



The Nashville Talent Hub Report

Barriers to Adult Postsecondary Access & Completion

Elevating Voices to Improve Adult Degree Attainment in Middle Tennessee

November 2018



The Lumina Foundation Talent Hub

The Talent Hub designation, which Lumina Foundation awards with support from The Kresge Foundation, indicates a community has shown the capacity and ability to significantly increase the numbers of residents with college degrees, certificates, or other credentials beyond a high school diploma.

“They’re committing to ensuring that not only do these students get into higher education and have the opportunity to earn a credential, but that every step along the way they have the support services they need to get through successfully.”

- Danette Howard, Lumina Foundation, Senior Vice President & Chief Strategy Officer

“What we wanted to do with Talent Hubs was signal a new standard, a new direction for community collaboration for attainment that elevated all of the best parts of the Community Partnership for Attainment.”

- Haley Glover, Lumina Foundation, Strategy Director

A Clearer Path to Prosperity for All Nashvillians

Nashville's economy is booming. Unemployment rates are at a historic low, wages are rising, and we are experiencing unprecedented growth. However, many of our residents are being left behind. We have a long way to go to close the equity gaps in our city.

We can help close these gaps by connecting residents to higher-wage, high-demand occupations – and we have a few great ways to do so.

One is connecting adults to the postsecondary education and credentialing opportunities they need to get to the next level. To this end, we are very fortunate to have access to free technical and community college tuition through Tennessee Reconnect, as well as the Middle Tennessee Reconnect Community's proven model of providing high-touch advising services and resources.

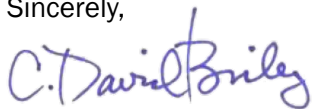
However, many residents still experience barriers beyond tuition – such as costs for transportation, childcare, books, and other living expenses. The Talent Hub report highlights these barriers and amplifies the voices of these determined, would-be students.

With collaborative partnerships such as the Nashville Talent Hub, we can ensure that every resident has a clear path to prosperity. Achieving this goal will not only impact the economic mobility of families in Nashville; it will continue and sustain the city's economic growth. As more and more residents further their education, employers will have access to the skilled workforce they need.

I am excited to support this important work, and grateful for the Promise Zone residents who shared their experiences of barriers to adult college access and completion. When our residents are empowered with access, education, and economic mobility, we all benefit as a community. I look forward to addressing the results of this report in several high-impact ways, and I am eager to share our ideas very soon.

Your engagement is critical to Nashville's success. Thank you for joining me in advancing economic prosperity for all.

Sincerely,



Mayor David Briley

Metropolitan Government of Nashville & Davidson County

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY IN RAISING ADULT ATTAINMENT

Tennessee's degree attainment goal has sparked a wave of innovation in higher education and economic development. From nationally-recognized access programs to policy reforms for postsecondary education, the circumstances in the state are favorable for realizing significant gains in college completion and degree attainment outcomes. However, the effort requires much more than policy and public funding to transform the culture in the state. Community leaders will need to work together to solve the toughest challenges that hinder growth in postsecondary outcomes for the underserved and underrepresented.

The Lumina Talent Hub designation is given to the communities that serve as examples of collaborative thinkers and doers driven by a common goal to significantly drive degree attainment outcomes. Within the context of the supports the state of Tennessee has provided to incentivize postsecondary student success, the city of Nashville has assembled a diverse group of stakeholders to create a collective impact model that focuses on adults in the Nashville Promise Zone.

The value of this report goes beyond demonstrating a commitment to engage the individuals that serve as the focal point of Nashville's degree attainment work. It represents a value to create strategies informed by the voices that will matter the most for the overall goal in the Nashville Talent Hub.

We congratulate the members of the Nashville Talent Hub team for offering a seat at the table to residents that are rarely heard or appreciated. Most important, we are thankful for the engagement of citizens in helping to inform the work ahead for the Nashville community. We are confident this work will help to inspire Nashville residents to better understand the disparities that surround them and encourage new advocates to join the effort of the Nashville Talent Hub.

Sincerely,

Nancy Eisenbrandt
Chief Talent Development Officer
Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce

Dakota Pawlicki
Strategy Officer for Community Mobilization
Lumina Foundation

Introduction

Nashville's strong economy provides a wealth of opportunity for many. The current unemployment rate is less than three percent, new job announcements continue to make headlines, and the influx of residents remains steady. Despite all of this, prosperity has not been accessible to all residents. Driven by a commitment to establish equity of opportunity and access to Nashville's economic prosperity, the Nashville Talent Hub was launched in 2017. With support from Lumina Foundation and the Kresge Foundation, more than one hundred Nashville organizations, led by the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, created a coalition to leverage Tennessee Reconnect and Tennessee Promise (Tennessee's free college programs), for the benefit of the Nashville Promise Zone, a geographical area where poverty and low educational outcomes are heavily concentrated.

