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College-Going Rate Decline Requires a Call to Action for Postsecondary Access and Completion Efforts in Tennessee

NASHVILLE – The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) today released the inaugural state college-going status report, [College Going and the Class of 2021](#). The report examines the annual college-going rate and explores student aspirations and plans for after high school graduation. The new college-going rate, the portion of Tennessee public high school graduates who enrolled in postsecondary education immediately after high school, is 52.8 percent.

The report shows that the college-going rate has been trending down over the past five years, from 63.8 percent for the Class of 2017 to 52.8 percent for the Class of 2021. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a nine percentage point drop in the college-going rate between the Class of 2019 and the Class of 2021. With declines in college going, we are also observing declines in overall freshmen enrollment in Tennessee. Similar trends are seen nationally, with the [National Student Clearinghouse Current Term Enrollment Estimates](#) reporting a 9.2 percent total decline in freshman enrollment between fall 2019 and fall 2021. Changes in the Tennessee college-going rate have not been evenly distributed across the state, with counties seeing different rates of change, and there were notable disparities in the college-going rate changes between Black and Hispanic students and white students.

“In the current economic reality, a high school diploma is not enough for long-term success,” said Executive Director Dr. Emily House, “All students can benefit from postsecondary education or training beyond high school to achieve success and provide opportunities for advancement, which is why the college-going rate decline and disparities should be a call to action for Tennessee and our nation.”

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission is relentlessly focused on increasing the number of Tennesseans with a postsecondary credential. In that spirit, the agency will begin the process of coordinating and convening stakeholders to determine recommendations and the path forward to renew the focus on improving access to postsecondary opportunity and thus increasing the number of individuals with a postsecondary degree or credential.

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