navigators assigned to their region, others have little contact with Navigators but see them as a helpful resource, while still others have little contact and either do not understand the role Navigators play or think they create more confusion than clarity.

## Targeted "nudge" interventions

To encourage positive student behaviors, some community colleges have experimented with direct communication "nudges." In spring 2020, as the first Reconnect cohort approached the end of their second year, Nashville State and Pellissippi State Community Colleges partnered with behavioral science research firms through TBR to send a series of targeted text and email reminders to Reconnect students.[3] The messages were tailored to prompt students about key requirements like reapplying for the grant (a requirement that no longer remains), meeting advising or registration deadlines, and accessing support services.

At both Nashville State and Pellissippi State, Reconnect persistence rates improved after the campaign. Persistence rates at Nashville State increased from 38 to 53 percent for the cohort receiving nudges. Similarly, persistence rates at Pellissippi State increased from 47 to 53 percent. In contrast, most other community colleges experienced flat or declining persistence during the same time period.

TBR observed increased Reconnect reapplications in the days immediately following nudges, indicating their effectiveness.

While reapplying for Reconnect is no longer required, positive results from this study suggest that nudge-style interventions may be useful for improving other program requirements.

## Peer mentoring initiatives

In 2021, TBR piloted a peer mentoring program for Reconnect recipients at Nashville State and Southwest to test whether pairing new adult students with trained student mentors would improve outcomes.[4] The idea was that an experienced peer could help a returning adult navigate college life, provide encouragement, and serve as a role model.

While intuitively promising, the pilot results showed limited impact. TBR's working paper entitled "Reconnecting but Disengaged: The Limited Effects of Peer Mentoring for Adults" found no statistically significant overall differences in persistence or credit accumulation between mentored and non-mentored students in the pilot semester.

One major challenge was low participation. Only about 28 percent of the students engaged with their assigned mentor. Feedback from the program suggested that the outreach messages may not have resonated with busy adult students.

The peer mentoring pilot highlights that simply offering a resource is not sufficient. Uptake is a critical component to success. If such programs are to succeed, they likely need to be opt-in or highly incentivized so that participants are motivated to engage.

# Conclusions

Tennessee Reconnect continues to serve its purpose of expanding access to higher education and increasing credential attainment for adult learners in Tennessee. The information presented here summarizes the conclusions of OREA's second statutorily required evaluation of the Reconnect grant.[AJ]

These conclusions focus on application and enrollment, credential attainment, and common challenges that Reconnect students experience.

## The number of Reconnect students has declined since the grant began in fall 2018.

In the 2018-19 academic year, 42,038 individuals applied for the Reconnect grant. These applications yielded 26,822 new Reconnect students, an enrollment yield of 64 percent. However, this yield in 2018-19 may have been driven in part by eligible students who were already enrolled in an eligible institution. In the 2019-20 academic year, 26,540 new applicants yielded 13,821 new Reconnect students, an enrollment yield of 52 percent. In the 2022-23 academic year, 17,380 individuals applied for the Reconnect grant. However, these applications yielded 6,255 new Reconnect students (36 percent).[AK] The decline in the percentage of new applicants who become enrollees may point to barriers in the enrollment process or external conditions affecting adult learners' ability to start or continue postsecondary education. Potential barriers are discussed on page 39.

The total number of Reconnect students (i.e., new Reconnect enrollees as well as existing enrollees) also declined over this period. In the 2018-19 academic year, 26,822 Reconnect students were enrolled. By 2022-23, that number had declined by more than half to 13,099, a decrease of approximately 51 percent.

The decline in Reconnect enrollment mirrors a broader trend of declining community college enrollment. From 2018-19 to 2022-23, total enrollment at Tennessee's community colleges declined from just over 89,000 to roughly 72,000 students. Adult student enrollment also declined during this time, decreasing from 29 percent in fall 2018 to 26 percent by fall 2022.[AL]

### *Lowering the age for Reconnect grant eligibility had minimal, if any, impact on enrollment*

In 2022, the General Assembly lowered the eligibility age for the Reconnect grant to include 23-year-olds. In practice, the change made all 23-year-olds, as well as 22-year-olds who turn 23 before January 1 during the academic year, eligible for Reconnect. Before the change, eligible Reconnect students had to be 24 years old or otherwise independent as determined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

The share of 22- and 23-year-olds in the Reconnect population increased slightly in the fall 2022 semester (from 2.9 and 2.8 percent the prior semester to 3.2 and 3.6 percent, respectively). Yet those shares were still lower than historical highs in the fall 2019 semester (3.7 and 4.4 percent, respectively). Students in these age groups who enrolled before 2022 qualified based on independent status rather than age. As such, lowering the age for eligibility had minimal, if any, impact on enrollment for the fall 2022 semester. Some fluctuation in the age of Reconnect students is to be expected year to year; thus, it is difficult to determine whether the changes in the share of 22- and 23-year-olds after the age adjustment occurred were normal or related to the change in law. A greater impact may be found in the future as more years of enrollment data become available.

