Panel Handout: Future of Community Colleges - Tennessee College Promise Campaign

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Tennessee Promise, a nationally renowned performance-based scholarship program for eligible high school seniors, was years in the making. Led by Governor Bill Haslam, Tennessee now provides a community college education for all responsible high school graduates. Early outcomes show that the state is lifting the college aspirations of youth by keeping the first two years of college within reach, without the burden of unmanageable debt.

Tennessee Promise is a critical component of the state’s Drive to 55 initiative. Its goal is to equip 55 percent of Tennesseans with a college degree or certificate by 2025. While Tennessee Promise and Drive to 55 are groundbreaking examples of a strong state investment in education, they are just the most recent additions to Tennessee’s historic commitment to the continuous improvement of its education systems.

Senator Lamar Alexander, Tennessee’s Governor from 1979 to 1993, former president of the University of Tennessee and U.S. Secretary of Education, who now chairs the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, prioritized education throughout his distinguished career. Building on his education legacy, Governor Haslam, then mayor of Knoxville, launched the Knoxville Promise in 2008. A year later tnAchieves was formed which houses the Tennessee Promise and related initiatives.

Since its first class of 493 high school graduates from Knox County in 2009, tnAchieves has grown to 54,896 students statewide with the class of 2015 and the birth of Tennessee Promise. These efforts are supported by a combination of state funds and donations, enabling every high school graduate to continue his or her education at a Tennessee community college or Tennessee Technology Center at a minimum.

First year results show that 65 percent of the Tennessee Promise students who chose to attend a community college or one of the Tennessee Technology Centers are first in their family to go to college and 70 percent of participants are from low income families. Both results provide further evidence that the Tennessee Promise is reaching a large percentage of students who would not have previously entered college.

“I am a firm believer in the fact that college changes your life. The Tennessee Promise is making a real difference,” said Krissy DeAlejandro, executive director of tnAchieves.
Tennessee Promise high school students benefit from mentors who help them complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) which funds a large portion of the community college costs for eligible low income students. Tennessee now leads the country in the number of high school seniors completing the FAFSA, another indication of early positive program outcomes.

Tennessee Promise mentors also help students apply for college admissions, serving as trusted partners for high schools and community colleges, answering questions, and supporting students to navigate the admissions process. The mentors also motivate students, reminding them that they can and will succeed in making their college dreams come true. Tennessee Promise students must also complete eight hours of community service to meet the eligibility requirements of the program.

“With tnAchieves I have learned to value education, the benefits that the community can give and the faith the community can have in students who want to receive a degree in Tennessee,” said Timothy “Andrew” Frantz, a Knox County student who participated in the program. “I look forward to the day in which I can work as a mentor for incoming tnAchieves students, so I can express the impact and the success that tnAchieves has had on my life and can have on theirs.”