



Campaign for Free College Tuition

Tennessee Promise aims to change face of state colleges

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Since Gov. Bill Haslam signed Tennessee Promise into law eight months ago, it has attracted a chorus of praise from other states, education experts and the White House, but leaders here can't afford to rest on their laurels.

The pioneering program is still in its infancy, and many questions about its reach and efficacy remain unanswered.

The coming year will be a crucial one.

"Obviously we're excited about Tennessee Promise being highlighted as a best practice, but from the perspective of implementation, honestly, it means very little," said Mike Krause, who was tapped by the governor last year to oversee the program's rollout. "We are squarely under the hood of implementation."

The statewide program — which offers eligible high school seniors the chance to go to one of the state's 13 community colleges or 27 colleges of applied technology tuitionfree, starting this fall — is one of the first of its kind, and has quickly drawn a national spotlight. "

There's a huge amount of interest in Tennessee Promise around the country," said Dewayne Matthews, vice president of strategy development at the Lumina Foundation, an Indianapolisbased group committed to increasing the number of Americans with college degrees. "There's a lot of people, frankly, hoping this works and works really well."

Many challenges are on the horizon, but Krause and other officials remain optimistic that Tennessee Promise will successfully draw firstgeneration college students onto campus for training that will make them more attractive to employers.

A model exists

Tennessee Promise did not develop overnight. It is rooted in the success of a privately funded Knox County program that began about six years ago, when Haslam was mayor of Knoxville.

Haslam watched as that program, Knox Achieves, offered local students free tuition at Pellissippi State Community College paired with mentoring. Enrollment numbers and graduation rates got a sizable boost. Knox County's college

matriculation rate has increased 11.5 percent since 2009, according to program data.

In recent years, the program spread to several other counties across the state under the name tnAchieves. Jon'Ta Goldsmith was one of the first tnAchieves students to enter Nashville State Community College when the program reached Davidson County last year.

The Hillsboro High School graduate grew up knowing she wanted to go to college, but no one else in her family had gone before. As her senior year got closer, she made a list. Vanderbilt University, Spelman College and Austin Peay State University were her top picks.

But her mother didn't want her to stray too far from their home in the Edgehill neighborhood. And money would be an issue.

Goldsmith, 19, has worked in RiverGate Mall for three years to raise funds, but she knew it would still be a struggle to cobble together enough for four years of college. When she heard about tnAchieves, and a tuitionfree ticket to Nashville State, it was a relief.

"It was that plan B that I could fall back on," she said. "Why not go to a school that can give you assurance and you know everything's going to be OK?" Seventy percent of the students in the tnAchieves program stay in school for at least a year, compared to the 51 percent average falltofall retention rate for all students at the state's community colleges. Twentyeight percent of tnAchieves students graduate within three years, compared to a 11 percent average overall at the Tennessee's community colleges. Haslam said adopting the tnAchieves model at the state level in the form of Tennessee Promise brings a funding source that is guaranteed for years to come.

The same could not be said for the tnAchieves programs, he said, because they primarily drew their funding from philanthropic dollars. For Tennessee Promise, the state created a \$361.1 million endowment funded with lottery reserves.

The recurring costs of the program will be paid by a combination of interest earnings from that endowment and any excess funds generated each year by the lottery scholarship program. It is important for the state "to make this promise not just to today's high school seniors but to today's firstgraders and today's fifth-graders," Haslam said. "In this case we can make that promise."

Changing approaches

About 58,000 students, or about 90 percent of Tennessee's senior class, have applied for the first year of Tennessee Promise, exceeding predictions by tens of thousands. The true number of Tennessee Promise participants won't be clear

until later this year — many of those students could decide to attend four-year universities or pursue other options.

In the meantime, community colleges across the state are preparing to educate swelling numbers. Some campuses might have to schedule classes at night or on the weekends to accommodate added students, according to John Morgan, chancellor of the Tennessee Board of Regents, which governs the schools.

"There are certainly places in the state where significantly increased enrollments will present something of a challenge for us, but I think our schools are ready for that challenge," Morgan said. "Even in those crowded locations, I believe we're ready."

Because the goal of Tennessee Promise is to educate students who would not have considered college without the scholarship, schools will also face the challenge of teaching students who are not prepared for the college experience. In anticipation of those students and their needs, the Board of Regents system is set to unveil a new approach to academic support.

Schools will move away from remedial courses, which did not generate college credits and sometimes caused students to withdraw before graduation. Instead, they will wrap tutoring and other services around credit-bearing courses. This approach will make its systemwide debut this fall, but Morgan said pilot programs have been successful.

Team success

The state has also recruited 9,200 volunteer mentors who have been matched with Tennessee Promise students. The mentors, who Krause describes as "reminders in chief," will help students manage the tasks that lie ahead, from applying for financial aid to enrolling in classes.

Experts say the mentors could be as valuable to students as the scholarship money, especially when those students don't have family members who are familiar with the process. "It's not just about money," Matthews said. "All of the available research of course points in the direction that (mentoring) is what really ultimately does make a difference in success."

For Jon'Ta Goldsmith, the added support from a mentor proved invaluable when she arrived on campus last semester. "The shock for me was registering for classes," she said. "You know what you want to do, you have it in your mind, but how do you actually get that on paper? All of that was a big scare." Now in her second semester, Goldsmith navigates campus with quiet confidence.

She also has a supportive classmate in her mom, Kenretha Goldsmith, who studies at Nashville State as well. Motivated by her only daughter, Kenretha Goldsmith, 43, got her GED while Jon'Ta was in high school. After that, she got a

scholarship and started at Nashville State herself. She said her daughter's continued academic success is inspirational, but it's not a surprise.

"She is going to see herself the way others see her," Kenretha Goldsmith said last week, looking at Jon'Ta with tears in her eyes. "I want her to be all that she can be."

Changing the conversation

Other leaders seem eager to follow Tennessee's example. During his State of the Union, President Barack Obama praised Tennessee and urged Congress to make community colleges across the country tuition free.

Texas, Indiana and Minnesota have introduced legislation that would follow the program here, and others have called Krause to ask him about Tennessee Promise.

"States are looking at what Gov. Haslam has done, and they are fundamentally going back and saying can we do this?" Krause said. "Our answer to them is, for us in Tennessee, it was the right thing to do because we needed to change the conversation around the state."

During a conversation last week at Nashville State, Jon'Ta Goldsmith and her mother said the financial aid that paved the way for their educations would change their lives. Jon'Ta wants to be a psychiatrist, and Kenretha wants to be a social worker.

"I always thought college was for rich people," Kenretha Goldsmith said. "That was my thinking because I grew up in a poverty area." "You don't have to be rich," Jon'Ta Goldsmith said. "You can be barely getting by and still be able to get an education."

Her mother answered with a smile: "Spoken like a true scholar."

Key dates

2014

Feb. 3: Haslam unveils his plan for Tennessee Promise during his annual State of the State address.

May 13: Haslam signed Tennessee Promise into law after it was passed by a wide margin in the General Assembly.

Nov. 1: The deadline for the first wave of eligible students to apply for Tennessee Promise. Officials got almost 58,000 applications.

2015

January/February: Tennessee Promise students are required to attend planning meetings.

Feb. 15: Deadline for Tennessee Promise students to file their FAFSAs.

March and April: Tennessee Promise students are required to attend another round of planning meetings.

Aug. 1: Deadline for Tennessee Promise students to perform community service required through the program.

Aug. 15: A roster of eligible students will be sent to participating colleges.