[AJ] These conclusions and considerations focus exclusively on the Reconnect grant for community college students and do not include the TCAT Reconnect grant.
[AK] Figures include both last- and zero-dollar Reconnect students. Last-dollar Reconnect students receive grant funds while zero-dollar Reconnect students are eligible for the grant but receive no money from the Reconnect grant because their tuition and mandatory fees are covered by other gift aid. Zero-dollar students are not required to maintain continuing eligibility requirements until they start to receive grant funds.
[AL] Data on adult student enrollment is available in THEC Fact Books, where adult students are defined as age 25 years or older.

### *At least 90 percent of non-Reconnect students do not fill out a Reconnect application, and approximately 50 percent do not file the FAFSA*

OREA identified 50,975 students who could qualify for Reconnect based on their age or independent status. To receive the Reconnect grant, students must file a Reconnect application and a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), among other requirements. OREA found that each year between 2018 and 2023, at least 90 percent of non-Reconnect students did not fill out a Reconnect application and approximately 50 percent did not file the FAFSA.

Reconnect enrollment numbers could be increased by more non-Reconnect students filing the FAFSA and completing the Reconnect application.

## Between 2018 and 2023, the Reconnect grant provided nearly $132 million to over 34,000 students, 40 percent of whom earned a credential.

Tennessee Reconnect is a last-dollar scholarship funded through the Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarship (TELS) program. Last-dollar scholarships are applied to a student's remaining tuition and mandatory fee balance after other gift aid, like federal Pell grants and state-funded merit scholarships, has been applied.

Reconnect students receive a grant up to the full cost of tuition and mandatory fees. Some Reconnect students receive no money from the grant because their tuition and mandatory fees are covered by other gift aid. As such, Reconnect students are classified as last-dollar students (eligible students who received money from the Reconnect grant) or zero-dollar students (eligible students who did not receive money from the Reconnect grant). Overall, 52 percent of Reconnect students were last-dollar students between fall 2018 and summer 2023.

From fall 2018 through summer 2023, nearly $132 million in lottery funds were allocated to students through the Reconnect grant. Most Reconnect students (95 percent) enrolled in a community college during that period. Annual Reconnect expenditures ranged from around $20 million to $32 million.

### *Reconnect is the fourth largest lottery scholarship expenditure*

In fiscal year 2023-24, Reconnect accounted for $20 million of all TELS-funded scholarships. By comparison, Tennessee Promise accounted for $24 million, the dual enrollment grant accounted for $59 million, and HOPE-related scholarships accounted for $347 million.[AM]

### *The majority of Reconnect students reported having dependents in their households and over half planned on working full time while enrolled*

From fall 2018 through summer 2023, 66,672 students applied and qualified for the Reconnect grant. Of those, 34,400 became last-dollar students, meaning they received funding from the Reconnect grant. The remaining 32,272 were zero-dollar students, meaning they did not receive funding from the Reconnect grant because their tuition and mandatory fees were already covered by other sources of financial aid or scholarships.

The average Reconnect student was 33 years old. Approximately 72 percent of Reconnect students were female. Over 90 percent of Reconnect students were either White (67 percent) or Black (24 percent). Most students (88 percent) were low-income (as determined by their current or previous eligibility for Pell grants) and nearly half (48 percent) were the first generation in their family to attend college. Additionally, 57 percent of Reconnect students reported having dependents.

[AM] While Tennessee Promise is a TELS program, it is funded through the Tennessee Promise Endowment Fund, rather than directly through TELS.

Reconnect students typically intend to work while enrolled at eligible institutions. Over half planned to work full time while enrolled.[AN] Academically, on average, students had already earned nearly 30 credit hours upon enrollment as Reconnect students, and almost half had already earned 61 credit hours or more. This data indicates that many Reconnect students enrolled with some previous college experience, or even substantial experience, but had not received a degree.

### *Most credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students were associate degrees, and 38 percent were in high-need fields*

From fall 2018 through summer 2024, 40 percent of all last-dollar Reconnect students earned a credential, compared to 30 percent of non-Reconnect students who either did not apply for the grant or did not meet all eligibility criteria but could have been eligible for the grant based on age and/or independent status.[AO]

During this period, 13,879 last-dollar Reconnect students earned a total of 18,588 credentials after beginning to receive the Reconnect grant.[AP] The most commonly earned credentials were associate degrees (12,602) and short-term certificates (2,727).[AQ]

Of the 18,588 credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students, 38 percent were in high-need fields[AR] and 29 percent were in in-demand fields.[AS] The fields of study with the highest number of credentials earned were Liberal Arts and Sciences (44 percent) and Registered Nursing (14 percent).[AT] Overall, Reconnect students earned credentials that demonstrate the intent to join or re-join the workforce and to transfer to a four-year institution.

### *Last-dollar students persist at higher rates than non-Reconnect students*

Between fall 2018 and summer 2023, more than 70 percent of last-dollar Reconnect students who initially enrolled in a fall semester returned the next semester, and 55 percent of those students remained enrolled one year later. By comparison, non-Reconnect students who initially enrolled in a fall semester remained enrolled at rates of 61 percent after one semester and 42 percent after one year.

Last-dollar Reconnect students are required to maintain continuous enrollment in fall and spring semesters to remain eligible for the grant except in cases of an approved leave of absence. Higher retention rates among last-dollar students compared to non-Reconnect students suggest that the continuous enrollment requirement may promote retention and help students sustain momentum toward credential completion.

### *Receiving the Reconnect Grant is positively associated with earning a credential*

There is a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between receiving the Reconnect grant and earning a credential when comparing last-dollar Reconnect students and non-Reconnect students.

OREA used a statistical method called a partial correlation to more rigorously examine the relationship between receiving funds from the Reconnect grant and credential attainment beyond the observable difference in credential attainment among last-dollar and non-Reconnect students (40 percent credential

[AN] Information on Reconnect students' work plans comes from the Reconnect application where students indicate whether and to what extent they intend to work while enrolled.
[AO] OREA used credential data from fall 2018 through summer 2024 and financial aid data from fall 2018 through summer 2023.
[AP] Students may obtain more than one credential throughout their academic career. As such, the total number of credentials is not equal to the number of students who received a credential.
[AQ] A short-term certificate is an academic credential that requires 24 credit hours or less (generally taking three months to one year to complete if a student attends full-time or three months to two years if the student attends part-time).
[AR] High-need fields qualify for a workforce premium in Tennessee's Outcomes Based Funding formula for higher education and include Agriculture, Natural Resources and Conservation, Computer and Information Sciences, Engineering, Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, Physical Sciences, and Health Professions.
[AS] In-demand fields are those identified by the 2025 Academic Supply and Occupational Demand report. The report is created by THEC, in conjunction with the TDLWD, TDECD, TDOE, and Finance and Administration. The report identifies "in-demand fields" based on job availability and wage thresholds.
[AT] Credentials in the Liberal Arts and Sciences/Liberal Studies program area are typically preparatory to transfer to a four-year college or university.

attainment and 30 percent, respectively). OREA's partial correlation controlled for initial cumulative credit hours. Specifically, the correlation suggests that when comparing students with similar levels of academic progress at the time of enrollment, Reconnect students are statistically more likely to earn a credential than similar non-Reconnect students.

While the relationship is statistically significant, it is weak in magnitude. Though a positive relationship is encouraging, it implies that grant receipt and initial cumulative credit hours do not solely drive student success. Student success appears to be shaped by a combination of influences, circumstances, and demographics.

### *Most credentials were earned after last-dollar Reconnect students stopped receiving the grant*

Of the 18,588 credentials earned by last-dollar Reconnect students, nearly 61 percent were received after students lost grant eligibility. The students who received these credentials, thus, remained enrolled and went on to earn their credential after no longer receiving financial support from the Reconnect grant.

This analysis indicates that the Reconnect grant's most significant impact may be as a catalyst for re-enrolling adult learners in higher education, rather than as a continuous source of financial aid each semester until students earn a credential.

## Barriers and challenges

### *Misconceptions persist about what the grant covers*

During interviews with OREA, community college administrators reported that students continue to struggle to understand the last dollar aspect of Reconnect as well as the difference between mandatory and non-mandatory fees. Some students may assume that "last dollar" means the grant covers all education-related costs "down to the last dollar" instead of covering the last dollars of tuition and mandatory fees not covered by other gift aid.

As a last-dollar grant, Reconnect covers tuition and mandatory fees after other gift aid, such as Pell grants, has been applied. Mandatory fees are charged to all students and include registration, student government, and facilities fees, among others. Reconnect does not cover non-mandatory fees, though some of these fees (e.g., course, program, lab, and exam fees) may be charged for classes that are required for certain programs of study. Students who do not understand what the grant covers may be surprised to learn Reconnect does not cover such fees.

Misconceptions about what the Reconnect grant covers may lead to unmet expectations and withdrawal due to unexpected financial strain or prevent students from enrolling altogether.