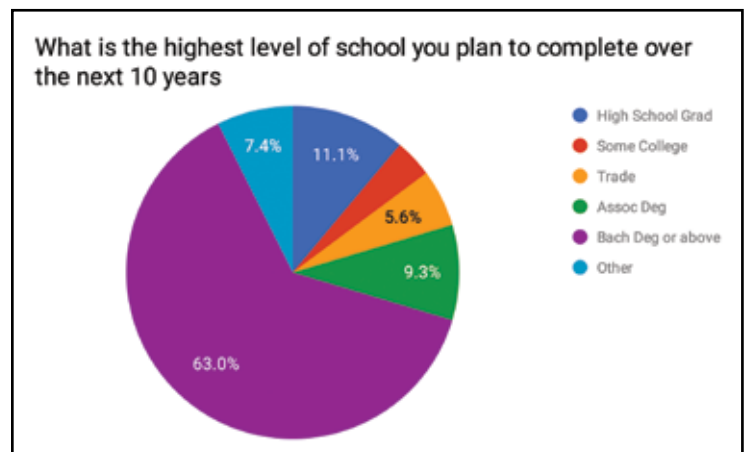
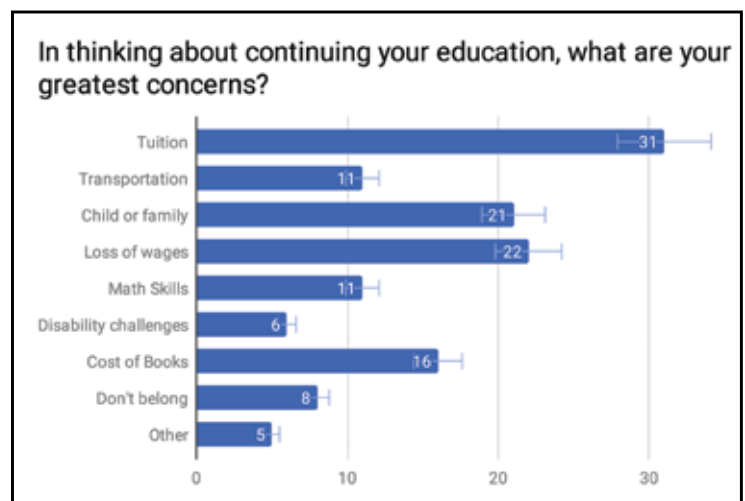
A postsecondary education is necessary to access a sizeable portion of Nashville's high-wage and high-demand occupations. With Tennessee's nationally recognized programs covering tuition for residents to attend a technical or community college, many assume the majority of barriers to higher education have been eliminated. However, the promise to participate in the postsecondary experience remains an empty one to Nashvillians living in communities where degree attainment rates remain dismally low.

Given the disparities between the postsecondary educational opportunities in Tennessee and the degree attainment rates in the Nashville Promise Zone, the Nashville Talent Hub is committed to understanding the root of these disparities and identifying community-led solutions. The voices and issues highlighted in this report will help policymakers, community leaders, and service providers better meet the needs of and understand the challenges facing adults in poverty striving to complete their educations. In spite of the barriers they face, these stories universally paint a picture of Nashvillians who value their families, their communities, and the opportunity to engage in meaningful work. These values identically mirror those of their more socio-economically successful peers, though the obstacles they face to fulfill them are much more significant and discouraging. In any case, college is the pathway to a promising economic future.

Context

Tennessee's Postsecondary Education Reforms

Tennessee is a national leader in removing barriers to postsecondary education and training. Shortly after taking office, Governor Bill Haslam announced his goal to increase the percentage of Tennesseans who hold a postsecondary credential from 32 percent in 2013 to 55 percent by 2025. In support of that ambitious plan, Governor Haslam increased funding for and created new programs to successfully connect more residents with educational opportunities after high school. In 2015, the State of Tennessee launched Tennessee Promise, providing last-dollar funds for high school graduates to attend technical or community college. In 2017, Tennessee Reconnect expanded opportunity by making community colleges and colleges of applied technology tuition-free for adults.



