

# TENNESSEE COLLEGE GOING & THE CLASS OF 2023



THEC  TSAC

# Tennessee Higher Education Commission

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# Executive Summary

College-going rate indicates the portion of public high school graduates who seamlessly enroll (i.e., immediately after high school) in postsecondary education. This year's college-going rate report focuses on the class of 2023. **College going is up for the class of 2023 by 2.4 percentage points over the class of 2022, for a statewide college-going rate of 56.7% (Figure 3).** This is once again the largest statewide increase since the implementation of Tennessee Promise, outperforming the increase observed last year between the classes of 2021 and 2022.

College going for the class of 2023 is up across all race/ethnicity and gender pairs. However, these increases are not evenly distributed (**Figure 7**). **White females, Hispanic/Latino males, and females in the "Other" race/ethnicity group saw growth in college-going rates above the statewide growth** of 2.4 percentage points. Meanwhile, growth for other student groups was smaller than the statewide growth. **Gaps between gender and race/ethnicity groups widened for the class of 2023.** These gaps, and high growth in the college-going rate for White female students, suggests that college-going gains for the class of 2023 were a result of getting students who have historically enrolled in postsecondary at high rates across the finish line to matriculate. While this is a positive outcome, more opportunities remain to focus college access efforts on those student groups that are less likely to enroll in college.

New this year, college-going rates for students who are economically disadvantaged are available and show stark differences between student groups (**Figure 11**). Economically disadvantaged is a designation used at the K-12 level to indicate socioeconomic status and includes students who are in foster care, homeless, migrant students, runaway students, and students who participate in federal/state income/nutrition programs. **For the class of 2023, economically disadvantaged students had a 39.3% college-going rate, while their non-economically disadvantaged peers had a 65.3% college-going rate.**

**College-going rates for students who participate in the Dual Enrollment Grant remain high (Table 3).** Further, the proportion of the class of 2023 enrolling at Tennessee Board of Regents community colleges and Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology and at the University of Tennessee universities increased compared to the previous class (**Figure 12**). Additionally, **the class of 2023 has a decreased share of enrollments at in-state public institutions compared to the previous cohort (Figure 13).** Students who enroll out-of-state tend to enroll at institutions in one of the many states bordering Tennessee (**Table 4**).

The report opens with an update on Momentum Year 2023 efforts, providing a variety of highlights on the efforts undertaken to support the high school class of 2023 to enroll in postsecondary education, as well as to support adult learners and to ensure that every postsecondary student in Tennessee has portable and stackable credential options for greater economic mobility.

Finally, the report makes three recommendations to continue to improve college-going rates:

- The Tennessee Higher Education Commission and Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (THEC/TSAC) should support students who have historically faced higher barriers to college entry, leveling up to help students who are most likely to enroll, and ensuring that postsecondary goals are accessible to all Tennesseans. This may include increased direct support services, campaigns to increase awareness of financial aid opportunities, and advocating for additional financial aid funding.
- THEC/TSAC remains committed to navigating challenges presented by the difficult rollout of the new Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in the 2023-2024 academic year; future efforts should also consider how additional student support services and increased financial aid funding may make postsecondary enrollment possible for more economically disadvantaged students.
- Recent expansions to the Dual Enrollment Grant should be applauded, but THEC/TSAC, alongside K-12 partners like the Tennessee Department of Education and State Board of Education, should continue to work to ensure that Early Postsecondary Opportunity (EPSO) participation is equally accessible to all students across the state and supported by rigorous research. Dual enrollment courses must also help prepare students to enroll and succeed in college, and all credit earned through these opportunities must be accepted at a student's final postsecondary destination.

# Momentum Year 2023

The Tennessee Higher Education Commission and Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (THEC/TSAC) are dedicated to increasing college access and student success culminating in a postsecondary credential. In May 2022, following the release of the inaugural College-Going Rate report, THEC/TSAC launched the Momentum Year initiative, which aimed to increase college enrollment and completion rates. As part of this initiative, THEC/TSAC set ambitious goals for the high school class of 2023 and adult learners, focusing on improving college-going rates, boosting adult enrollment through Tennessee Reconnect, and aligning education with workforce training. Despite falling short of a 60% college-going rate, substantial progress was made across various metrics for the class of 2023. These efforts, including improved advising programs, increased FAFSA completion rates, and strategic partnerships, reflect THEC/TSAC's commitment to fostering educational attainment and economic mobility for all Tennesseans. This section provides a status update on progress made toward Momentum Year goals.

## **Goal One: Increase the college-going rate for the high school class of 2023 to at least 60 percent.**

- The state's college-going rate for the class of 2023 improved by 2.4 percentage points over the previous year to 56.7%. While falling short of the intended goal, THEC/TSAC are proud of the continued work to improve college going and of steady progressive increases in the state's college-going rate.
- THEC's high school-embedded college and career advising programs, GEAR UP TN and Advise TN, improved the rates at which their students enrolled in college or technical training by 2.5 percentage points and 1.2 percentage points, respectively.
- The percent of Tennessee Promise applicants with a completed FAFSA at the TN Promise deadline increased from 72.8% for the class of 2022 to 74.1% for the class of 2023. Rates increased across all racial/ethnic groups and genders. When combined with the historic number of Promise applicants in the fall, this increase represents approximately 1,600 additional students who completed their FAFSA.
- A record 151 high schools were recognized as 2023 FAFSA Champions. A high school can be a FAFSA Champion by either increasing their rate of FAFSA filing by at least 5 percentage points or by attaining a 90% or higher completion rate of the FAFSA among high school seniors. The number of Champion schools more than doubled over the class of 2022.
- THEC/TSAC's Outreach Team gave financial aid presentations statewide that reached 32,982 students, parents, counselors, and college access professionals. Workshops focusing on college applications reached 13,007 students.
- The THEC/TSAC Communications team distributed FAFSA completion guides, social media messaging and image toolkits, step-by-step college application video walkthroughs, FAFSA Verification instructional videos, College and Career Planning Night slides, webinars on FAFSA best practices, and monthly newsletters to over 3,000 school counselors and other college access professionals through the 2022-2023 school year.

## **Goal Two: Increase adult enrollment in higher education through Tennessee Reconnect participation.**

- According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, there are nearly 600,000 adults in Tennessee with some postsecondary education but without a degree or credential. Recently released data indicates a 6.2% increase in re-enrollment of Tennesseans in this category during the 2021-2022 academic year over the prior year.<sup>1</sup>
- THEC's team of Reconnect and Re-Entry Navigators provided high quality, one-on-one, institution neutral college and career navigation services to 8,495 adult students, including 2,787 students at nine state correctional facilities.
- Nearly 1,200 students served by THEC's Reconnect Navigators earned their credential during Momentum Year 2023, bringing the total "alumni" served by the program to 4,900 since program inception in 2015.
- Reconnect Navigators engaged in communication with Reconnector students (in-person, or via text, phone, or email) an average of 11,533 times per month during the 2022-2023 school year.
- Re-Entry Navigators engaged in communication an average of 502 times per month with justice-involved Reconnectors during the school year.
- To improve FAFSA filing among 2023-2024 Reconnect applicants, Reconnect Navigators contacted applicants who had not yet filed, resulting in an additional 2,000 Tennessee Reconnect applicants submitting the FAFSA.
- Through its partnership with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, THEC works with Tennesseans receiving unemployment insurance benefits (UI) to use Reconnect to earn a credential and satisfy the unemployment work search requirement. In Momentum Year 2023, an additional 679 UI applicants opted in to work with a Reconnect Navigator, bringing the total number of UI applicants working with a Navigator to 3,973 since 2020.
- THEC, with funding from the Department of Finance and Administration's Office of Evidence and Impact (OEI), began work with the Boyd Center for Business & Economic Research at the University of Tennessee to conduct an evaluation of the Navigate Reconnect program to determine its outcomes and effectiveness in serving Tennessee's adult learner population. The study will consider the impact of Navigate Reconnect on adult learner enrollment, adult learner persistence, adult completion rates, and related effects on workforce development.

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<sup>1</sup> The report examines adult re-enrollments between 01/01/2021-07/31/2022, compared to those in 01/01/2020-07/31/2021. Berg, B., Causey, J., Cohen, J., Ibrahim, M., Holsapple, M., and Shapiro, D. (June 2024), *Some College, No Credential Student Outcomes, Annual Progress Report – Academic Year 2022/23*, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/some-college-no-credential/>

**Goal Three: Improve coordination and alignment in education and workforce training to ensure students have portable and stackable options for greater economic mobility.**

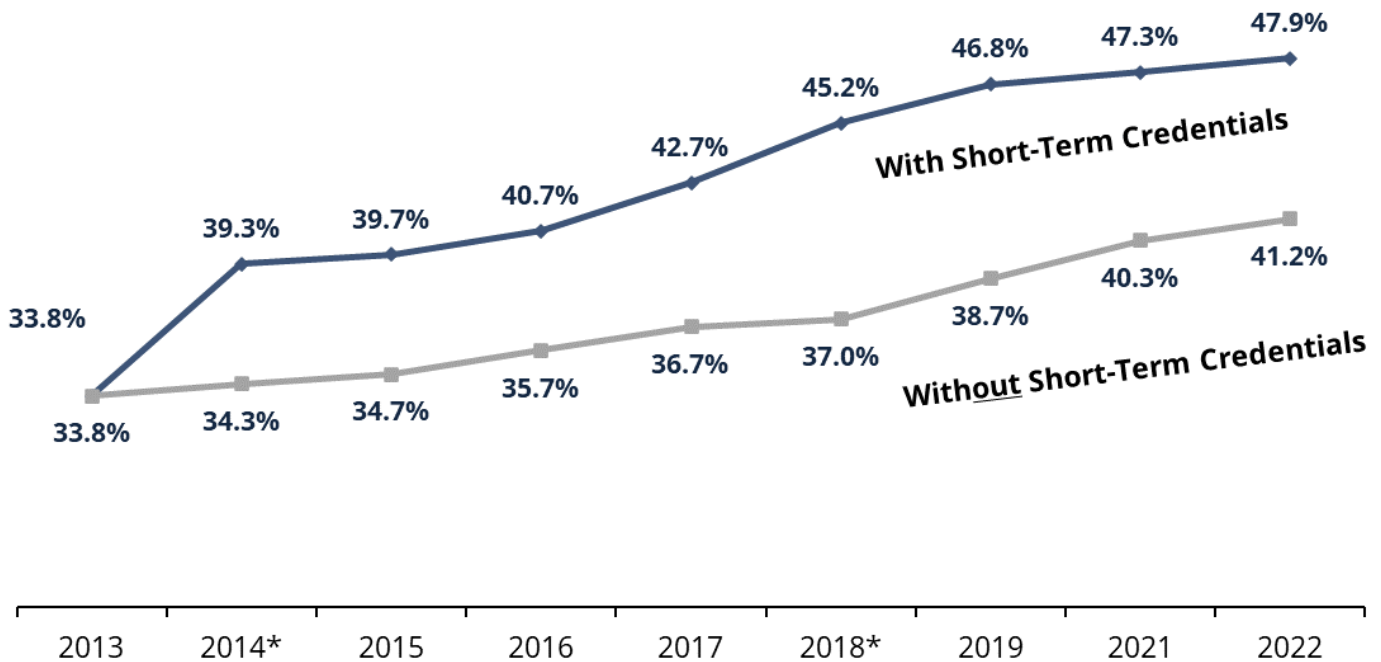
- THEC continues its work with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development, institutions, and lawmakers to develop Tennessee-specific terminology, validation processes, and ultimately a registry for quality non-degree credentials (QNDC). A QNDC is a short-term credential that qualifies an individual for an in-demand occupation, ensures a living wage, and is stackable and portable. QNDCs may include industry certifications, occupational licenses, apprenticeships, badges, or other micro credentials.
- Through the adoption of revised, accelerated academic program approval and off-site instruction policies, THEC has streamlined processes, clarified requirements, and created more flexibility for campuses to offer programs more quickly, in response to local workforce needs.
- In spring 2023, THEC's Academic Affairs and Workforce Alignment team, in collaboration with the Tennessee Board of Regents and the University of Tennessee system, convened a series of state-wide meetings of campus representatives from public and private institutions to update the Tennessee Transfer Pathways, which allow students to seamlessly transition to a four-year degree program after earning an associate degree.
- Approximately 4,533 13- to 16-year-olds received the Dual Enrollment Grant in academic year 2022-2023 for coursework toward a Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) credential, the first year the grant was available to 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders. Increasing participation in TCAT dual enrollment builds upon the work of programs like the Governor's Investment in Vocational Education (GIVE) community grants, which facilitate the development and implementation of employer-driven career pathways from secondary to postsecondary to fill critical and demonstrable local workforce needs.
- Through TCAT Crump's GIVE grant, students who complete the Farming Operations Technology program can receive up to 30 hours of credit toward a bachelor's degree in agriculture at UT Martin. TCAT Crump's GIVE program had an increase of 400 dual enrollment students in 2023.