### *Navigate Reconnect contributes to positive student outcomes, but Navigators are not consistently integrated at all community colleges*

Navigate Reconnect is a state-funded program that provides guidance and assistance to adult learners in Tennessee, including Reconnect students. All Tennessee adults are eligible for Navigate Reconnect services free of charge, even if they do not become Reconnect students. Interacting with Navigate Reconnect staff, called "Navigators," is optional for Reconnect students; these staff are based in regions across the state.

Navigators help adult students explore college options, answer questions about financial aid and the enrollment process, and connect adult students with local resources like childcare and affordable transportation.

A 2025 report by the University of Tennessee's Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research evaluated the Navigate Reconnect initiative and its impact on enrollment and persistence between 2019 and 2021. They found that students who interacted with a Navigator were more likely to remain enrolled and complete college credentials than students who did not.[AU]

OREA observed no consistent or formalized approach across Tennessee's 13 community colleges for integrating Navigator support into student outreach services. Some community colleges have established strong working relationships with Navigators, while others have limited interaction and coordination. Greater integration of Navigators at all institutions may improve outcomes for Reconnect students and other adult students.

### *Balancing work, family, and school responsibilities continues to challenge Reconnect students*

In 2023, just over 85 percent of Reconnect students reported planning to maintain employment. Over half (57 percent) planned to work full time while enrolled. More than half of Reconnect students (57 percent) also reported having dependents.[AV] These students must balance work hours and caregiving responsibilities with class attendance, studying, and assignments. The challenge of balancing these competing demands was also identified in OREA's 2022 Reconnect evaluation.

Given the competing pressures, flexible class schedules and course formats are appealing to Reconnect students and adult learners in general. A variety of course delivery methods (e.g., in-person, online, hybrid, real-time, recorded, etc.) provides such flexibility and helps students stay on track to earn a credential while also meeting their work and family obligations.

## Considerations

The following considerations are intended to support legislative and administrative decision-making related to the Tennessee Reconnect grant. They cover a range of potential modifications and enhancements that may promote greater access, efficiency, and outcomes. Each consideration is grounded in evidence presented in this evaluation and is intended to inform ongoing program oversight and improvement.

Since its inception, Reconnect has successfully supported thousands of adult learners in accessing postsecondary education and promoted credential attainment. Many aspects of the program appear to be functioning well. If the General Assembly and other stakeholders are satisfied with the program's current performance and trajectory, no immediate changes are needed.

Reconnect is the fourth largest lottery scholarship expenditure. In fiscal year 2023-24, Reconnect accounted for $20 million of all TELS-funded scholarships, representing 4 percent of total TELS expenditures that year. By comparison, Tennessee Promise accounted for $24 million,[AW] the dual enrollment grant accounted for $59 million, and HOPE-related scholarships accounted for $347 million. Between fiscal years 2024 and 2025, TELS proceeds declined from $501 million to $412 million.

The Comptroller's Office appreciates that some potential changes to Reconnect may have financial implications for lottery expenditures and further recognizes the tension between declining lottery revenues and steady or growing enrollment in the state's lottery-funded scholarship programs.

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[AU] Fifty-five percent of community college students who interacted with a Navigator were still enrolled two years later or had earned a credential in that time compared with 44 percent who had not interacted with a Navigator.
[AV] Percentages listed here are from the 2023 Reconnect grant application and thus refer only to students who applied in 2023.
[AW] Tennessee Promise scholarships are funded by the Tennessee Promise Endowment Fund, which was the direct beneficiary of excess lottery revenues until 2025. Promise expenditures are presented among TELS expenditures for cost comparison purposes.

## THEC, TBR, and community colleges could better coordinate efforts to improve Reconnect participation.

In the second year of Reconnect (2019-20), 52 percent of new applicants became new Reconnect students, but by 2022-23, the percentage had declined to 36 percent. The decline in the percentage of new applicants who become enrollees may point to barriers in the enrollment process or external conditions affecting adult learners' ability to start or continue postsecondary education. Potential barriers are discussed on page 39.

THEC, TBR, and community colleges should review this evaluation's conclusions and considerations and assess their existing efforts related to Reconnect students. To improve program participation, closer coordination among these three parties may be beneficial. State-level marketing efforts could be paired more closely with campus-level outreach, advising, and follow up, for example. Aligning these efforts would likely increase the percentage of applicants who ultimately become Reconnect students.

### *Target enrolled non-Reconnect students*

At least 90 percent of non-Reconnect students do not fill out a Reconnect application, and approximately 50 percent do not file the FAFSA. These students were enrolled and met age and eligibility criteria for Reconnect. Participation in Reconnect, and the state's FAFSA filing rates, could be increased by targeting these students.