The Nashville Promise Zone

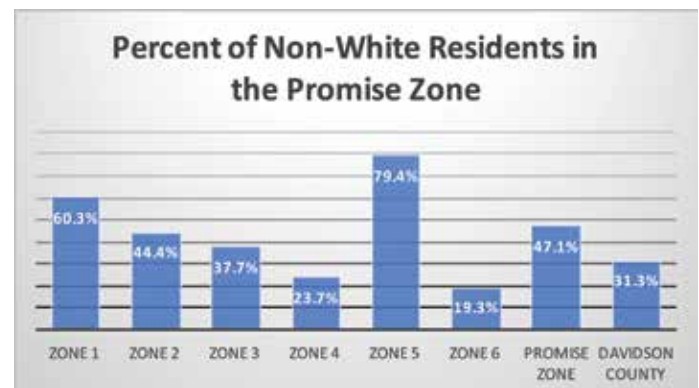
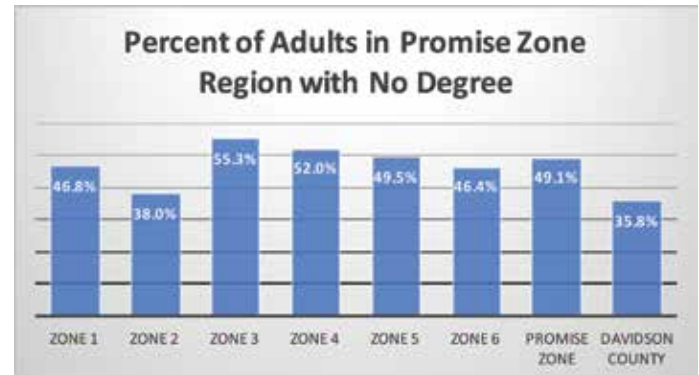
In July 2016, Nashville received a 10-year federal Promise Zone designation to foster partnerships across organizations serving residents in areas of the city with the highest levels of concentrated poverty. The Nashville Promise Zone (NPZ) comprises 46-square miles and neighborhoods just south, east, and north of downtown Nashville.¹ Partners in the NPZ include the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency (MDHA), the Mayor’s Office, six coordinating nonprofit agencies, and nearly 100 other civic, nonprofit, business and education partners. Outcomes for the NPZ include improvement in the collective impact of services and the development of collaborative, neighborhood-level revitalization strategies. The goals of the NPZ are to:

- Increase access to quality affordable housing
- Create jobs
- Increase economic activity
- Improve education opportunities
- Improve community infrastructure
- Reduce violent crime



Geographic boundaries of the Nashville Promise Zone

All of Nashville’s public housing developments are included in the NPZ. In several public housing developments, more than half of households report zero income, and overall the zone reports a poverty rate of 37.6 percent. A quarter of Nashville’s violent crimes occur in the NPZ, including nearly half of all homicides and a third of robberies.



The Nashville Promise Zone Data collected from ACS 2016

Nashville Promise Zone Sub-Zones

Sub-Zone 1 - Lead Agency, Martha O’Bryan Center
Goal: Expand educational opportunities

Sub-Zone 2 - Lead Agency, Edgehill Neighborhood Partnership
Goal: Increase access to quality affordable housing

Sub-Zone 3 - Lead Agency, Woodbine Community Organization
Goal: Spur economic activity

Sub-Zone 4 - Lead Agency, Conexión Américas
Goal: Expand community infrastructure

Sub-Zone 5 - Lead Agency, Urban League of Middle Tennessee
Goal: Reduce violent crime

Sub-Zone 6 - Lead Agency, St. Luke’s Community House
Goal: Create jobs

The Nashville Talent Hub

In September 2017, Lumina Foundation, in partnership with the Kresge Foundation, designated Nashville as a Talent Hub community. The Nashville Talent Hub provides dedicated funding and resources to increase postsecondary degree attainment and job accreditation for adults living in the Nashville Promise Zone. The Nashville Talent Hub leverages Tennessee's free tuition program for adults, which is coordinated primarily by the Middle Tennessee Reconnect Community. The Mayor's Office, and faith and community-based organizations are critical partners, along with postsecondary institution partners Nashville State Community College and TCAT-Nashville. Additionally, the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce is engaging area employers to partner with the Nashville Talent Hub by providing adult college students with internships, learn-and-earn opportunities, and full-time careers in high-growth sectors.



Mayor David Briley and Dr. Shanna Jackson, Nashville State Community College Demolition Ceremony for New Madison Campus

Report Methodology

Information gathered during a listening tour and an anonymous survey provided the data for this report. Participants included low-income adults living in the Promise Zone, some of whom had attended some college, but had not graduated and others with no postsecondary experience. Questions were designed to identify the barriers - experienced and perceived - of adults living in poverty who attempt to access and complete their education after high school.

