

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2017, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) announced a call for proposals for research on the Tennessee Reconnect Grant, entitled, *Adult Learner Research: Building the Policy Framework for Tennessee*. Approved projects received endorsement from THEC and some staff support. Staff from the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) at the University of Tennessee submitted a proposal and received approval in late November to conduct a project entitled, *Understanding How Students Reconnect: A Longitudinal Study*.

This qualitative and longitudinal project involved a series of interviews with 20 Reconnect Grant recipients from across the state at specific points in their educational journeys. We began interviews with the first cohort of students as classes began in fall 2018. Interview topics included (1) background and the decision to reenroll (2) the transition experience, (3) academic experiences, and (4) completion or exit. The primary goal of this study was to capture and illustrate the experiences of the first program participants to enable more direct practice and policy-based interventions to support recruitment, retention, and degree attainment.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. Students often experienced a difficult beginning to their college career, which led to leaving postsecondary education prior to obtaining a credential.
2. Students doubted their ability to get a college degree after struggling with their first attempt and felt that they would not fit in after dropping out initially.
3. Students received incentives to re-enroll in college because of the promise of tuition-free college, as well as the opportunity to improve their life and the lives of their families.
4. Access to a state-initiated grant created specifically for adult students increased students' belief that they belonged in college and could obtain a college degree.
5. Students experienced barriers and learning curves when re-entering postsecondary education. Specific barriers were with student support services primarily developed for traditionally-age students and campus technology.
6. Students experienced an increased sense of marginality through the perceived lack of support from student services and the increased use of unfamiliar campus technology. Students indicated that the presence of other adults using the Tennessee Reconnect Grant increased their comfort on campus.

"The reason I came back was because I had looked back from where I started to that point when I failed. And I was like 'you know what, I'm not going to wait another 25 years to finish what I started 25 years ago'. I have a 14-year-old granddaughter. How would it look to her if I not once, but twice, dropped out of college? It's not a good example. So why not finish?"
– 50 year-old Hispanic woman, 25 years since last attended

See recommendations for policy and practice, next page.

Inquiries, comments, and feedback related to this research may be directed to PERC Graduate Research Assistant, Gresham Collom (gcollom@vols.utk.edu).

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Understanding How Students Reconnect: A Longitudinal Study

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Postsecondary Education Research Center
June 4, 2019



THE UNIVERSITY OF
TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
RESEARCH CENTER

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

1. **Conduct a Needs and Gap Analysis** – Conduct an analysis of the existing Tennessee Reconnect program as implemented by policymakers and administrators to determine the ongoing needs and gaps in services for adult learners.
2. **Research Evidence-based Practices** – Expand the current study to include additional interviews from Tennessee Reconnect students, TBR faculty and staff, and Tennessee Reconnect Community Advisors and staff and create a series of case studies that highlight evidence practices across Tennessee Reconnect communities and campuses.
3. **Determine Program Effectiveness** – Conduct research to determine program effectiveness and the effect on Tennessee’s Drive to 55 goals, Education Outcomes, Cost and Benefit Analysis, and State Economic and Workforce Development Impact.

“This is my opportunity to go get wiser. I have a more supportive husband and daughter.

This might be my last chance to really give it and get through with it this time.

All the way.

I’m not let nothing stop me this time. Nothing.”

– 54 year-old African American woman, 10 years since last attended college

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

1. **Develop a specific Tennessee Reconnect orientation and/or adult student First Year Seminar (FYS) program.** Tennessee policymakers should engage stakeholders including higher education experts in adult learners, first-year seminars, orientation programming; faculty; academic and Tennessee Reconnect community advisors; and Tennessee Reconnect students to assess current programs and develop a specialized program for this population.
2. **Assess and improve advising models for adult students at Tennessee Reconnect participating colleges.** Given the needs and unique schedules of adult learners, college personnel should assess and improve their advising models for Tennessee Reconnect students.
3. **Create a cohort model.** Connecting students is vital to promoting engagement, which is fundamental to student success. This could be accomplished formally and in-person with campus-based student groups, or more informally via social media.
4. **Implement an adult student mentor program.** A mentorship program could provide incoming students with both resources about the college but could also provide guidance from personal experience.
5. **Evaluate the first-dollar nature and covered costs of the Tennessee Reconnect Grant.** As an incentive to return to college, adult learners view the grant as a way to remove a financial barrier to pursue a postsecondary degree or credential. It is important to understand the effects of this policy decision on issues of access, affordability, and indebtedness of adult learners. This evaluation should be completed by a non-partisan and independent research center.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gresham D. Collom is Graduate Research Assistant for the Postsecondary Education Research Center (PERC) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His areas of research interest include access to and experiences in higher education for underrepresented populations, public policy in higher education, and international higher education. Collom is a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program with an emphasis in Higher Education Administration. He holds a Master of Science in Education with an emphasis of Higher Education Leadership degree from the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, and a Bachelors of Arts degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire.