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Completion grants could help community college students stay on track | Opinion

Short-term pilot-program mini-grants would cover a modest financial shortfall and help Tennessee Promise students avoid dropping out of college.

David Pickler, Guest columnist

A core component of the Tennessee Business Roundtable’s vision for Tennessee is realizing our state’s “Drive to 55” objective — to equip at least 55% of working-age Tennesseans with a post-secondary credential by 2025.

State needs more community college graduates

To achieve this goal, our state absolutely must increase college completion among Tennessee public community college students, a critical stream within our state’s talent pipeline. Tennessee’s ability to staff our increasing number of skilled, well-paying jobs depends heavily upon these students’ ability to earn certificates, diplomas and associate degrees that signify they’ve attained the knowledge and training those jobs require.



Tennessee Promise provides a last-dollar scholarship to ensure affordability does not keep any high school graduate from enrolling in and going to college. Today, however, far too few of our community college students are persisting

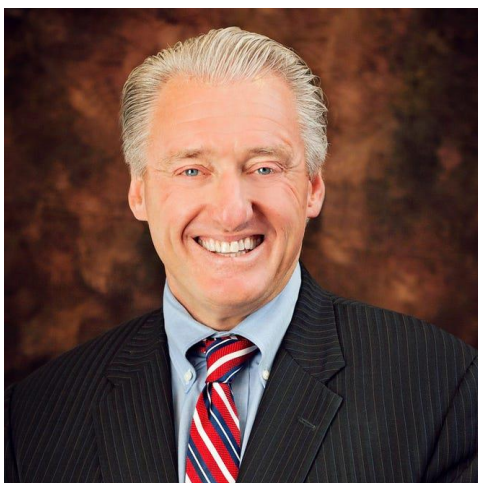
all the way to the finish line. Only 25% graduate within three years, and even fewer low-income students and students of color do so.

We've learned that, after starting down their post-secondary paths, many students are confronted with short-term financial challenges when an unexpected bill arrives, or a laptop or car breaks down. These financial mini-crises are causing too many of them to stop, turn around or get completely off their path to college completion.

A four-year pilot program

To help these students persist to college completion when “life happens,” state Rep. Scott Cepicky and state Sen. Joey Hensley have introduced legislation to provide Tennessee Promise students with short-term, low-dollar “completion grants,” which cover a modest financial shortfall and help students avoid dropping out of class or college altogether. This proposal would launch a four-year pilot program to provide completion grants to Tennessee Promise students experiencing financial hardships that would otherwise prevent them from completing a degree or credential.

Knox Promise shows mini-grants work



Two similar programs have shown that such interventions really work. [Knox Promise](#), which supports Tennessee Promise students in Knox County, has provided students with coaching, advising and similar completion mini-

grants. Data verified by the University of Tennessee's Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research shows that the fall-to-fall persistence rate for Knox Promise completion grant recipients was over 20 percentage points higher than Tennessee's statewide community-college retention rate. Completion grant recipients in Knox Promise were also more likely to earn attempted credit hours than non-completion-grant students. And further south, Georgia State University has provided similar Panther Retention Grants to more than 12,000 students. Of those who received them, more than 86% have gone on to graduate — most within two semesters.

The COVID-19 pandemic created new practical and economic barriers to completion momentum for our students, so the opportunity cost to Tennessee of sub-par community-college completion recently got even higher. With our state now running an estimated nine-figure recurring annual revenue surplus, we shouldn't hesitate to invest a tiny fraction of it in this pilot intervention.

If we mean what we say about wanting Tennessee to lead the nation in education and workforce development, and if we're serious about achieving our state's Drive to 55 objectives, we should test this promising, evidence-based approach to helping Tennessee Promise students overcome and persist when "life happens" along their college completion paths.

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