The Nashville Talent Hub held thirteen focus groups in early 2018. This allowed for the cataloging of barriers adults in poverty faced when pursuing college and a clearer understanding of individual aspirations. These conversations included trusted community leaders, employers, and adults living in the Nashville Promise Zone. A community-based nonprofit or a governmental agency working directly with participating adults hosted each focus group. Sessions were intentionally scheduled during meetings, events, and classes where adults would already be present in order to eliminate as many attendance barriers as possible. The 113 listening tour participants included parents at family engagement nights and workshops, adult students currently continuing their postsecondary educations, young adults experiencing homelessness, men who are currently incarcerated, career fair attendees, and both graduates and non-completers of postsecondary programs.

Trusted community partners administered a survey (online and paper) in English and in Spanish. Approximately 60 people completed the anonymous survey, providing structured responses that compliment and amplify anecdotal information obtained during the listening tour. The survey enabled additional feedback from the participants.

Report Findings

This report elevates and amplifies the experiences of adults in Middle Tennessee trying to access the state's postsecondary opportunities in the midst of great adversity. In understanding these unique challenges, we can develop specific solutions for those in our community who will benefit most from obtaining the postsecondary degree or credential necessary to fully access the economic opportunities available in our region and state. We identify barriers to postsecondary attainment, share perceptions about the perceived value of pursuing a higher education, and recommend factors for institutions and community leaders to consider when serving adults in the Nashville region.

Barriers & Challenges

Tennessee Reconnect removes significant financial barriers for adults attending college. However, other obstacles prevent adults from pursuing their postsecondary education goals. These challenges include:

- The cost of tuition and beyond
- Family concerns and obligations
- Transportation
- Navigating multiple complex systems

The Cost of Tuition and Beyond

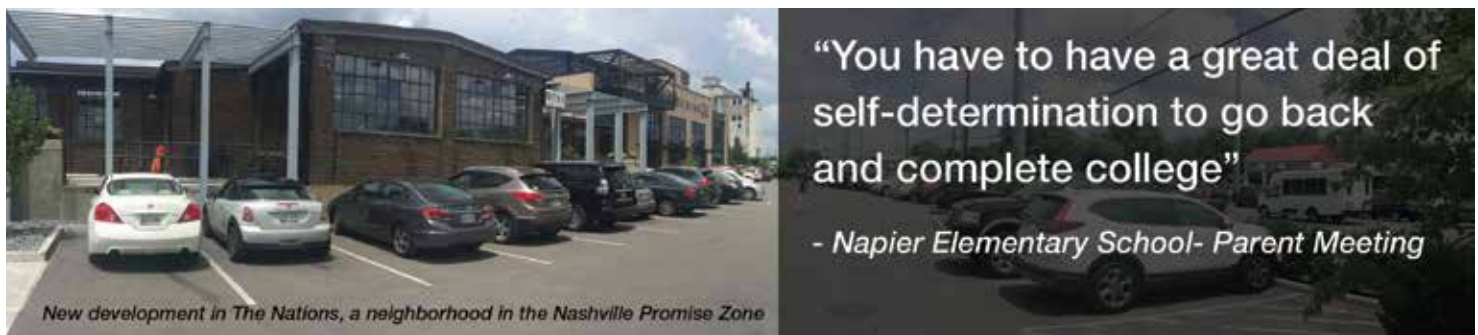
Educators and college students have expressed concern about high tuition, which has been rising almost six percent above the annual rate of inflation.² This disproportionately impacts the ability of low to moderate income households to access postsecondary opportunities, thus hindering their ability to participate in economic prosperity. But the great national crisis is the fact that too many other young adults are not going to college or, if they do, don't graduate, in large part because they can't afford it.

In response to a question about their greatest concerns related to continuing their education, 52 percent of survey respondents cited the cost of tuition. Likewise, costs outside tuition were raised

her college degree one course at a time because she has to pay for it herself without financial support from family or state resources. "I don't have much of a choice," she said. Many people under age 24 encounter the same situation. As the participant noted, "they are independent in every way, but can't check that box on the FAFSA."

Only U.S. citizens or eligible non-citizens can participate in Tennessee Reconnect, which means undocumented adults face significantly greater financial barriers. Listening tour participants shared their frustrations of being brought from other countries to Tennessee as children, and then being charged full tuition rates that apply to out-of-state students. This can more than triple the cost of tuition. One young woman shared that because she was charged out-of-state tuition rates, it's taken her "a long time to get to this point."

Other costs associated with college put higher education out of reach. A lack of financial resources for meals away from home, required professional clothing,



consistently as a concern. Some cost-concerns were specifically connected with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is a requirement to be eligible for the Tennessee Reconnect grant. Beyond the tedious paperwork required to complete the federal filing document, many young adults under the age of 24 have challenges obtaining the status of "independent student" due to complicated family situations. Allowable situations for claiming an independent student status include being married, having a child, serving in the military, becoming a ward of the state, or petitioning for independence. While these cases are rare, they are more common in communities where financial and housing instability are more prevalent. One listening tour participant shared that she doesn't meet any of the allowable situations and has neither the time nor the resources to petition the state for independence. She is earning

transportation, childcare, lost wages, and supplies is an incredible barrier to continuing one's education. Nationally, since 1996, most of the cost increases in higher education have come from living costs, books and supplies, personal expenses, and transportation. Twenty-seven percent of survey respondents cited just the cost of books as a barrier to college attendance. The need for affordable and accessible technology is an additional concern. Both survey and listening tour participants highlighted limited internet access and a lack of publicly accessible computers as major barriers.

Lost income was cited as another major concern. Listening tour participants mentioned their hesitations for considering college, if the opportunity required fewer working hours. Many discussed the reality of working multiple jobs and the limits on disposable income or savings to forgo work. Most were receptive to the notion of learn-and-earn options that allowed

income to be supplemented through apprenticeships or internships.

Family Concerns and Obligations

Conversations with focus groups highlighted the difficult balancing act adults face when continuing their education. Attending college is a decision that impacts the student as well as the entire family. In many cases, potential adult students are parents or caregivers, which is a significant financial responsibility for the household. One out of three survey respondents raised family responsibilities and concerns as a barrier to going back to school. Participants shared that childcare is difficult to find and is often too expensive. Even if affordable and accessible childcare is available, many cited quality as an additional factor to consider. Evening or nighttime childcare is extremely rare in Nashville, eliminating night classes as an option for adults with children, even though night classes were most compatible with work schedules.

One listening tour participant shared that beyond access to quality childcare while she is in class, she also needed the mental space to focus on coursework and studies outside of class. As another parent said, “The focus on kids leaves little time to think about college.” In addition to issues specific to children, adults serving as the backbone of family support systems often felt they lacked additional support needed to take a step towards higher education, even if that step would eventually benefit their entire families. As one participant responded, “I cannot attend [class] every day, even with childcare.” This statement suggests that many parents desire to have more time with their children.

Transportation

Transportation was cited as an acute barrier in the context of physically meeting the responsibilities of school, work, and family obligations. Nationally, 50 percent of undergraduates live at home. They rely either on personal or public transportation networks

to make trips between home and school and, typically, between school and work. According to research conducted by the Tennessee College Access and Success Network, public transportation travel time between Cane Ridge High School, a local high school, and the Southeast Campus of Nashville State can be seven times longer than car travel.³ Students who are working and attending school cannot afford a two- to three-hour commute, a recent report notes, “so if rides or access to a reliable vehicle falls through, students may drop out of college.”⁴

Navigating Multiple Complex Systems

For adults living in poverty, navigating fragmented and sometimes opaque systems often feels as though the system is rigged against their success. For example, some local policies prohibit full-time postsecondary students from accessing public housing. There are also concerns about early mistakes resulting in criminal charges that have lasting consequences. One participant’s father committed a crime when he was 17 years old and, now at age 45, he continues to be denied job opportunities. Exposure to these examples dissuades some young adults from pursuing a degree or credential because they believe they still would not be able to get a job that would improve their economic situation. National research shows that the introduction of the drug-conviction question on the FAFSA reduced immediate college enrollment rates by 12 to 22 percentage points for high school graduates with a recent drug conviction.⁶ Similarly, a study of 3,000 applicants to the State University of New York found that 62 percent of applicants with a conviction failed to complete the application process, compared to just 21 percent of applicants without a conviction.⁷ Finally, defaulting on prior loans was identified as another systemic barrier. A previous loan default makes an applicant ineligible for a Tennessee Reconnect grant. In Tennessee, the borrower default rate is 11.8 percent.⁸ When asked what advice they would give to the Governor to make college attendance a possibility for more residents, one listening tour



participant said they would expand student loan forgiveness. With these systemic barriers - in addition to the barriers of tuition costs, loss of wages, and child and family obligations - one resident noted that “people don’t really know where to start” when it comes to thinking about continuing their education.

