

Raising the College-Going Rate in Northeast Tennessee



EDWorks Policy Brief

By Laura Higgs Kappel and Patrick Kelly

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For high school graduates, choosing whether or not to go to college is an important decision that will likely impact the rest of their lives. College options in Tennessee include a Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT), a community college, or a four-year public or private college or university. Continuing on the education pathway directly out of high school into a postsecondary institution has many benefits for the student and the region in which the student lives. Benefits for the student include finding a career and professional job, receiving higher long-term earnings than students with only a high school education, having more options for promotions and career advancement, gaining the opportunity for enriching personal and intellectual growth, improving health and longevity, and enjoying many social and cultural aspects surrounding campus life (Carnevale et al., 2013; Colavito et al., 2023; Ma and Pender, 2023; Matherly, 2023; Wycoff, 2024). For the region, the benefits include a more educated citizenry, a larger pool of potential workers, and greater creativity, research, and innovation from college graduates in the workforce. Local colleges also promote the local economy by providing jobs and opportunities for the people of the region.

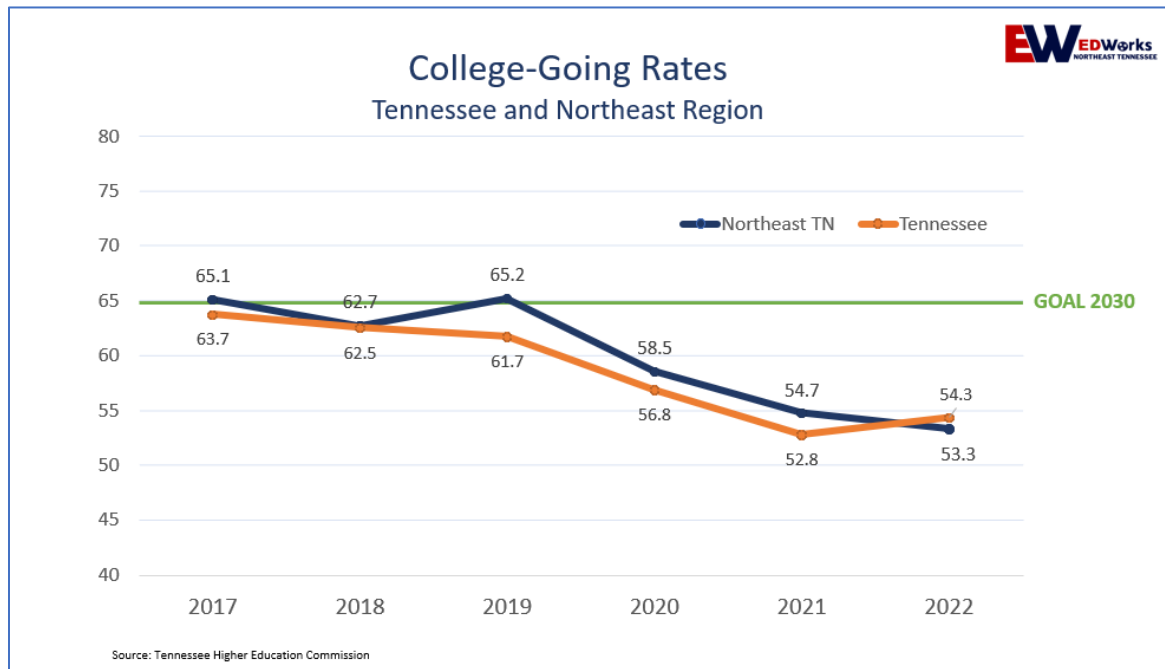
The timing of when to go to college is another important factor. The advantages to attending college directly out of high school include the opportunity to receive state financial aid, such as in the Tennessee Promise program; greater support services from high school and college counselors; continuity in education that keeps students' skills sharp and their momentum high; a greater likelihood of going to college compared to students who take time off; and the opportunity to begin a career and find a professional job earlier in life.

College-Going Rate in the State and Northeast Tennessee Region

Because a college education leads to enriched lives, and the time after high school graduation is a critical period in the education pathway, EDWorks seeks to improve the college-going rate for the nine counties of Northeast Tennessee. EDWorks has set a goal of having a regional college-going rate of 65% by 2030. The college-going rate (CGR) is an indication of the portion of high school students who enroll in college in the semester immediately following high school graduation. In Tennessee, state education organizations have set goals for the college-going rate. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), in their report "Momentum Year 2023" announced the goal for the high school class of 2023 to have a 60% CGR (THEC, 2024). An increased CGR is one step in the state effort to reach the goals of the "Drive to 55" campaign put into place in 2013 by Governor Bill Haslam to "get 55 percent of Tennesseans equipped with a college degree or certificate by the year 2025" (Tennessee Board of Regents, n.d.).