Tennessee has previously implemented successful FAFSA filing campaigns focused on high school students. Similar strategies could be adapted and implemented to reach adult learners already enrolled in the community college system. TBR and community colleges should explore targeted outreach, application assistance, and messaging strategies to increase FAFSA filing rates and Reconnect application rates among this group of students. Increasing participation among currently enrolled students could increase use of the Reconnect grant and support adult learners already engaged in postsecondary education.

If more students at community colleges enroll in the Reconnect program, the program's costs will rise. For example, if an additional 10 percent of applicants converted to Reconnect students and received the average amount of grant funding per semester ($1,223), the program's annual cost would rise from roughly $20 million to around $33 million.

### *Expand the use of "nudges" to increase enrollment and persistence in the Reconnect grant*

Targeted "nudges" represent another potential strategy to increase Reconnect participation. A nudge is a short, targeted, and personalized communication, generally a text message or email reminder, from the college to a student to prompt an action on the student's part. Nudge campaigns that TBR conducted prior to the 2022-23 academic year contributed to improved Reconnect reapplication rates.[AX]

Community colleges could expand their use of nudges to increase Reconnect participation among eligible students and persistence among those already receiving the grant. For example, text message and email nudges could prompt students to apply for the FAFSA, apply for the Reconnect grant, maintain enrollment, or register for at least six credits to retain Reconnect eligibility.

[AX] The research was conducted to examine the impact of nudges on a student's likelihood of reapplying to the Reconnect grant. The reapplication requirement no longer exists.

## THEC, TBR, and community colleges should explore ways to increase the number of students who work with a Reconnect Navigator.

Navigate Reconnect is a state-funded program that provides guidance and assistance to adult learners in Tennessee, including Reconnect students. All Tennessee adults are eligible for Navigate Reconnect services free of charge, even if they do not become Reconnect students. Interacting with Navigate Reconnect staff, called "Navigators," is optional for Reconnect students; these staff members are based in regions across the state.

A 2025 study by the University of Tennessee's Boyd Center found that students who interacted with a Navigator between 2019 and 2021 were more likely to persist and complete a credential. This research found that 55 percent of those who interacted with a Navigator were still enrolled or had graduated two years later, compared to 44 percent of students who did not work with a Navigator.

In interviews with community college faculty and staff, OREA observed no consistent or formalized approach across Tennessee's 13 community colleges for integrating Navigator support into student outreach services. Some community colleges have established strong working relationships with Navigators, while others have limited interaction and coordination.

THEC, TBR, and community colleges should explore strategies to expand and make routine Navigator contact, particularly during the early stages of outreach and enrollment. Improving coordination between Navigators and campus staff may help increase the number of students who work with Navigators and increase student persistence and completion.

## Topics for further research

OREA identified several areas where additional research could inform future policy decisions and help improve outcomes for adult learners, particularly Reconnect grant recipients.

### *Evaluate the effectiveness of course delivery formats for Reconnect students*

Most Reconnect students balance coursework with employment, caregiving responsibilities, or both. Given the competing pressures, flexible school schedules and course formats are appealing to Reconnect students and adult learners in general. A variety of course delivery methods (e.g., in-person, online, hybrid, real-time, recorded, etc.) provides such flexibility and helps students stay on track to earn a credential while also meeting their family and work responsibilities.

More research is needed on how Reconnect and other adult students perform in different course delivery formats and on the practices and support models that improve outcomes for students in online courses. Institutions can apply the insights from such research to design course delivery formats that support access and success for Reconnect students.

### *Assess the role and utility of Reconnect success plans*

Reconnect applicants receive a success plan upon filing their application, but little is known about whether and how applicants use the plan. Further research could assess the usefulness of success plans to Reconnect students, what information is most relevant or influential, and whether changes are needed to make the plans more useful. Because the success plan also serves as a valuable data collection tool for the state, additional evaluation could improve both its policy impact and its research value.

### *Explore new support models for working students and students with dependents*

As noted earlier, most Reconnect students planned to work and more than half reported having dependents. These family and work obligations significantly impact students' ability to attend classes and complete assignments. Piloting more flexible scheduling pathways and targeted supports, such as tailored advising and enhanced wraparound services, could help identify strategies to reduce attrition and improve outcomes for Reconnect students.

# Endnotes

[1] Dick Startz, Brookings Institution, *First-generation college students face unique challenges*, April 25, 2022.

[2] Celeste Carruthers and Emily Pratt, Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research, *Navigate Reconnect 2024 Annual Report*, Jan. 9, 2025.

[3] Tennessee Board of Regents, *A Nudge to Reconnect: Using Financial Aid Nudges to Promote Adult Students' Persistence at Tennessee Community Colleges*, July 2021.

[4] Tennessee Board of Regents, *Reconnecting but Disengaged: The Limited Effects of Peer Mentoring for Adults at Tennessee Community Colleges*, May 2023.

# Appendix A: Sample Reconnect application

## Tennessee Reconnect Application

### Application Information
Application Date

### Student Information
Last Name
First Name
Middle Initial
SSN
Street Address
City
State
Zip Code
Phone
Mobile Phone
Email Address

List the email address you use most often as this is the primary form of contact from our office.

Confirm Email Address
Birth Date
Gender
Race
County

### Additional Student Information
The purpose of the following required questions is to help you complete a Reconnect Success Plan. Your responses will not impact your eligibility for the grant.

1. What is the highest level of education you have completed? (Drop Down Menu)
2. Have you previously taken courses at a community college or university?
3. How long ago did you attend?
4. Select the Tennessee college or university you are currently attending
5. Select all the Tennessee colleges and universities you have attended (Drop Down Menu)
6. Are you currently, or have you ever served in the U.S. Military (to include Active, Reserve, or National Guard components)?
7. Do you plan to work while enrolled in college?
8. Do you have children or other dependents for whose care you're responsible?
9. When will you most likely be able to attend classes?
10. When do you plan to begin college?
11. Where do you plan to access the internet if there are assignments you need to complete online?
12. Do you have reliable transportation to get to and from campus?
13. What is your current yearly income? Include your spouse's income if you are married.

• Check this box if you are currently receiving Unemployment Insurance benefits.
** Attending college full time can fulfill certain UI eligibility requirements.

- Select up to three items that you anticipate could be challenges as you pursue a college degree or certificate: (Drop Down Menu) Academic Preparation Family Responsibilities Finances Lack of access to support and services available on campus Physical or learning disability Time management Using required technology Work demands None of the above

**(Survey Items)**

- Think about your behavior at school or at work and indicate how well the statements below describe you.

**< Not at all like me** **Very much like me >**

- » If I do not understand a task at work or in class, I ask a supervisor/instructor to explain it to me.
- » If I need help with something at work or in class, I ask a colleague/classmate or supervisor/instructor for help.
- » I almost never ask for help at work or in class, even when the work is too hard to complete on my own.
- » I almost never ask for help from colleagues/classmates or supervisors/instructors, even when I need it.
- » Think of how you compare to most people -- not just the people you know well, but most people in the world.
- » Instead of preparing for some deadlines, I often spend time doing other things.
- » I often delay simple tasks for days or weeks.
- » I usually accomplish all the things I plan to do in a day.
- » I often find myself performing tasks that I had intended to do days before.
- » I often have a task finished sooner than necessary.

**Tennessee Reconnect Scholarship Anticipated Institution**
College/Institution (Drop Down Menu)

**Certification Statement and Consent to Release Information**

I certify that the information reported in my Tennessee Reconnect application and on any other document completed by me in connection with my application is true and complete to the best of my knowledge. I understand that under penalty of perjury any false statements intentionally made may result in prosecution for violation of Tennessee Code Annotated § 39-16-702 and in the permanent loss of my Tennessee Reconnect Scholarship.

I authorize the release and exchange of information related to my Tennessee Reconnect application between the Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC), the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), my Tennessee Reconnect Navigator, and my postsecondary institution. Such information may also include student contact information, state and federal financial aid eligibility, FAFSA data, postsecondary enrollment status, academic status, and residency and location information required by my postsecondary institution and my Tennessee Reconnect Navigator to ensure timely receipt of the Tennessee Reconnect Grant. I hereby authorize the entities receiving such information to contact me for reasons related to the Tennessee Reconnect Grant. Such information may also be used by TSAC, THEC, and their contractors for statistical research, and that all application information will be held in strict confidence. I further certify that I have read and understand the applicable program rules and regulations.

# Appendix B: Sample Reconnect success plan

TENNESSEE
Reconnect

## Reconnect Success Plan for John Doe

### What is my Reconnect Success Plan?

**You've made the decision to attend college and have set a goal to earn a degree. Your focus and determination will help ensure that you persist to graduation. You will also need a plan. The Reconnect Success Plan provides information to you, based on your specific needs, so that you can keep life – and fear – from getting in the way of reaching that goal. Use this Reconnect Success Plan to learn about the help and support that exists for you, to connect to real people who can answer your questions and guide you, and to chart your course to becoming a college graduate. Whether you have a busy schedule with work commitments, kids to take care of, or fears about returning to the classroom, you are still within reach of earning a college degree, and your Reconnect Success Plan can help.**

****You must update your Reconnect Success Plan annually to remain eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant.****

**Congratulations! You have officially applied for the TN Reconnect Grant! You are joining a community of other adult learners working to fulfill their goals and expand their opportunities for themselves and their families. We look forward to working alongside you as you achieve your goals! Your next steps are to:**

- **Apply for admissions to Austin Peay State University at http://www.apsu.edu/admissions/index.php. If you are currently enrolled, contact your Financial Aid Office to check on the status of your Reconnect Grant Application at http://www.apsu.edu/financialaid/ or email them at sfao@apsu.edu.**
- **Submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) here: https://fafsa.gov. If you need help with your FAFSA, contact http://www.apsu.edu/financialaid/ or email them at sfao@apsu.edu.**
  **You have indicated that you plan on attending Austin Peay State University, if you need to update this to another college you can do so by listing the new college first when you complete the FAFSA.**

### Austin Peay State University Resources and Information

**For information specific to adult learners visit https://www.apsu.edu/adult-learner or contact Dr. Allen Barger at bargera@apsu.edu or 931-221-1021. Because your success is important to Austin Peay State University, they offer the following information and resources specifically for adults:**

- **A student orientation just for adult learners like you. Make sure you attend to get your questions answered and to prepare for your classes.**
- **Student groups like these to connect to other adult learners:**
  **Adult and Nontraditional Student Center/antsc@apsu.edu**
  **Alpha Sigma Lambda /kanej@apsu.edu**
  **Military Student Center/msc@apsu.edu**

### Middle Tennessee Reconnect Region Resources and Information

**Tennessee Reconnect Communities are local organizations across Tennessee dedicated to supporting adult Tennesseans in going to college. This free resource is available to you, regardless of the college you plan to attend.**
**Each TRC has Reconnect Navigators, who work one-on-one with adult learners through all aspects of the college-going process, including:**

- **Exploring school and program of study options that fit your interests and career goals.**
- **Understanding college costs and applying for financial aid.**
- **Fitting college into your life and creating a work/life balance.**

**Important Offices:**
**Financial Aid: sfao@apsu.edu; 931-221-7907**
**Admissions and Records: admissions@apsu.edu; 931-221-7661**
**Student Support Center: golsonm@apsu.edu; 931-221-6553**
**Food pantry: sos@apsu.edu; 931-221-6120**

**Places to Study and Use Computers:**
**Library: for Hours and locations visit https://library.apsu.edu/about/hours.html**

- **Locating resources in your community to support your college-going journey.**
- **Problem-solving challenges that may arise.**

**Your county is part of the Middle Tennessee Reconnect Region.**
**You can connect with your local Tennessee Reconnect Community Navigator in the way that works best for you!**
**Middle Tennessee Reconnect Region**
**Middle Tennessee Reconnect Region Website**
**Dwight.Fox@tn.gov**

## Information for Veterans and Service Members

Every college has an office or individual ready to help veterans and service members navigate their way into and through college. They can also connect you to campus resources and support systems. Austin Peay State University has a veteran student center where you can meet other veterans, connect to academic and enrollment support, and get help in understanding your veteran education benefits. For information use the contact information below:

V. Jasmin Linares
ova@apsu.edu
931-221-7760
http://www.apsu.edu/veterans-affairs/

## Programs Available to Fit Your Schedule

Austin Peay State University offers a wide range of programs available during traditional business hours.
To search for the programs available at Austin Peay State University, click here.
If you'd like to know if you are online-course-ready, you can take an online course readiness assessment here.

Austin Peay State University may charge additional online course fees that will not be covered by your Reconnect grant.

## Childcare While You Are in Class

Did you know that 1 out of 4 college students are raising children of their own while going to college? Many parents work in addition to going to school and raising children. While this may feel daunting, completing a degree will lead to higher lifetime earnings and employment for you. The research also shows that when you attend college, your child is more likely to attend college. The work you are doing now can impact your family for generations to come. While balancing caretaking and college can present challenges, Austin Peay State University offers childcare on campus. Use the contact information below if you have any questions.
Claudia Rodriguez
rodriguezc@apsu.edu
931-221-7760
http://www.apsu.edu/clc/index.php

Austin Peay State University also offers childcare assistance funds. Use the contact information below if you have any questions.
rodriguezc@apsu.edu
931-221-6232

## Internet Access: Stay Connected

College courses today require that you have internet access so that you can connect to your professors, your student portal, do research, check and respond to emails, and complete assignments. Even though you have internet access in your home, you can use campus resources to complete your work. Along with study spaces for students, Austin Peay State University's library has computers that you can use to complete assignments. Location(s) and hours can be found at the link below:

- https://library.apsu.edu/about/hours.html

## Employed While in College?

You may be going to college to improve your job prospects, move up within your company, or change jobs. Today, more than ever, employers are looking for employees who are willing to grow, and with skills and critical thinking abilities that are often developed in education programs beyond high school. Ask your employer if you are eligible for any education benefits or reimbursement that can help you with tuition and related costs. There

## Experience counts!

You may be able to earn college credit for what you already know from your work, military or other personal experiences.