Perceptions of the Value of College

For institutions to effectively support their students, they must be aware of the students’ (1) reasoning for returning to school and completing their degree, (2) perception of the benefits of completing the degree, and (3) perception of accomplishment post-graduation. This section describes the information gathered from listening tours, surveys, and research on postsecondary education and provides recommendations on how institutions can influence student perception to improve their chances of success.

Reasons for Returning to and Completing College

During the listening sessions, participants expressed similar reasons for returning to college. When asked about the benefits of college completion, beyond advancing career advancement, the majority of participants noted the accomplishment of earning a degree would inspire their children to also pursue higher education. Participants also perceived that careers upon graduation would increase their income, improving their quality of life and enabling them to invest in their children’s future.

Benefits of College Completion

While participants had clear intentions for completing college, they were less confident about the quality and worth of higher education. Dr. Camille B. Kandiko’s 2012-2013 study on college student perceptions discovered a consistent trend in students expecting a “value-for-money” model while attending college.⁹ The study recommended a transparent system in which students can clearly understand how their tuition is distributed across the institutions, what their student fees pay for, and the overall value of their degree (Kandiko, 7).¹⁰ During the listening sessions, participants also discussed the ambiguous connection between course content the skills needed in the workplace. To improve student success, institutions should clearly communicate the value of general education requirements, elective classes, and the connection to the skills needed in the workplace.

Feeling of Accomplishment

Participants agreed college completion could lead to more opportunities for their and their family’s future. Participants emphasized the perception of accomplishment that would accompany college completion. The adult student’s emotional connection to their degree is an important factor for institutions to acknowledge and foster, given the benefits to self-efficacy and confidence on the student’s part. During the listening session one participant stated, “It [earning a degree] would make a huge difference in my life. It would be my stepping stone out of poverty and my way to help my mother get a safe home to live in.” By building self-esteem in students, postsecondary institutions can improve the success outcomes for the students traditionally challenged with completing college. A participant mentioned that Trevecca University’s FUTURO Inc. chapter - a mentorship program - has improved the outcomes of Latino students at the institution. A female participant expressed how the program helped her obtain her degree and launch a successful small business. This program and similar models of mentorship are proven strategies for ensuring outcomes for college students.

Perceptions of the Barriers

Many listening session participants had deep-seated doubts about whether or not going back to school was a risk worth taking. Based on personal experiences and experiences of peers, these perceptions are concrete reasons why many adults forego college, even when tuition is covered to attend a technical or community college. The primary perceptions identified in our research include:

- Experiencing Impostor Syndrome
- Lack of opportunity after degree obtainment
- Finite capacity to entertain college
- And concerns about benefits cliffs

Impostor Syndrome

Impostor Syndrome is defined by Ellen Hendrickson as “pervasive feeling of self-doubt, insecurity, or fraudulence despite often overwhelming evidence to the contrary.”¹¹ An individual’s self-perceptions influence their opinions about whether or not they are “college material,” which often affects their decisions. The resulting negative self-perception can lead to

disengagement, as students develop a sense of shame about who they are and what they are capable of accomplishing in their lives. While every demographic is susceptible to this experience, minorities and women are most likely to experience Impostor Syndrome.¹² Some participants described a cycle of learned helplessness, or a perpetual feeling of not being worthy or up to the challenge of college. Thirteen percent of survey respondents stated they did not feel like they belonged in college.

Lack of Opportunity After Earning a Degree

Many adults perceive that the benefits of a postsecondary degree are not worth the time and difficulty of facing so many systemic barriers. Thirty-seven percent of survey respondents ranked the loss of wages as their greatest concern about going back to school. This included loss of wages while in school as well as the fear that a postsecondary degree would not lead to income growth. Some participants cited the lack of jobs available post-college for individuals

the incurred debt would be a long-term burden. This was especially true for participants who were unable to utilize certain tuition discounts because of their residency status.

This lack of awareness of career options is often related to middle and high school experiences, where there are limited opportunities for career and college exploration. One listening session participant shared that he had always assumed college was only for people who wanted a doctorate degree or wanted to become a lawyer, neither of which interested him. He did not begin to consider attending college until he became aware of other, more interesting job opportunities accessible only with a degree. Many listening session participants suggested introducing career pathways as early as middle school to prepare students for the choices available to them after high school.

The potential for accumulating student debt was perceived to be insurmountable. Some participants



who had previously been incarcerated, believing that a college degree or certificate would never outweigh a former criminal conviction.

Cost of living is a barrier in both attending and continuing higher education. The annual income for most individuals in the Nashville Promise Zone is between \$10,000 and \$25,000. For students, tuition on top of food, rent, medical expenses, transportation costs and, often, child care makes day-to-day living difficult.