# High School Seniors and College Going

The Drive to 55 is the campaign to raise the proportion of Tennessee’s working-age population (ages 25-64) with a postsecondary credential to 55 percent by the year 2025.<sup>2</sup> High school graduates who enroll in postsecondary education are a core group whose postsecondary attainment is critical to reaching the goal. As of 2022, 47.9 percent of Tennesseans aged 25-64 had a postsecondary credential.<sup>3</sup> This attainment rate includes certificates and industry-recognized certifications that provide a wage premium when compared to individuals with a high school degree only. **Figure 1** shows the difference between an attainment rate that includes these short-term credentials and an attainment rate that measures the percentage of the population ages 25-64 that hold an associate degree or higher. While students in the high school class of 2023 will not reach age 25 by 2025, and thus will not impact the Drive to 55, their college going, as with other recent high school graduating classes, is critical to Tennessee’s long term attainment goals.

**Figure 1: Tennessee Attainment Rate (Ages 25-64)**



Note: 2014 and 2018 represent a methodological change, adding certificates and certifications, respectively, and are marked with an asterisk (\*). These methodological changes affect the **blue** line only.

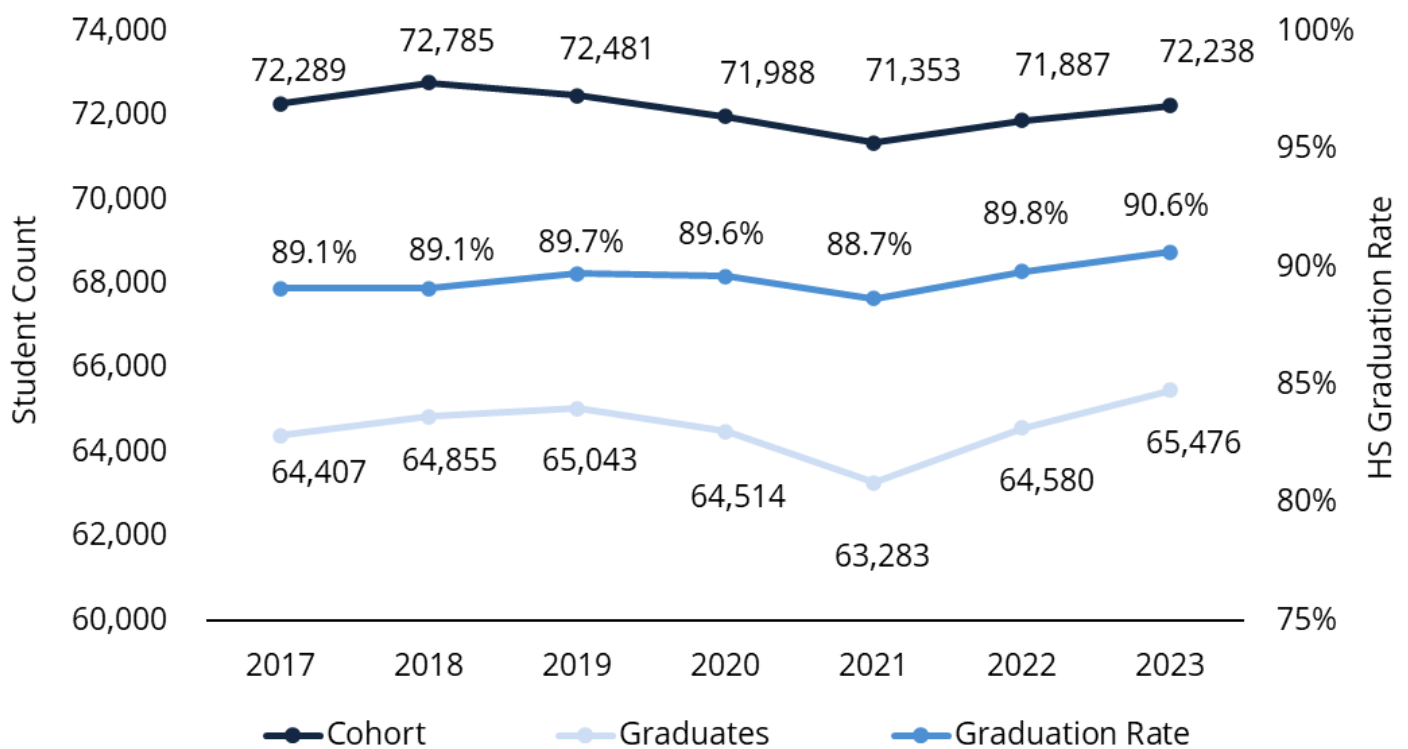
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey and Lumina Foundation’s A Stronger Nation.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Drive to 55, see “Postsecondary Attainment in the Decade of Decision: The Master Plan for Tennessee Postsecondary Education, 2015-2025” at [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/other-research/master-plan/MasterPlan2025\\_0418.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/thec/bureau/research/other-research/master-plan/MasterPlan2025_0418.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Data from the Lumina Foundation, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress/state/TN>; attainment rate includes short-term credentials, which encompass certifications and certificates.

**Figure 2** shows cohort graduation rates from the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). Graduation rates for the class of 2023 increased to 90.6%. Notably, the size of the 2023 graduating class cohort increased slightly over the prior year, but is still below the 2018 graduating class, which represents the largest graduating cohort in TDOE’s publicly available data.<sup>4</sup> Starting in 2022-23, TDOE has also started reporting a federal graduation rate, which calculates a four-year high school graduation rate by only including students who complete all required coursework in all subject areas and graduate with a regular diploma or an AAD diploma within four years and a summer of their original 9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort date. The Tennessee graduation rate, presented here for consistency with prior years, is calculated following the State Board of Education graduation policy.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 2: High School Graduation Cohorts, Graduates, and Graduation Rates**



Note: Student counts are shown on the left vertical axis, and high school graduation rates are shown on the right vertical axis. For the class of 2023, 72,238 students made up the graduating class cohort, and 65,476 students graduated, yielding a graduation rate of 90.6%.

<sup>4</sup> Statistics in this paragraph and figure 2 based on THEC calculations using data from the Tennessee Department of Education, <https://www.tn.gov/education/districts/federal-programs-and-oversight/data/data-downloads.html>. Graduation rate is based on the count of students in the ninth-grade cohort who earn a regular high school diploma or an alternate academic diploma on time (four years and a summer). For more detail, see the State Report Card technical document at <https://www.tn.gov/education/families/report-card.html>.

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see the 2022-23 Federal Accountability Protocol at [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/accountability/2022-23\\_Federal\\_Accountability\\_Protocol\\_Updated\\_Jan2024.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/accountability/2022-23_Federal_Accountability_Protocol_Updated_Jan2024.pdf).

The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education projects the number of public and private high school graduates across the United States as part of their Knocking at the College Door initiative. In December 2020, WICHE reported that the number of Tennessee public and private high school graduates would peak with the high school class of 2025 due to shifting demographics and birth rates in the state and country.<sup>6</sup> New projections from WICHE are expected in late 2024, but an interim report suggests that nationwide learning loss as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic may impact high school graduate counts further; in particular, learning loss in middle school, evidenced by a variety of test scores, may impact the graduating classes of 2026 – 2028, just as demographic downturns appear in the population nationwide.<sup>7</sup> In addition to a potentially shrinking pool of high school graduates, students who do enroll in postsecondary may be less academically prepared than previous students. Higher education institutions should prepare now to support these students and their learning needs. As we anticipate the number of high school graduates in the enrollment pipeline to decrease, ensuring that a higher proportion of those students enroll in postsecondary education and complete needed credentials will be a key part of realizing Tennessee’s attainment needs to fulfill workforce demand.

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education’s graduate count projections, see <https://knocking.wiche.edu/data/knocking-10th-data/>.

<sup>7</sup> Peace Bransberger, “WICHE Insights Navigating Learning Loss and Changing Demographics in Education,” Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, February 2024, <https://knocking.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2024/02/WICHE-Insights-Navigating-Learning-Loss.pdf>.

## College-Going Data and Methods

The college-going rate is a measure of the proportion of graduates in each high school cohort that seamlessly enroll in postsecondary education. More precisely, this metric counts public high school students in the Tennessee Department of Education's (TDOE) ninth grade cohort who earn a regular high school diploma and enroll at a postsecondary institution the following summer or fall term after graduating high school.<sup>8</sup> The THEC cohort of graduates is slightly smaller than the graduate cohort counts provided by TDOE. The THEC cohort measure excludes students who do not earn a regular diploma, meaning that students who earn alternate academic diplomas are not included. Using a cohort method is aligned with TDOE methods for calculating graduation rate; however, THEC's high school graduate base does not include high school graduates who graduate more than a year before their anticipated graduation.<sup>9</sup> Cohorts of high school graduates are referred to by their high school graduation year in this report. The process is shown below using the example of the class of 2023.



Notably, there are alternative paths through and after high school that students may take which are not captured by this college-going rate measure. Students who earn postsecondary credentials while in high school are not captured as college-going if they do not then go on to enroll in postsecondary after high school. Students who enter the military or who join Department of Labor Registered Apprenticeships are also not included due to a lack of data to track these post-high school outcomes.

### *Data Sources and Notes*

The data in this section are sourced from the Tennessee Longitudinal Data System (also known as P20 Connect), the National Student Clearinghouse Student Tracker (NSC), and the Tennessee Higher Education

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<sup>8</sup> Students who graduate high school early may also be found in college enrollment in earlier terms, such as a December graduate who enrolls in postsecondary in the following spring term. For more information on TDOE's cohort methodology, see the 2022-23 Report Card Technical document at <https://www.tn.gov/education/families/report-card.html>. Postsecondary enrollment measures by TDOE may include additional enrollments beyond the immediate fall term of seamless enrollment and thus not match data presented here.

<sup>9</sup> High school graduates included in THEC's college-going base include winter, spring, and summer graduates in cohort's fourth (or senior) year. For the class of 2023 this represents students from winter 2022, spring 2023, and summer 2023.

Commission’s Student Information System (THECSIS). High school graduate data from TDOE is pulled from P20 Connect and matched to enrollment data from THECSIS and NSC to present a complete picture of public high school graduates’ enrollment behaviors, whether they enrolled in-state or out-of-state, at public or private institutions. Throughout this report, demographic groups are aligned with TDOE reporting and are not necessarily comparable to other THEC reporting.

*Privacy Notice*

Throughout this report, THEC complies with the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) requirements to protect students’ personally identifiable information. Therefore, when tables are presented, individual observations containing fewer than ten observations are suppressed. The suppressed counts are included in table totals. All cases in which observations are suppressed are identified with a note directly beneath the respective table.

# College Going in Tennessee

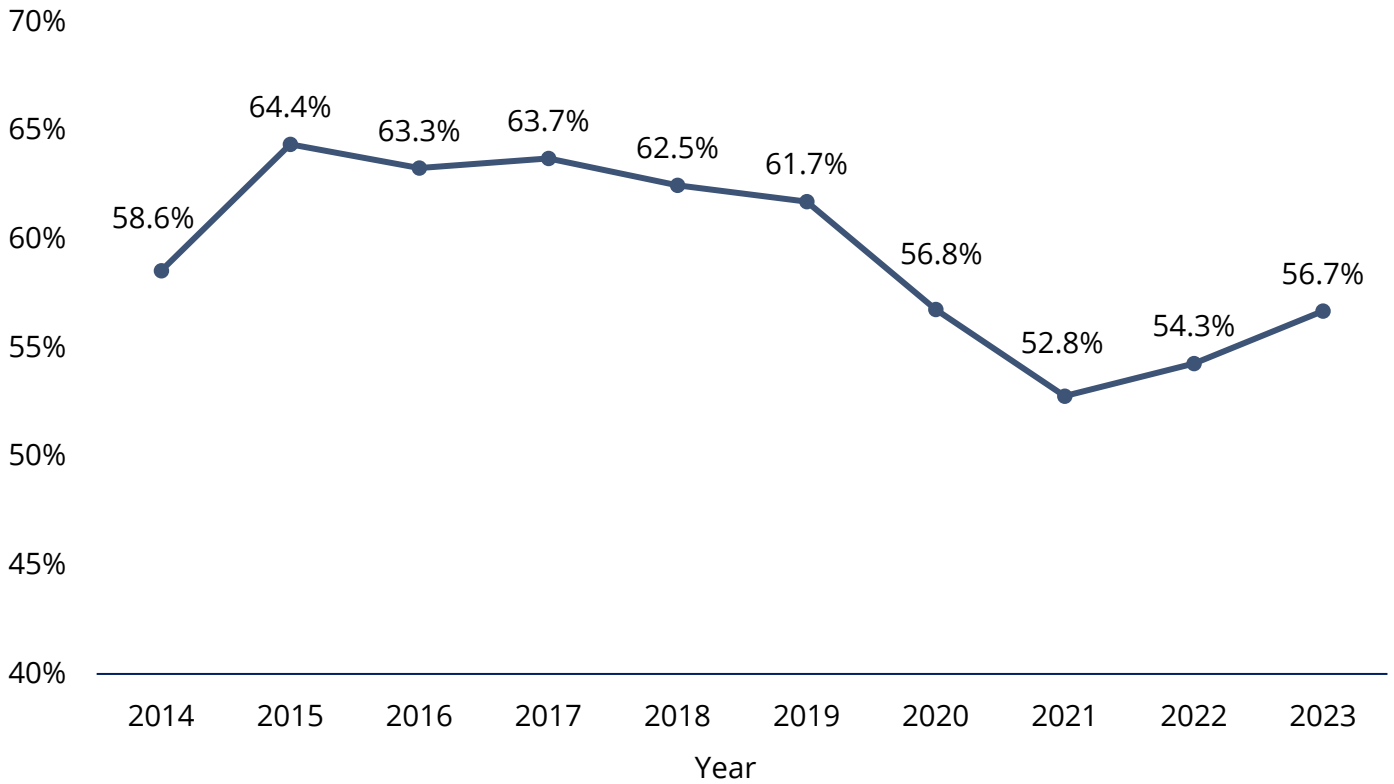
**Table 1** shows counts of public high school graduates and postsecondary enrollees for the last decade. These counts of high school graduates utilize THEC’s cohort measure and thus differ from the TDOE graduation cohort counts for reasons clarified above. **Figure 3** presents the overall college-going rate of Tennessee’s public high school graduates over the last decade. For the high school class of 2023, the overall college-going rate increased to 56.7%. This longitudinal view shows two major changes to the higher education environment in Tennessee: the introduction of the Tennessee Promise program statewide in 2015 and the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

The class of 2023 continued to face pandemic impacts throughout their time in high school; their freshman year of high school was disrupted in the spring of 2020, and instability and uncertainty remained throughout their high school careers. While student support and college access services adapted to continue to support this class of students, the environment they faced while taking crucial steps to college preparation and making college-going decisions was far from normal. Growth in college-going rates of nearly two-and-a-half percentage points between the class of 2022 and the class of 2023 represents significant progress in building back to college-going rates seen in the state prior to 2020. This progress has many causes, including the efforts from partners across the state during Momentum Year, as described earlier in this report.

**Table 1: Public High School Graduates and Postsecondary Enrollees**

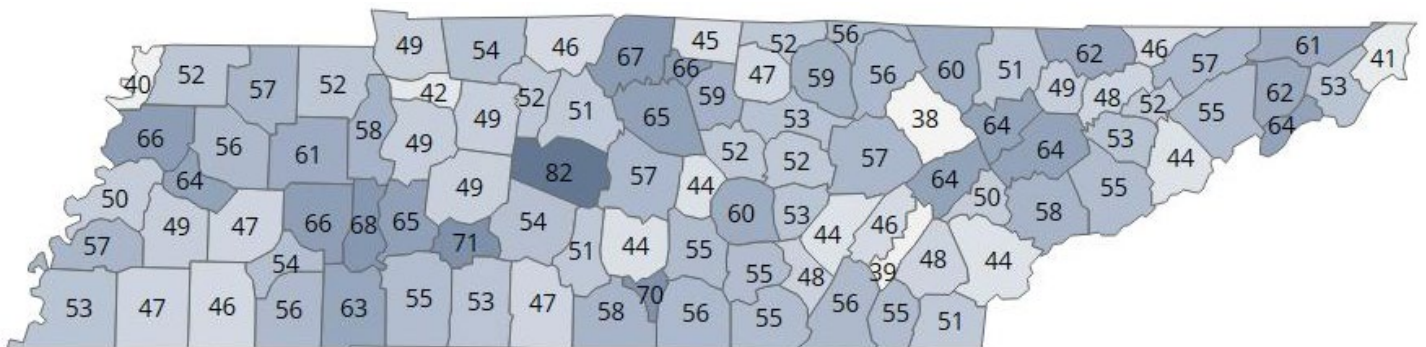
HS Class	Public HS Grads	Postsecondary Enrollees	College-Going Rate
2014	59,860	35,050	58.6%
2015	60,599	39,013	64.4%
2016	62,339	39,456	63.3%
2017	63,486	40,463	63.7%
2018	63,912	39,942	62.5%
2019	64,061	39,553	61.7%
2020	63,519	36,061	56.8%
2021	62,238	32,856	52.8%
2022	63,113	34,265	54.3%
2023	63,932	36,267	56.7%

**Figure 3: Statewide College-Going Rate**



**Figure 4** shows a heat map of college-going rate by county for the class of 2023. Darker blue counties have a higher college-going rate, and lighter colored counties have a lower college-going rate. College-going rate ranges from 38.3% in Morgan County to 82.1% in Williamson County. Sixty-five of Tennessee’s 95 counties have a college-going rate below the statewide rate of 56.7% for the class of 2023. More detailed data on college-going rate by county over the last five years is available in **Appendix A**, including counts of the high school graduating cohort to demonstrate the relative size of each county. In counties with a smaller number of high school graduates, a handful of students enrolling in postsecondary education can change the college-going rate by several points.

**Figure 4: Class of 2023 College-Going Rate by County**

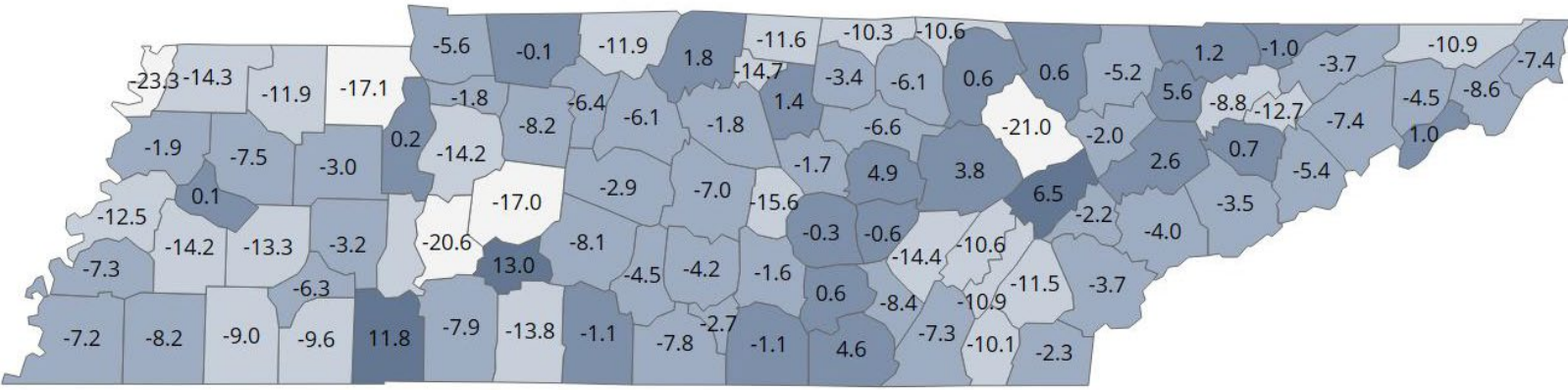


Note: Numbers shown in each county represent county college-going rate, rounded to the nearest whole number (in %), for the class of 2023.





**Figure 6: College-Going Rate Change by County, 2019-2023**



Note: Numbers shown in each county represent county percentage point change in college-going rate for the class of 2019 compared to the class of 2023.

### ***College Going by Student Demographics***

Just as college-going rate varies by county, postsecondary enrollment behavior varies by gender and race/ethnicity. **Table 2** shows college-going rates by gender and by race/ethnicity for the class of 2023. Females have a higher college-going rate than males, and the gap between gender groups widened for the class of 2023 to nearly 14 percentage points. White students have the highest college-going rate, followed closely by students in the “Other” race/ethnicity category, which includes American Indian or Native Alaskan, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Two or More races. Students who identify as Asian or as Two or More races make up most of this category. Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in postsecondary at lower rates than the rest of their class.

These college-going rates represent a within-group rate, comparing students in a race/ethnicity or gender demographic with other students in the same demographic. Some groups are notably smaller in Tennessee. Historically and in the class of 2023, White students represent the largest share of college-going students, as well as the largest share of Tennessee’s overall high school graduates and postsecondary enrollment. **Table 2** reflects the sizes of these groups for the class of 2023. Over the 5-year period shown in subsequent figures, the share of high school graduates in the Hispanic/Latino and “Other” race/ethnicity categories has grown while the shares of Black or African American students and White students have decreased. The shares of male and female high school graduates have remained relatively stable over that time.

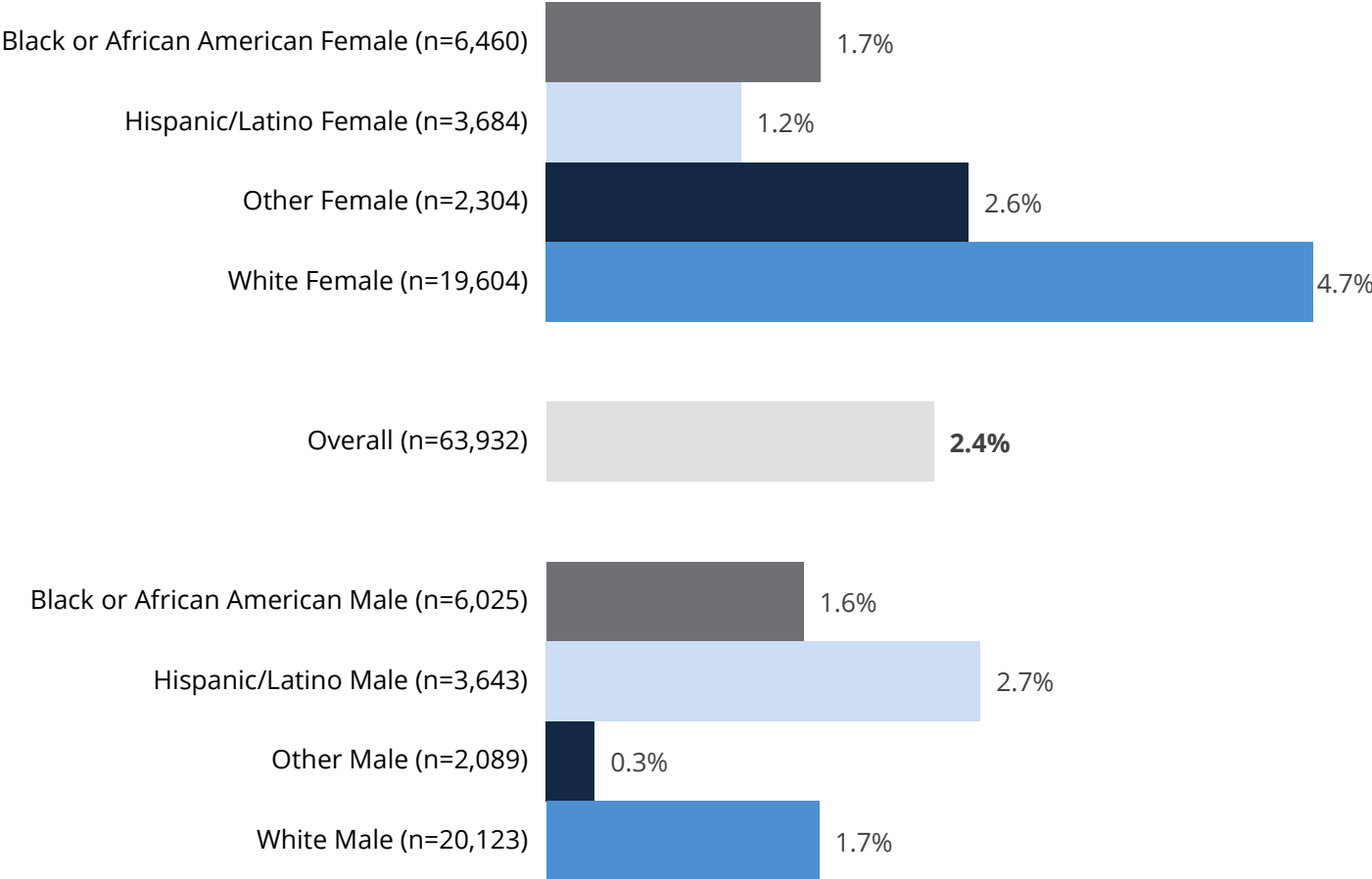
**Table 2: College-Going Rates of Class of 2023 by Race/Ethnicity, Gender,  
and Race/Ethnicity-Gender Pairs**

	<b>Public HS Grads</b>	<b>College-Going Rate</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
<i>Male</i>	31,880	49.9%
<i>Female</i>	32,052	63.6%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
<i>Other</i>	4,393	61.6%
<i>Hispanic/Latino</i>	7,327	39.4%
<i>Black or African American</i>	12,485	48.5%
<i>White</i>	39,727	62.0%
<b>Race/Ethnicity-Gender</b>		
<i>Other Male</i>	2,089	55.1%
<i>Other Female</i>	2,304	67.4%
<i>Hispanic/Latino Male</i>	3,643	33.6%
<i>Hispanic/Latino Female</i>	3,684	45.1%
<i>Black or African American Male</i>	6,025	41.8%
<i>Black or African American Female</i>	6,460	54.8%
<i>White Female</i>	19,604	69.5%
<i>White Male</i>	20,123	54.7%

Note: The "Other" race/ethnicity category includes American Indian or Native Alaskan, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races. Here and throughout the college-going data, demographic groups are aligned with Tennessee Department of Education reporting and are not necessarily comparable to other THEC reporting.

**Figure 7** compares college-going rates for the class of 2023 to rates for the class of 2022 and shows that college-going rate increased to different degrees for different race/ethnicity-gender pairs. Excitingly, college going is up across all race/ethnicity-gender pairs, though the magnitude of this increase differs across groups. The statewide growth rate of 2.4 percentage points is driven by a nearly five percentage point increase in the college-going rate of White female students. Hispanic/Latino male students, a rapidly growing population in the state and one that has traditionally faced significant barriers to enrolling in postsecondary education, saw a 2.7 percentage point gain in their college-going rate; female students in the “Other” race/ethnicity group also saw gains in their college-going rate above the statewide increase. Smaller student groups may see more volatility in college-going rates over time, as those rates are based on a smaller number of high school graduates in that demographic group.

**Figure 7: College-Going Rate Increases, 2022 to 2023, by Race/Ethnicity-Gender Pairs**

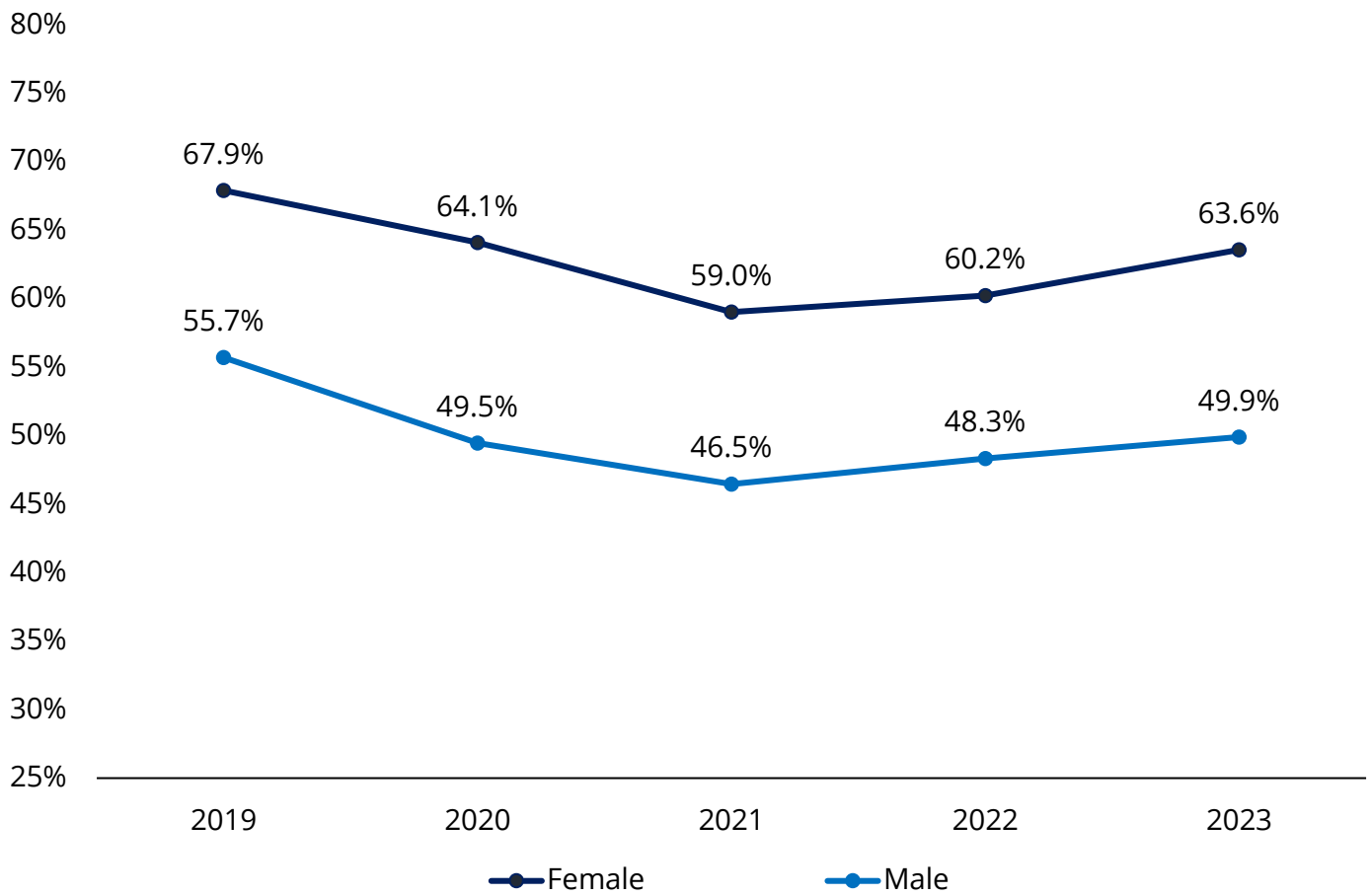


Note: The “Other” race/ethnicity category includes American Indian or Native Alaskan, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races.

**Figure 8** shows college-going rates over the last five years by gender. Females have consistently higher college-going rates than their male counterparts. The gap between female college going and male college going increased for the class of 2023, widening to 13.7 percentage points. This gap is the widest it has been since the class of 2020, where the gap grew to 14.6 percentage points. Despite an important 1.6 percentage

point increase in male college-going rate for the class of 2023, female college-going rates grew 3.3 percentage points.