For more information contact:
Telaina Wrigley
wrigleyt@apsu.edu
931-221-6353

**may be support available to you.**

**Because you are already employed, you understand your job demands and may be wondering how you can balance work, school and your life responsibilities. Your local Tennessee Reconnect Community Navigator can help you create a plan to successfully balance your responsibilities and find more time for classes, homework and studying. Visit this link.**

## Additional Locations with Computer Access:

- **Felix G. Woodward Library http://library.apsu.edu/about/hours.html**
- **Adult & Nontraditional Student Center http://www.apsu.edu/student-life/ants/**
- **VetSuccess http://www.apsu.edu/military/vet-success/index.php**

## Prep for Academic Success

Returning to college after taking time off or beginning college for the first time as an adult student can be intimidating. Know that you are not alone! There are numerous people and resources on your campus to support your academic success. To assist adults with any academic challenges that may arise, Austin Peay State University offers:
Additionally, every adult learner on campus is provided with:

- Academic Completion Specialists
- Faculty Advisor

Check the college profile on the first page of this Reconnect Success Plan to see what other workshops your college offers to help you brush up on your academic and study skills.

## Including Your Family In Your College Journey

Although managing multiple priorities as an adult student can be difficult at times, having your family alongside you through your college experience can provide encouragement and motivation to succeed. Students have joined their children in setting aside “homework time” to do their own college work while their children work on their homework. Campuses often invite families to certain events on campus to help create a college journey that includes both you AND your family.
Additionally, your Tennessee Reconnect Community Navigator may have tips on what has worked for other parents. Your friends and family will be your support system as you go to school and often are willing to help out when they see you are pursuing this goal.

## Overcoming Technology Challenges

Campuses rely on technology to schedule classes and distribute financial aid. If you are having trouble using the college's website to register, enroll or pay for classes, ask for help. Start with the adult learner contact listed on the first page of this Reconnect Success Plan. Also, instructors will often utilize online platforms to post assignments, content, and helpful supplements to material presented in class. Once enrolled, instructors will make it clear what technologies you will need to access to complete the requirements of the class. If you are feeling overwhelmed or nervous about utilizing technology in these new ways, your institution has resources to assist you. {Reconnect Institution} offers the following services to assist you:

- Technology boot camps
- Technology help desk
- Technology Online

See this link for information regarding hours and locations:

- https://library.apsu.edu/about/hours.html

# Beyond the Reconnect Grant: Covering Other College Costs

**While the Tennessee Reconnect grant will help pay for tuition and most fees, there are still college expenses – like special program fees or online fees, books and supplies – and living expenses that you will need to cover. But there are options available to help you. Being informed and prepared will assist you in the process. Use these resources to get ready. To get started, visit here to explore state and federal financial aid programs for which you may be eligible. You will also find information here about employer tuition reimbursement programs and tax benefits for education expenses.**
**In addition, your campus also has resources to help ensure financial strain is not a barrier to completing your college degree. Austin Peay State University offers the following financial assistance resources:**

- **Institutional Scholarships - Scholarships provided by the individual school with varying criteria. Visit this link for more information.**
  **https://apsu.academicworks.com/opportunities?utf8=%E2%9C%93&term=%5B_NON-TRADITIONAL%5D&commit=Search**
- **Emergency Funds - One time scholarships to cover unexpected costs that create barriers for you to continue on a path towards graduation. For more information contact:**
  **http://www.apsu.edu/student-account-services/**
  **singletong@apsu.edu**
  **931-221-7005**
- **Nontraditional Payment plans – Options for dividing payment for tuition and fees into smaller payments distributed throughout the semester. Your college offers the following payment options.**
  - **Monthly payment options**
  - **Deferred payment options**

  **See the following for more details:**
  - **http://www.apsu.edu/student-account-services/**
  - **931-221-6285**
- **Scholarship for books and supply costs – Apply for funds to cover book and supply costs that are not covered by other financial aid programs.**
  **See the following for more details:**
  - **http://www.apsu.edu/msc/texts-for-vets/texts-for-vets-info.php**
  - **msc@apsu.edu**
  - **931-221-1685**
- **Textbook rental options – Textbooks can often be an unexpected expense in addition to tuition and fees. Rent your textbooks to help decrease costs. See the following for more details:**
  - **http://apsu.bncollege.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/BNCBRentalView?catalogId=10001&langId=-1&storeId=88631**
  - **apsubookstore@apsu.edu**
  - **931-221-7655**

**Your Tennessee Reconnect Navigator is also a great resource to help connect you with community resources that may be available in your region.**

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