Survey respondents and listening session participants stressed that the cost of tuition was the biggest reason for not attending college, despite potential financial aid opportunities. Many adults believed that not only would one fail to make more money after college, but that

described unsuccessful attempts at utilizing loan forgiveness programs. Others shared that while they attempted to pay off loans, they were unable to keep up with payments and other expenses. Most listening session participants believed that there would be debt upon finishing college. Perceptions about debt discourage low-income students from seeking higher education, especially when they already have debt and believe they will not have access to better career opportunities upon graduation.

Finite Capacity

Many adults perceived that they did not possess the personal capacity or social network to undertake the complexities of pursuing postsecondary education. Listening session participants shared concerns about

having adequate time to both attend college and raise their families. Similarly, balancing a work schedule with a class schedule was perceived as impractical.

The need for personal support systems was a consistent theme. As one student said, “You have to have a great deal of self-determination to go back and complete college- there needs to be a support system established.” Fifty-eight percent of survey respondents said that access to free one-on-one personal financial coaching or counseling would help them complete a degree program. Many adults also mentioned a lack of family support as a barrier to success. One young adult shared that her grandmother actually discouraged her from exploring college and career options because of her autism diagnosis. Listening session participants also cited the overwhelming amount of paperwork, the lack of language interpreters, and the struggle to understand the culture and process of postsecondary institutions as barriers to engagement.

Many participants believed that finite capacity issues could potentially be remedied through expanded access to community-based organizations and services critical to entering and completing college. One listening tour participant suggested to encourage postsecondary education through parenting classes, as parents will often look for better opportunities to improve the quality of life for their children. Mentorship programs and internship opportunities were also discussed as potential strategies to maintain student engagement. Participants described available career placement services as insufficient and suggested that a community one-stop shop for services would be impactful. Expanded training opportunities in the correctional system was also suggested as a way to improve the re-entry process for individuals who had been previously incarcerated.

Negative Peer Experiences

Community support and culture influences a potential student’s willingness to attend and succeed in postsecondary education. One listening session participant shared that her sister, who had a poor experience attending college, discouraged her from continuing her education. The listening tour and survey results illustrate a clear need for positive influencers in communities to encourage youth and adults alike to explore different college and career pathways. Building capacity in community-based organizations can provide the necessary wrap-around services that encourage residents to seriously consider college.

Benefits Cliffs

There is an incredibly narrow margin between being eligible for state and federal benefits and earning too much. “Benefits cliffs” are experienced when a family earns enough to be discontinued from benefits but does not earn enough to cover the expenses of those benefits.¹³ This is a common issue when families are no longer eligible for childcare or transportation vouchers. For example, a recent study on Cleveland, Ohio found that a single parent with one child earning one dollar beyond the benefits threshold resulted in a loss of more than ten thousands dollars of benefits, which could not be recovered until the individual earns an additional thirty thousand dollars in annual income.¹⁴ One very common perception is that going back to school will jeopardize a family’s public housing eligibility, or that taking a job that requires an additional credential or degree will put a family just out of reach of meeting basic household needs.

During a listening session, the participants emphasized the cycle of poverty and the difficulty low-income families face when attempting to improve their economic status. Before they can explore postsecondary education, resources need to be in place to create stability. While some individuals have jobs, often that income is not enough to maintain their current lifestyle, especially if they are also attempting to pay for school. As the cost of living in Nashville rises, wages have not tracked.

Key Take-Aways and Reflections

We have much to learn from the adults facing the greatest challenges in obtaining postsecondary degrees and credentials. Based on the opinions shared by listening session participants and survey respondents, there are several common themes that point to actionable solutions for community leaders and policymakers to consider.

The Barriers to Postsecondary Access Include More Than Tuition.

When an adult goes to college, the entire family goes college. The disincentives associated with life obligations, work schedules, and lack of academic preparation far outweigh the incentive of free college. More flexible options beyond just online education are critical for providing education programs. Delivery modalities that limit the requirement of seat time such as competency-based education offer proven

options to help adult students with these challenges. Caregiving and childcare services are useful incentives to attract more adults into the college pipeline. Adults also consistently express an interest in the learn-and-earn opportunities of well-paying apprenticeships and internships. Making these opportunities more adult-friendly can go a long way in adding the capacity needed for many to successfully attend and complete college.

Higher Education Institutions Need to Extend Outreach and Recruitment in the Community.

Marketing and recruitment channels are successful in promoting the benefits of Tennessee Reconnect for many adults in the state. However, many residents in the Nashville Promise Zone believe these programs are not designed for or accessible to them. Targeted recruitment efforts will build bridges of trust and ensure that no adult falls through the cracks on the path to economic success. Recruitment services should be integrated into existing community programs with evidence of successful engagement and outcomes.

Participants in the listening sessions shared concerns about program eligibility due to life circumstances related to prior college debt, criminal records and academic preparedness. While many of these circumstances are not insurmountable, all require a considerable amount of consultation. In some unfortunate cases, not much can be done to assist someone through the college entry process. Honesty, in either case, is a quality valued by residents when receiving advice on their options for enrolling in college. Recruitment efforts for adults in the Nashville Promise Zone region should incorporate a network of resources that specialize in offering advice on matters that impact program eligibility.

The College Experience Must be Integrated Into the Community Experience and Culture.

Residents of the Nashville Promise Zone feel a deep sense of pride for their community. Challenges were certainly acknowledged, but so was hope and optimism. Attending college was not seen as an impetus for leaving one's community, but rather as a means to enrich the community and those in it. The college experience, from recruitment to successful completion, should incorporate many moments where students feel the institution's value for their circumstances and background. Participants also

shared their anxieties about feeling as though they do not belong in college. Students need to be appreciated for who they are and where they came from before college. These fears play out in different ways when considering college, and only eliminated when students build the confidence based on small but frequent achievements.

It is Only About Making More Money.

When asked about an ideal salary or an ideal company to work for, participants discussed wanting to have enough money to take care of family or work for organizations known to offer good benefits. Very few mentioned the benefits of making more money. The reasons for completing college centered on a sense of accomplishment, a closer connection with their community, and, most importantly, an opportunity to set a positive example for their family.

Earning a degree or credential increases one's earning power and household income. Adults with postsecondary degrees add to local tax revenue and their region's pipeline of talent. We must remain mindful that there are other reasons why college is important to adults. As community leaders, it is critical that we make every effort to recognize these values, especially for adults within the Nashville Promise Zone. Our postsecondary institutions and community-based organizations should find ways to merge the city's economic values for economic prosperity with residents' values for community and family empowerment.

Conclusion

As witnessed from the voices and concerns elevated in this report, there are many opportunities to rethink the current approach to recruiting and serving adult college students. We must proactively address barriers through meaningful reforms in policy and practice. Simplified paperwork, realignment of key transportation routes, and thoughtful supports for parents and caregivers are a few examples of promising solutions for adult postsecondary success.

Perceptions of adults living in the Nashville Promise Zone reveal a distinct need to ensure equitable postsecondary outcomes for all residents in the city. Building confidence among underserved and underrepresented residents is a critical first step toward fostering a sense of belongingness and



New development at 4th Avenue North and Jefferson Street, an intersection in the Nashville Promise Zone

inclusion. Redesigning outreach programs and providing financial empowerment counseling will help adults plan and prepare for attending college and significantly reduce the anxieties for many adults that currently see no future in higher education.

We honor and appreciate the feedback and advice of residents who are seldom heard or often misunderstood, especially in the context of postsecondary education and economic mobility. Their commitment to family and community, despite challenges that impact their quality of life, give hope to (re)designing approaches to effectively transform lives and our economy. Degree attainment is a primary channel for economic mobility. The concerns and perceived challenges expressed in this report warrant action to ensure the promises made to improve access and completion in Tennessee.

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Talent Hub Partners

Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce
Office of Mayor David Briley
Nashville State Community College
Nashville Career Advancement Center
Complete Tennessee
Tennessee Board of Regents

A Special Thanks to the Listening Tour Partner Organizations

Napier Elementary School-Parent Session
Workforce Essentials Class- HiSet Group (National College)
Nashville Launchpad
Tied Together Parenting Classes- Martha O'Bryan Center
Head Strt Parent Policy Council- North Head Start Center
Adult Education Class- Martha O'Bryan Center
Adult Literacy Group- Martha O'Bryan
Davidson County Sheriff's Office
Woodmont Baptist Church Visit
Chapter 2 Employment Classes- Martha O'Bryan Center
Head Start Parent Policy Council- Trevecca University
Futuro Aspire Chapter- Trevecca University

“Increasing persistence and completion. Far too many students drop out of college without completing a degree, and states and institutions need to follow the lead of states like Tennessee by implementing a comprehensive approach to increasing completion. Making college affordable for all Americans who need it should be an urgent national priority, and will require that we rethink many of our assumptions about how much college costs and how we pay for it. We also must work on creating better pathways to guide students successfully through postsecondary education systems.”

- Jamie Merisotis, Lumina Foundation President & CEO