The data for the college-going rate is currently available from the Tennessee Higher Education Commission up through 2022, with the state CGR at 54.3%. That figure represents an increase from the 2021 rate of 52.8% but a much lower rate than the 63.7% of 2017. Since that time, the trend has been primarily going down, with the exception of the slight increase in 2022 (THEC/TSAC, 2022). The decreases in 2020 and 2021 can be partially attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Compared to the state college-going rates, the rates in Northeast Tennessee are lower for 2022 at 53.3% compared to the state rate of 54.3%. Prior to 2022, the CGR in Northeast Tennessee was slightly above the state rate, as shown below:



College-Going Rate by County in Northeast Tennessee

College-going rates vary substantially across the region. The nine counties which make up the Northeast Tennessee region for EDWorks include Carter, Greene, Hamblen, Hancock, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington. According to THEC's 2022 data broken down by counties, the highest CGR in the EDWorks region is 58.7% in Sullivan County, which also has the highest number of high school graduates. Five counties had a CGR of 50% or above: Greene, Hancock, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington. The lowest CGR for 2022 was in one of the region's most rural counties, Johnson County at 40.5%.

County	CGR for 2022
Carter County	49.5%
Greene County	52.2%
Hamblen County	49.0%
Hancock County	52.3%
Hawkins County	47.3%
Johnson County	40.5%
Sullivan County	58.7%
Unicoi County	56.6%
Washington County	57.2%

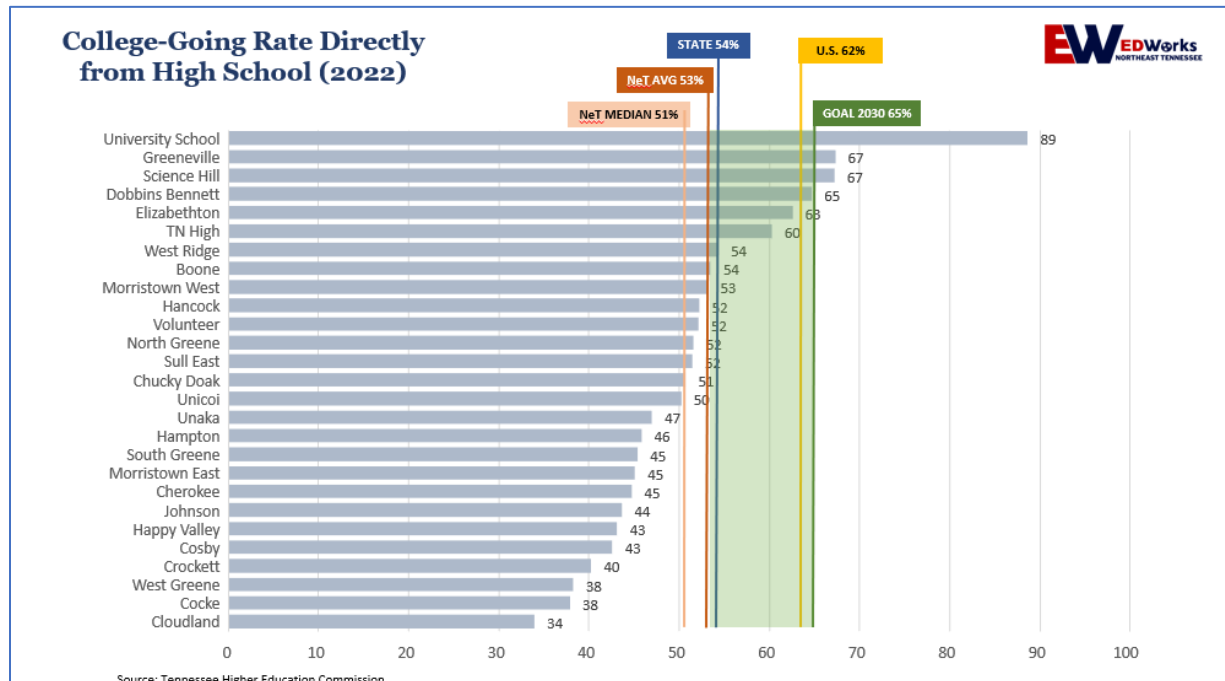
These rates can be compared to previous years, starting in 2017. The following chart shows the CGR by county in Northeast Tennessee from 2017 – 2022 and, for perspective, the number of high school graduates in the class of 2022 (THEC, 2023).