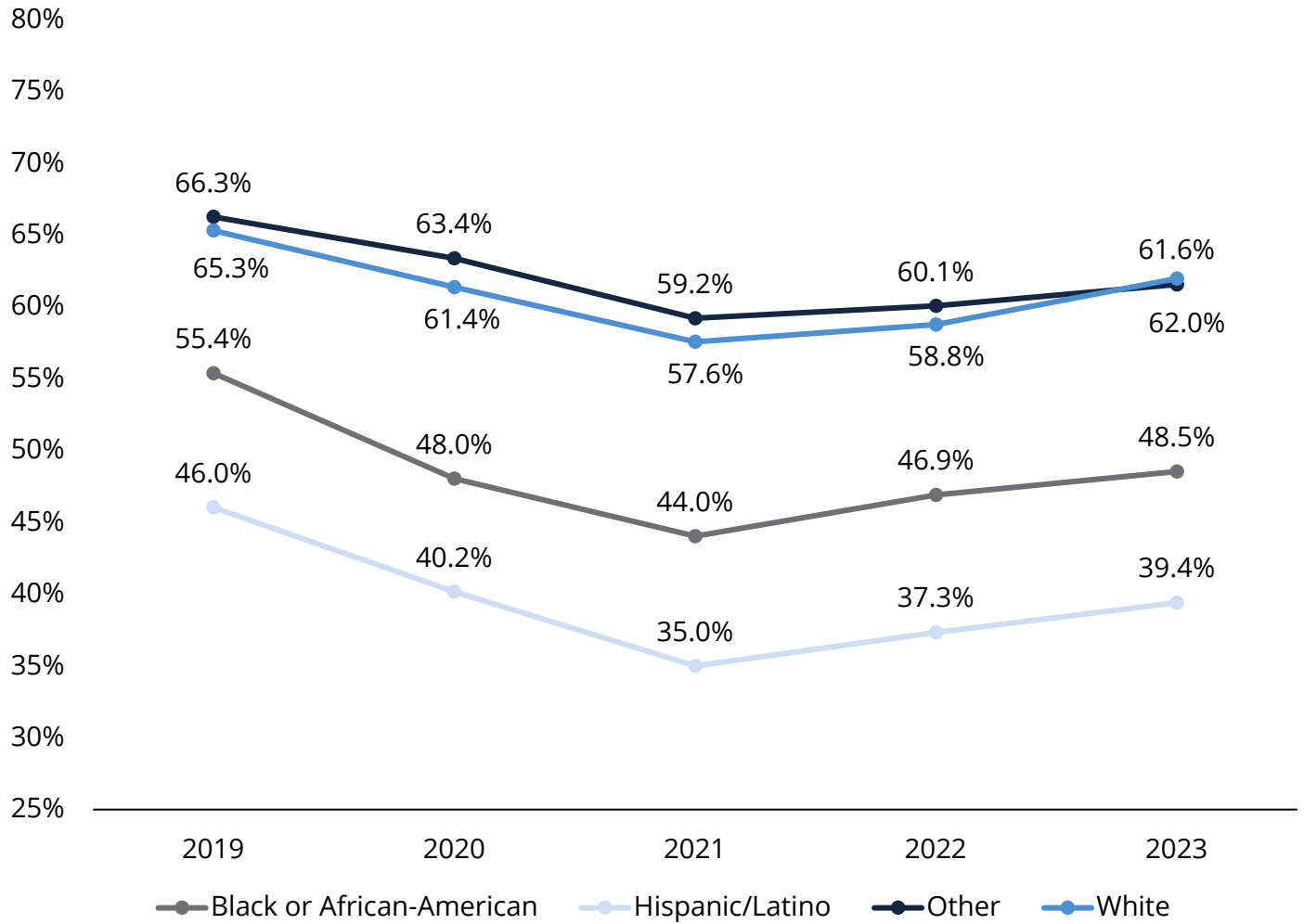
**Figure 8: College-Going Rates by Gender**



Note: Figures are rounded to the nearest tenth of a percentage point.

**Figure 9** shows college-going rates over the last five years by race/ethnicity. Hispanic/Latino students have the lowest college-going rates, while White students have the highest college-going rates. The gap in college-going rates between White students and Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino students has grown again; this gap narrowed between the classes of 2021 and 2022 but widened again for the class of 2023.

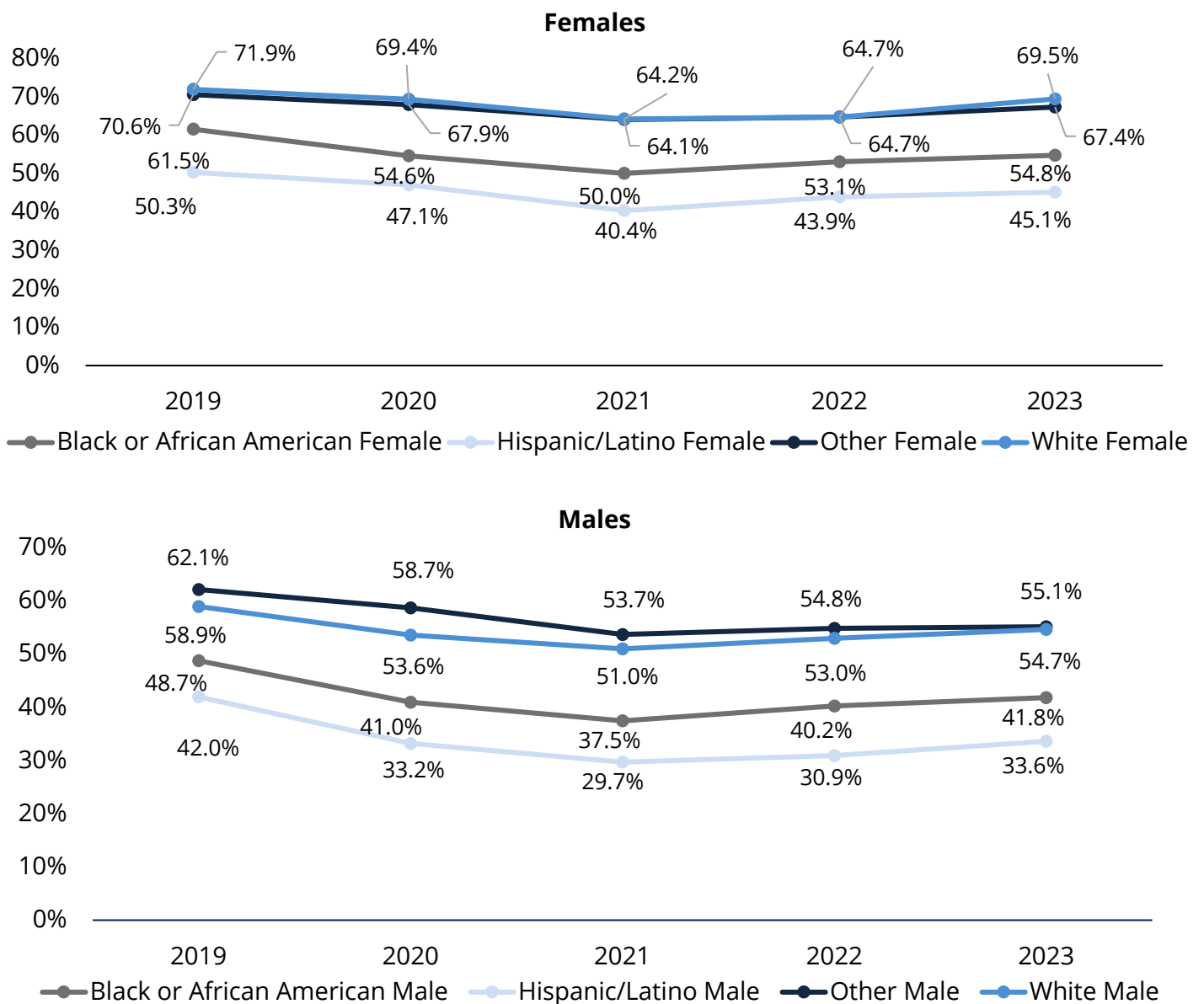
**Figure 9: College-Going Rates by Race/Ethnicity**



Note: The "Other" race/ethnicity category includes American Indian or Native Alaskan, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races.

**Figure 10** shows college-going rates by race/ethnicity-gender pairs for the last five years. Female students by race/ethnicity are shown in the top graph, while male students by race/ethnicity are shown in the bottom graph. White females and females in the “Other” race/ethnicity group have similar college-going rates while “Other” males have slightly higher college-going rates than White males, though the gap between rates for these two groups narrowed for the class of 2023. Gaps between White females and Black or African American females and between White females and Hispanic/Latino females widened compared to the class of 2022, driven by the large increase in college going for White female students. Gaps between White males and Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino males stayed consistent compared to the class of 2022. The gaps between female and male college-going rates for students of the same race/ethnicity remain particularly pronounced.

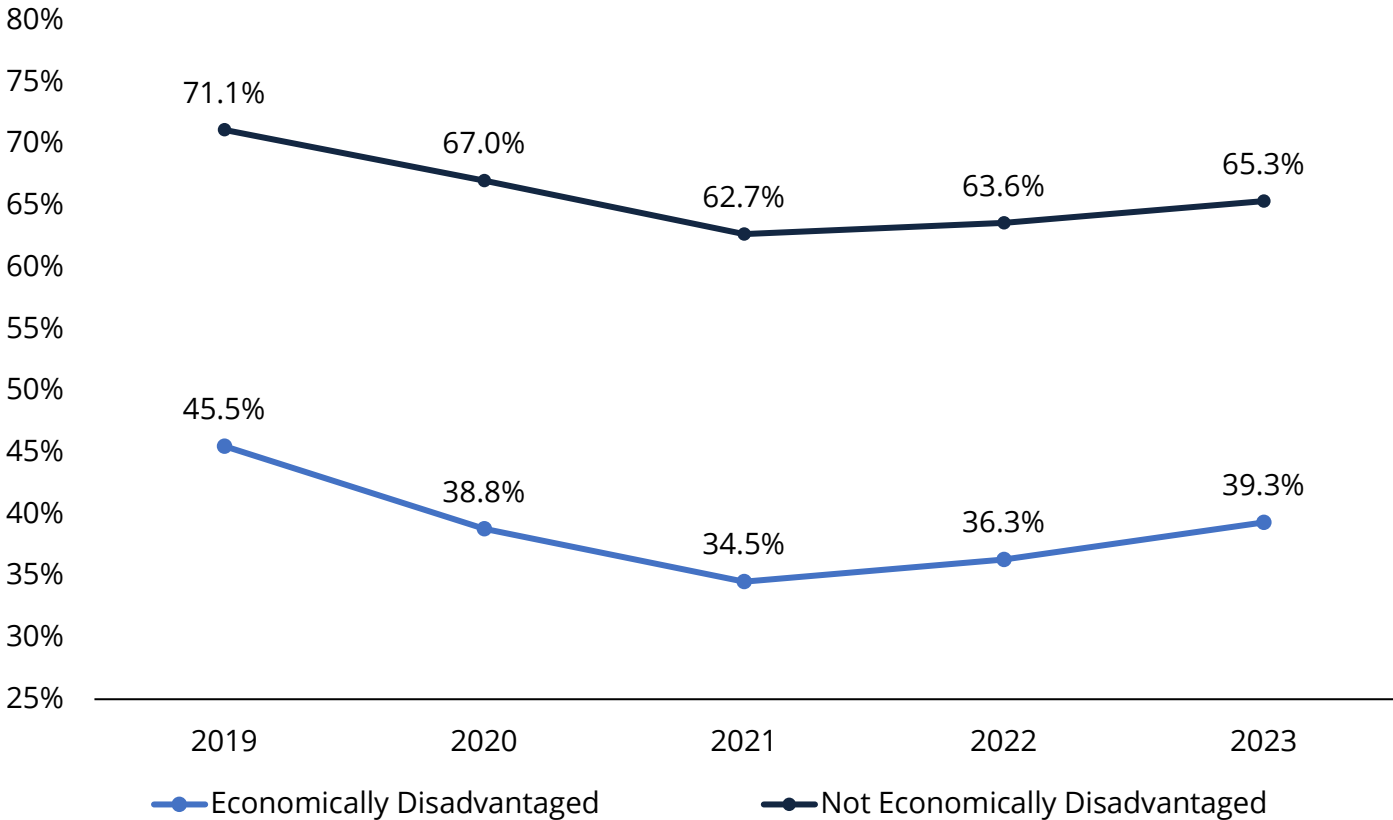
**Figure 10: College-Going Rates by Race/Ethnicity-Gender Pairs**



Note: The “Other” race/ethnicity category includes American Indian or Native Alaskan, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races.

New to the report this year, **Figure 11** shows the college-going rate for students who are economically disadvantaged compared to students who are not economically disadvantaged. Economically disadvantaged includes students who are in foster care, homeless, migrant students, runaway students, and students who are directly certified by the Tennessee Department of Human Services as participants in federal/state income/nutrition programs, namely Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).<sup>10</sup> As shown below, students who are economically disadvantaged enroll seamlessly in postsecondary education at much lower rates than students who are not included in the economically disadvantaged category. Additionally, the gap in college-going rates between economically disadvantaged students and non-economically disadvantaged students grew to over 28 percentage points for the classes of 2020 and 2021, likely a reflection of the disparate pandemic impacts on these student groups. However, more recent classes have seen this gap begin to narrow, with the college-going rate for non-economically disadvantaged students in the class of 2023 at 65.3%, and the college-going rate for economically disadvantaged students at 39.3%. However, this 26 percentage point gap, while narrowing, is still far too wide.

**Figure 11: College-Going Rates by Economically Disadvantaged Status**



<sup>10</sup> Economically Disadvantaged definition from the Federal Programs and Oversight Data Manual, Tennessee Department of Education, August 2023.

## ***Additional Influences on College Going***

Literature suggests that participation in Early Postsecondary Opportunities (EPSOs) positively impacts college-going rates. Exposure to opportunities to take college-level coursework in high school gives students a chance to see themselves in a college setting; these opportunities include Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Cambridge International, dual credit, dual enrollment courses, industry certifications, and college level examination program or CLEP.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, offerings may include opportunities to earn a credential while in high school; as noted above, students who earn a credential in high school and do not go on to pursue any additional postsecondary training immediately after are not included as college going in this report.

TSAC administers Tennessee’s financial aid programs, including the Dual Enrollment Grant (DEG).<sup>12</sup> Using THEC/TSAC data, **Table 3** shows the count of students and proportion of each high school graduating class that was found to have received the Dual Enrollment Grant at any time in their high school career, as well as the college-going rate for those dual enrollment grantees. Participation in the Dual Enrollment Grant was more common for members of the class of 2023 than previous classes. Thirty percent of the class of 2023 participated in the Dual Enrollment Grant at some point in their high school careers, and those students went on to enroll in postsecondary education at 78.8%, much higher than the college-going rate of the full cohort. While this investigation faces data limitations, as not all EPSO participation is included, the descriptive findings suggest that EPSO participation may increase a student’s likelihood of postsecondary enrollment. Additional research may move beyond the descriptive and consider factors like student academic preparation – as those who are more likely to participate in EPSOs may also tend to be higher achieving students who are more likely to enroll in postsecondary.

**Table 3: College-Going Rate for Dual Enrollment Grantees**

<b>HS Graduating Class</b>	<b>Dual Enrollment Grantees (as % of cohort)</b>	<b>DEG College-Going Rate</b>	<b>Full Cohort College-Going Rate</b>
2021	17,490 (28.1%)	78.1%	52.8%
2022	17,676 (28.0%)	78.4%	54.3%
2023	19,191 (30.0%)	78.8%	56.7%

<sup>11</sup> Tennessee Department of Education, Early Postsecondary Opportunities, <https://www.tn.gov/education/students/early-postsecondary.html> (accessed June 20, 2024)

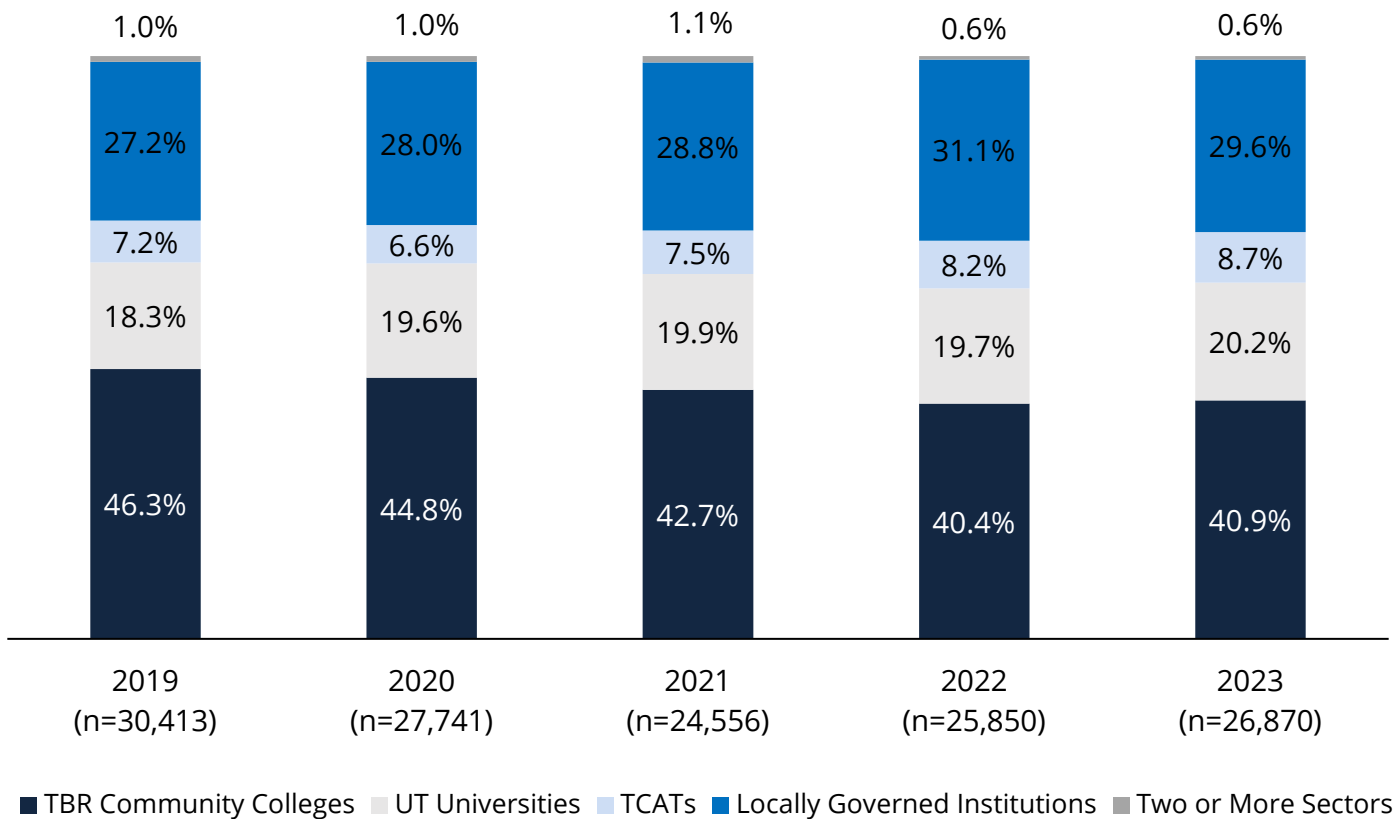
<sup>12</sup> Dual Enrollment Grant records from the Financial Aid System of Tennessee (FAST) were matched to enrollment records in THECSIS to confirm which students in each THEC cohort of high school graduates participated in the dual enrollment grant at any point in their high school years. This is an undercount of dual enrollment participation and of EPSO participation more generally, as not all students who take dual enrollment courses receive the state Dual Enrollment Grant, and not all EPSO participants take dual enrollment courses. For more information about the Dual Enrollment Grant, see <https://www.collegefortn.org/dualenrollment/>.



## College Going by Sector

**Figure 12** shows the distribution of college-going public high school graduates who enroll in Tennessee’s public institutions by system. This is a subset of all postsecondary enrollees. Reversing a trend, a slightly larger portion of the class of 2023 enrolled at Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) community colleges than in the previous cohort. The proportion of the class of 2023 enrolling at Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs) and at schools in the University of Tennessee (UT) system increased compared to the previous class. New this year and available later this summer, THEC plans to introduce heat maps for each in-state, public university, showing which counties’ public high school graduates are found enrolled at each university. While TBR community colleges and TCATs tend to draw enrollment from their local communities, the universities recruit statewide. The heat maps, located on THEC’s website, will show trends in this recruitment of public high school graduates who seamlessly enroll at Tennessee’s public universities.

**Figure 12: Public In-State High School Graduate Enrollment by System**

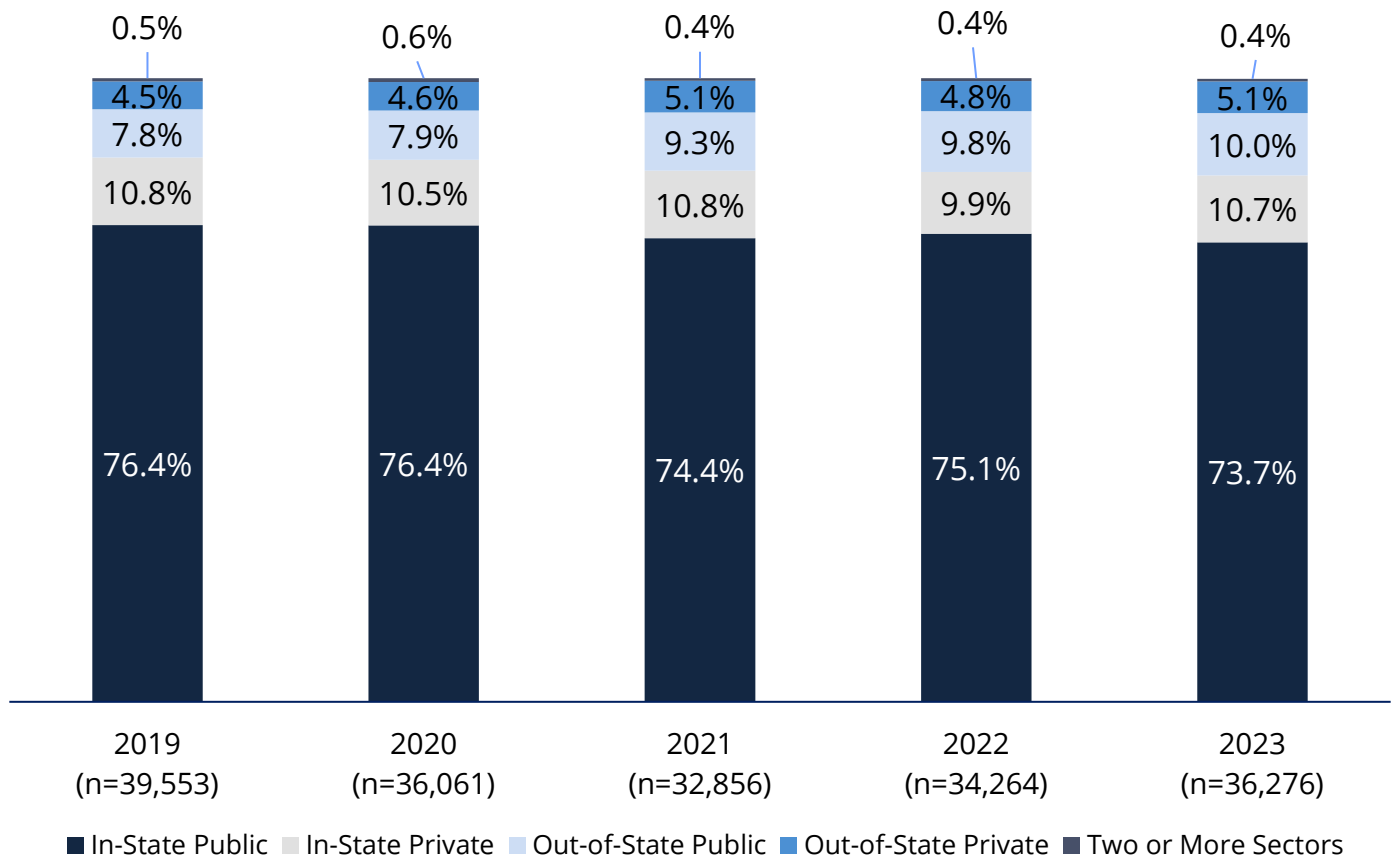


Note: The classes of 2021, 2022, and 2023 include UT Southern in the UT Universities proportion.

**Figure 13** shows the distribution of college-going public high school graduates who enroll in any college according to their sector of enrollment. While the majority of students enroll at in-state public institutions, the class of 2023 has an increased share of enrollments at in-state private institutions compared to the previous cohort, returning to the proportion seen in the classes of 2019 and 2021. The class of 2023 saw a

small increase in the proportion of college goers enrolling in out-of-state institutions, both public and private; this change amounts to fewer than 500 additional students enrolling exclusively out-of-state from the class of 2023 compared to the class of 2022.

**Figure 13: Public In-State High School Graduate Enrollment by Sector**



Note: The classes of 2021,2022 and 2023 include UT Southern in the In-State Public proportion.

**Table 4** shows the top ten states that received enrollments from Tennessee public high school graduates in the class of 2023. Unsurprisingly, when students enroll out-of-state, they are more likely to enroll in states bordering Tennessee. It is also important to note that with the rise of online education, students may not be relocating out-of-state to enroll at these institutions; colleges and universities with robust online course offerings may attract students to enroll without having to relocate. More detail is available in a data download on THEC’s website about which types of institutions (public vs. private, in-state vs. out-of-state, two-year vs. four-year) enroll Tennessee’s public high school graduates.

**Table 4: Top Ten States Receiving Tennessee Public High School Graduates, Class of 2023**

State of Enrollment	Enrollment Count	Proportion of Out-of-State Enrollment
Alabama	933	16.6%
Kentucky	887	15.8%
Mississippi	679	12.1%
Georgia	316	5.6%
Florida	218	3.9%
Virginia	210	3.7%
North Carolina	207	3.7%
Arkansas	202	3.6%
Illinois	161	2.9%
South Carolina	146	2.6%
All Other Out-of-State	1,648	29.4%

Note: Students may enroll at multiple institutions, so out-of-state counts here may duplicate students compared to previous figures.

### ***Class of 2022 Labor Market Outcomes***

Economic conditions presented to high school graduates continue to impact their college-going decisions. Because of data delays, and the need to track longer-term wage outcomes, this section looks back at the high school graduating class of 2022. When the class of 2022 graduated, there was a continued labor shortage, and employers advertised high starting wages for entry-level work. These short-term economic gains are often considered by students when weighing the trade-off of furthering their education. Many have speculated that students were opting to enter the workforce instead of enrolling in college. Parents are also showing increasing support for their recent high school graduates to enter the workforce rather than attending college.<sup>13</sup>

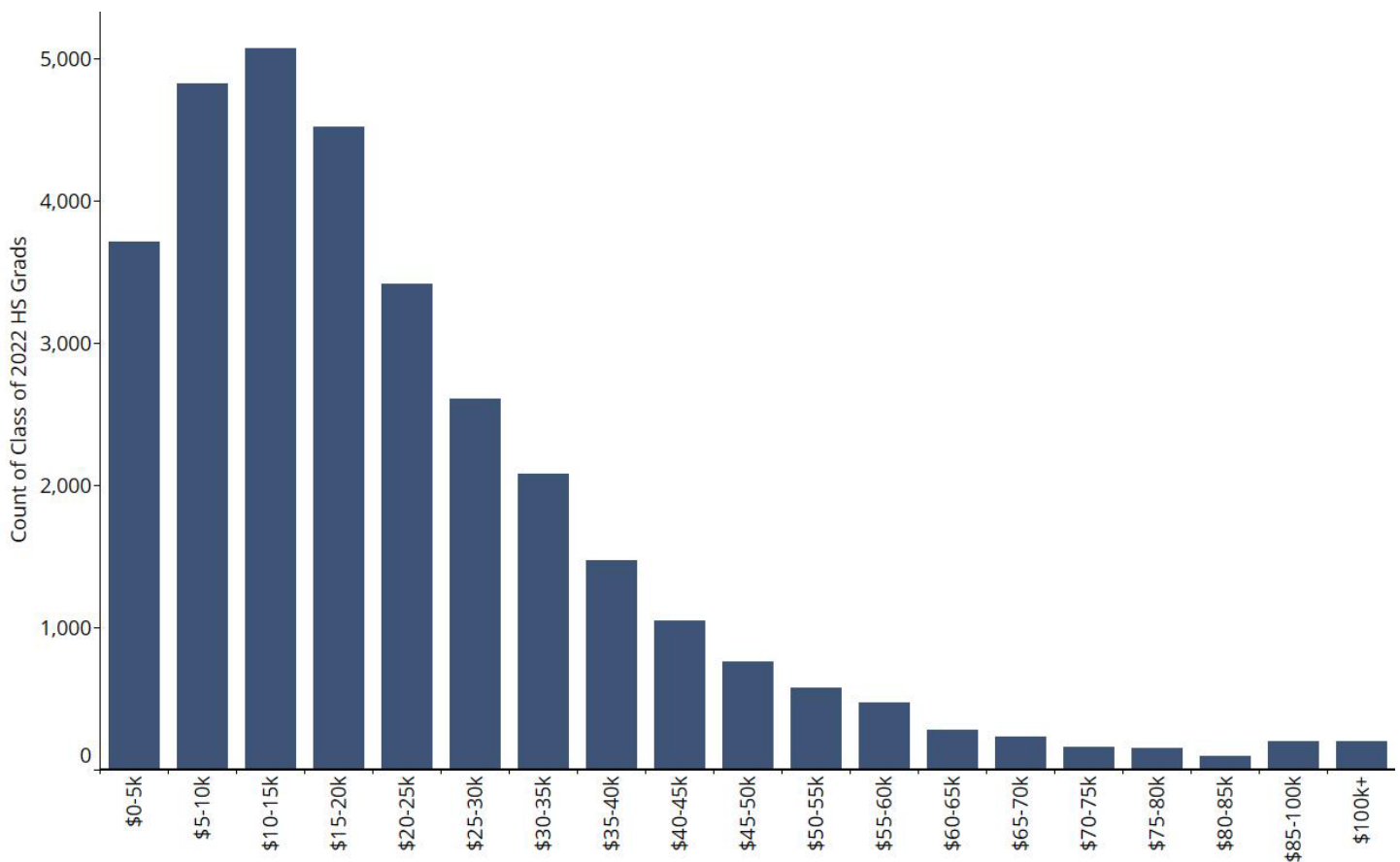
To better understand this issue, data from the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD) was merged with college-going data for the class of 2022 to gain deeper insight on how students who entered the workforce fared. For more information on the methodology used to calculate wage data, see **Appendix B**. To estimate only full-time wages in this analysis, graduates were separated into three groups: those for whom no wage data was found (either because they were not working or because they could not be matched into wage data), those for whom wage data was found but estimated annual wages were less than \$15,080, and those for whom wage data was found and earnings were at or above \$15,080 annually. The \$15,080 threshold approximates full-time work at minimum wage, where minimum wage is \$7.25/hour and full-time work is assumed to be 40 hours a week for 52 weeks in a year. For the class of 2022, 49.5% of students were not found in the TDLWD wage data. These students

<sup>13</sup> Forbes, Why Parents Now Say a Good Career Matters More Than a College Education, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markcperna/2023/06/06/why-parents-now-say-a-good-career-matters-more-than-a-college-education/> (accessed June 22, 2024).

with no wages had a college-going rate of 54.7%, close to the overall college-going rate for the class of 2022 (54.3%). Students may have no wages in the data for a variety of reasons, so definitive conclusions cannot be drawn about the college-going rate for these students.

**Figure 14** shows the distribution of estimated annual wages for all students with wage data. From the 2022 cohort, 13,677 students were found to have wages below the \$15,080 annual threshold. This represents 21.7% of the 2022 cohort. These students with low wages have a 67.2% college-going rate. Finally, 18,205 students (28.8% of the cohort) were found with annual wages that met the \$15,080 minimum threshold. These students had a college-going rate of 43.9%. The difference in college-going rates between the two groups suggests that the students in the group earning below a full-time minimum wage may be more likely to be working part-time while enrolled in college, while those students earning above a full-time minimum wage may include more students who opted to enter the workforce rather than enroll in postsecondary. Additionally, students in this group who did enroll may be working more hours or at higher wages to support themselves or their families while also attending college.

**Figure 14: Estimated Wage Distribution, Class of 2022 HS Graduates**



Note: Includes only high school graduates found with 2022 Q4 and 2023 Q1 wages (n=31,882).

Source: Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development

Compared to the wage analysis of the class of 2021 cohort, more students from the 2022 cohort were found with wages that suggest they are working at least full time at minimum wage; these students may alternatively be working less than full time at the high hourly rates mentioned above. The college-going rate patterns between the two groups of students hold for the 2022 cohort – students earning less than full time minimum wages have a higher college-going rate than students earning at least \$15,080 annually. For both groups, students who were not found seamlessly enrolled in postsecondary education have a higher median wage than students who did enroll. These findings are summarized in **Table 5**.

**Table 5: Wages of 2022 HS Graduates**

<b>Metric</b>	<b>No Wage Found</b>	<b>Low Wage, &lt;\$15,080</b>	<b>Meets Min. Wage, &gt;=\$15,080</b>
Count (Proportion) of Class of 2022	31,231 (49.5%)	13,677 (21.7%)	18,205 (28.8%)
Overall CGR	54.7%	67.2%	43.9%
Median Wage for College Goers	--	\$7,667	\$25,663
Median Wage for Non-College Goers	--	\$9,474	\$28,439

## Conclusion

College-going data for the class of 2023 shows a promising reversal of recent declines; Tennessee's college-going rate increased to 56.7% (**Figure 3**). This represents the largest statewide increase in college-going rate since the implementation of Tennessee Promise, outperforming the increase observed last year between the classes of 2021 and 2022. However, gaps between gender and race/ethnicity groups widened for the class of 2023 (**Figure 8**, **Figure 9**, and **Figure 10**). This, combined with high growth in the college-going rate for White female students, suggests that college-going gains for the class of 2023 were a result of getting students who were more likely to enroll in postsecondary across the finish line. While this is a positive outcome, opportunities remain to focus college access efforts on those groups that are less likely to enroll in college. THEC/TSAC should consider efforts to specifically support students who have historically faced higher barriers to college entry, leveling up to not only help students who are most likely to enroll to achieve their college-going goals, but also ensuring those goals are accessible to all Tennesseans.

New analysis in this year's report highlights college-going gaps between economically disadvantaged students and students who are not economically disadvantaged (**Figure 11**). Future efforts must aim to close this gap. As of June 2024, students statewide have struggled to submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), resulting from Federal Student Aid updates and a delayed release of the 2024 FAFSA. While THEC/TSAC have responded by extending FAFSA filing deadlines, deploying additional student support services, and organizing TN FAFSA Frenzy events through this summer, challenges remain.<sup>14</sup> The class of 2024, particularly students who have traditionally faced high barriers to entry, may see lower postsecondary enrollment rates as a downstream effect of the new FAFSA and resulting delays in receipt of award letters, which provide critical information about financial assistance to go to college. THEC/TSAC should consider how additional support and increased financial aid funding may make postsecondary attainment more feasible for economically disadvantaged students. This may include increased direct support services, campaigns to increase awareness of financial aid opportunities, and advocating for additional financial aid funding, particularly for the Tennessee Student Assistance Award, a need-based grant.

Finally, as Dual Enrollment Grant participation increases, college-going rates for DEG students remain strong (**Table 3**). Further research may explore this link more deeply, but access to Dual Enrollment courses and other Early Postsecondary Opportunities (EPSOs) remains an important tool to promote college access. Recent expansions to the Dual Enrollment Grant should be applauded, but work remains to ensure that EPSO participation is equally accessible to all students across the state. Dual enrollment courses must also sufficiently prepare students to enroll and succeed in college, and all credit earned through these opportunities must be accepted at a student's final postsecondary destination.

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<sup>14</sup> Tennessee Promise FAFSA Deadline Extended to August 1 Allowing More Students to Apply for Crucial Financial Aid, [https://www.tn.gov/thec/news/2024/5/31/fafsa\\_deadline.html](https://www.tn.gov/thec/news/2024/5/31/fafsa_deadline.html) (Accessed June 22, 2024).

## Appendix A: College-Going Rate by County, 2019 to 2023

County	HS Grads, c/o 2023	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Anderson	843	66.2%	62.6%	57.0%	58.7%	64.2%
Bedford	578	48.5%	47.2%	44.7%	43.6%	44.3%
Benton	117	57.9%	51.0%	46.1%	59.6%	58.1%
Bledsoe	110	58.0%	41.7%	35.2%	38.4%	43.6%
Blount	1,245	61.7%	58.8%	54.1%	56.8%	57.7%
Bradley	1,153	65.2%	63.4%	59.1%	55.9%	55.1%
Campbell	308	56.5%	47.3%	46.9%	51.8%	51.3%
Cannon	107	59.5%	45.7%	42.0%	42.0%	43.9%
Carroll	319	63.8%	70.1%	50.5%	55.7%	60.8%
Carter	534	61.4%	57.3%	52.8%	49.5%	52.8%
Cheatham	424	58.1%	56.3%	46.0%	48.9%	51.7%
Chester	158	60.8%	59.0%	51.7%	54.3%	54.4%
Claiborne	261	61.2%	45.8%	50.7%	56.2%	62.5%
Clay	85	62.0%	60.3%	47.9%	48.6%	51.8%
Cocke	307	49.1%	40.2%	38.8%	39.0%	43.6%
Coffee	598	57.0%	52.2%	49.0%	49.0%	55.4%
Crockett	215	64.0%	56.8%	44.0%	53.1%	64.2%
Cumberland	439	53.0%	49.5%	42.1%	45.9%	56.7%
Davidson	4,800	56.9%	51.5%	46.7%	49.5%	50.8%
Decatur	91	78.9%	71.6%	76.1%	58.2%	68.1%
Dekalb	165	53.2%	50.3%	52.2%	54.0%	51.5%
Dickson	532	57.4%	57.6%	51.9%	48.5%	49.2%
Dyer	393	68.0%	66.1%	56.3%	64.6%	66.2%
Fayette	161	55.4%	45.7%	32.6%	43.7%	47.2%
Fentress	154	55.9%	51.8%	50.3%	47.0%	56.5%
Franklin	326	57.3%	56.6%	45.1%	50.5%	56.1%
Gibson	607	63.5%	57.7%	53.0%	53.4%	56.0%
Giles	225	48.2%	48.7%	44.3%	39.8%	47.1%
Grainger	241	56.5%	51.9%	35.9%	44.9%	47.7%
Greene	706	62.3%	57.5%	49.5%	52.2%	55.0%
Grundy	87	54.5%	56.7%	45.0%	52.5%	55.2%
Hamblen	680	64.3%	51.8%	51.2%	49.0%	51.6%
Hamilton	2,719	63.2%	59.5%	54.7%	54.8%	55.9%
Hancock	67	47.3%	53.6%	43.8%	52.3%	46.3%
Hardeman	208	55.1%	46.5%	43.9%	45.8%	46.2%
Hardin	188	51.0%	51.9%	51.3%	61.5%	62.8%
Hawkins	490	60.2%	51.5%	47.4%	47.3%	56.5%
Haywood	194	63.7%	51.4%	41.6%	45.9%	49.5%
Henderson	292	68.9%	65.0%	62.6%	66.0%	65.8%

**College-Going Rate by County, 2019-2023 (continued)**

<b>County</b>	<b>HS Grads, c/o 2023</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
Henry	328	68.9%	52.0%	47.1%	50.2%	51.8%
Hickman	194	66.0%	56.4%	48.9%	49.2%	49.0%
Houston	85	44.1%	40.7%	51.7%	50.0%	42.4%
Humphreys	182	63.6%	55.7%	51.1%	52.6%	49.5%
Jackson	88	50.0%	45.6%	44.3%	39.8%	46.6%
Jefferson	505	52.6%	44.6%	46.6%	49.5%	53.3%
Johnson	481	48.4%	58.5%	53.4%	40.5%	41.0%
Knox	3,935	61.6%	63.7%	59.5%	64.3%	64.1%
Lake	43	62.8%	48.8%	72.5%	62.8%	39.5%
Lauderdale	191	62.2%	47.3%	47.9%	47.0%	49.7%
Lawrence	406	66.5%	59.4%	53.9%	56.5%	52.7%
Lewis	96	57.8%	49.5%	45.5%	61.8%	70.8%
Lincoln	364	65.5%	59.8%	54.1%	56.0%	57.7%
Loudon	486	52.4%	53.9%	43.8%	43.2%	50.2%
Macon	215	56.7%	51.0%	50.0%	43.8%	45.1%
Madison	718	60.5%	54.1%	43.8%	42.3%	47.2%
Marion	272	50.6%	51.4%	45.9%	49.5%	55.1%
Marshall	365	55.7%	50.5%	49.5%	45.8%	51.2%
Maury	747	62.0%	51.6%	48.0%	50.3%	53.8%
McMinn	447	59.1%	50.2%	49.9%	51.1%	47.7%
McNairy	283	65.4%	55.0%	51.0%	50.3%	55.8%
Meigs	110	50.0%	47.7%	55.9%	48.3%	39.1%
Monroe	443	47.2%	42.7%	40.9%	44.0%	43.6%
Montgomery	2,285	53.7%	50.6%	45.4%	49.2%	53.7%
Moore	60	72.7%	80.4%	64.9%	53.2%	70.0%
Morgan	206	59.4%	49.6%	47.6%	48.8%	38.3%
Obion	296	66.4%	55.4%	57.9%	53.1%	52.0%
Overton	211	64.9%	58.3%	51.7%	56.4%	58.8%
Perry	74	85.5%	67.6%	75.5%	64.5%	64.9%
Pickett	41	66.7%	63.0%	73.8%	64.6%	56.1%
Polk	149	53.3%	53.7%	49.3%	48.7%	51.0%
Putnam	799	60.0%	53.0%	50.8%	47.6%	53.4%
Rhea	321	56.4%	54.2%	47.2%	44.1%	45.8%
Roane	359	57.6%	63.3%	52.5%	52.0%	64.1%
Robertson	890	58.2%	48.4%	41.4%	37.2%	46.3%
Rutherford	3,953	63.5%	59.4%	55.0%	56.1%	56.5%
Scott	266	59.1%	51.0%	57.4%	46.0%	59.8%
Sequatchie	132	56.9%	50.0%	54.8%	46.9%	48.5%
Sevier	867	58.6%	50.2%	48.7%	49.8%	55.0%



### College-Going Rate by County, 2019-2023 (continued)

County	HS Grads, c/o 2023	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Shelby	8,557	60.0%	52.6%	49.2%	52.3%	52.8%
Smith	184	57.8%	54.1%	43.9%	53.0%	59.2%
Stewart	140	54.9%	43.6%	39.3%	42.9%	49.3%
Sullivan	1,410	71.8%	62.3%	61.5%	58.7%	60.9%
Sumner	2,067	65.3%	59.0%	53.9%	54.7%	67.1%
Tipton	666	64.3%	60.5%	57.4%	57.0%	57.1%
Trousdale	77	80.9%	58.5%	53.7%	58.0%	66.2%
Unicoi	204	62.7%	57.7%	62.5%	56.6%	63.7%
Union	188	43.9%	44.9%	34.6%	50.3%	49.5%
Van Buren	53	53.4%	52.7%	53.6%	63.5%	52.8%
Warren	420	60.5%	54.9%	52.6%	51.8%	60.2%
Washington	1,185	66.1%	61.8%	53.9%	57.2%	61.6%
Wayne	153	62.8%	56.8%	49.7%	51.2%	54.9%
Weakley	251	69.3%	60.5%	57.3%	57.9%	57.4%
White	260	46.6%	43.5%	40.5%	41.5%	51.5%
Williamson	3,354	84.9%	80.5%	81.3%	81.6%	82.1%
Wilson	1,743	66.7%	65.3%	62.5%	62.4%	64.8%

## Appendix B: Class of 2022 Wage Methodology

The Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development’s unemployment insurance (UI) records were matched to high school graduates from the class of 2022 in quarter four (Q4) of 2022 and quarter one (Q1) of 2023, following their high school graduation.<sup>15</sup> UI data reflects wages earned by employers participating in Tennessee’s UI system. Notably, this excludes self-employed individuals, those employed by the federal government, and those who work outside of Tennessee (an exclusion which may particularly impact students living in border counties close to other states). Waiting two quarters from spring graduation gives graduates time to enter the workforce full-time or to enroll in college, which does not preclude a student from entering the workforce either full- or part-time. These Q4 and Q1 wages were summed and multiplied by two to determine an estimated yearly wage for class of 2022 high school graduates. Graduates must be found employed in Tennessee for two quarters to be included in the wage outcomes. Graduates found in only one quarter of wage data (n=10,066) are not included in annual wage estimates, and those students are included in the group for whom no wage data was found.

<sup>15</sup> Quarter Four of 2022 represents October, November, and December 2022. Quarter One of 2023 represents January, February, and March of 2023.