College-Going Rate by County (Highlighted data show increases from previous year)								
County	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Number of H.S. graduates 2022*	Number of high schools in 2022*
Carter	62.4	57.8	61.2	57.7	52.8	49.5	532	5
Greene	59.9	57.5	62.3	57.5	49.5	52.2	645	5
Hamblen	66.6	61.3	64.3	51.8	51.2	49.0	675	2
Hancock	57.4	50.0	47.3	53.6	43.8	52.3	65	1
Hawkins	58.4	58.2	60.2	51.5	47.4	47.3	456	3
Johnson	46.3	64.5	48.4	58.5	53.4	40.5	151	1
Sullivan	69.1	68.1	71.8	62.3	61.5	58.7	1385	3
Unicoi	77.5	64.9	62.7	57.7	62.5	56.6	175	1
Washington	68.1	64.5	66.1	61.8	53.9	57.2	1214	4
							Total: 5298	Total: 25
* These numbers do not include the students in online or virtual academies in the respective counties.								

Compared to the rates of 2017, the rates of the class of 2022 are lower across the board, with the biggest drop being -20.9% in Unicoi County. Other large decreases were -17.6% in Hamblen County and -12.9% in Carter County. Only three counties showed increases in 2022 compared to 2021: Greene (+2.7%), Hancock (+8.5%), and Washington (+3.3%). The CGR declined in the other six counties. Six of the nine counties showed increases in 2019, and the other three showed increases in other years (Hancock in 2020, Johnson in 2018, and Unicoi in 2021). None of the counties showed increases in more than two of the six years. The EDWorks region overall experienced a decline in the CGR with around only half of the high school graduates continuing on to college immediately following high school.

College-Going Rate by High Schools

The variation in CGRs is even wider at the high school level. The chart below displays the CGRs for each of the high schools in the region.



Note: The CGR rates by high school from THEC do not include the online and virtual learning academies.

Four high schools in the region were at or above the CGR of 65% in 2022:

- Greeneville High School of Greene County at 67%
- Dobyns-Bennett High School in Sullivan County at 65%
- Science Hill High School in Washington County at 67%
- University School of Washington County at 89%.

Eleven high schools had a CGR between 50-64%. Eight high schools had a CGR between 40-49%, and two high schools had a CGR below 40% (THEC, 2023).

Differences in the location of high schools can affect the CGR, particularly with some high schools in more densely populated areas and others in more rural settings. College-going rates are typically higher in areas with greater access to and more opportunity for postsecondary education. Challenges that some rural students may face when considering college include less access to early post-secondary experiences such as dual enrollment and advanced placement courses and longer distances to travel to higher education institutions. Additionally, many rural students may come from families that do not have a tradition of attending college or an

expectation that their children will attend, and students from this background may be the first generation in their family to even apply to college, creating a new set of challenges.

The size of the school may also have a significant impact on the college going rate since the enrollment (or the choice not to enroll) in college of just a few students from a smaller high school may make a more substantial difference in the CGR than that same number of students from a larger high school.

Barriers to Attending and Completing College

In addition to the challenges that rural students may face, all students face different barriers that may inhibit their decision to attend college. According to a 2024 report by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation, the biggest barrier for students considering going to college is the cost, with 85% of the over 14,000 students in their survey who do not have a degree saying that the cost of college was either very or moderately important in their decision to enroll or not. The students surveyed were divided into three categories: currently enrolled, stopped out, or never enrolled. The next three barriers were, in order of top ranking: work conflicts, mental health and emotional stress, and the extensive time commitment. Other reasons in rank order were ease in finding a well-paying job, insufficient options for remote learning, personal mental health reasons, the belief that a degree is not valuable and/or a lack of interest, and caretaking for children or adult family members (Gallup and The Lumina Foundation, 2024). Barriers students face may range from the very practical, including cost, transportation, or childcare, to the psychological, such as lacking the confidence to succeed in college, to the sociological, as in students coming from homes where a college degree was not valued or was considered unnecessary for a good life. First-generation college students, for example, often need additional support to navigate the college system and to be successful in their classes, and in many cases, they do not complete their degrees.

EDWorks College-Going Rate Goal

EDWorks seeks to reduce some of these barriers for students and to make going to college the first choice of students graduating from high school. For the class of 2022, there was a total of 5,298 high school graduates in the nine counties and 25 high schools, not including online and virtual academies. Of those graduates, 2,761 entered college in the fall semester following graduation. That creates a regional CGR of 52%. To reach the goal of 65% using the same number of high school graduates, there would need to be a total of 3,444 high school graduates entering college, or an increase of 683 students.

Conclusion

EDWorks of Northeast Tennessee aims to promote a college-going culture and to increase the college-going rate to 65% by 2030 with the larger goal of improving the educational levels, professional career opportunities, and quality of life for the people of Northeast Tennessee. EDWorks plans to facilitate this increase by promoting the value of going to college, by creating more opportunities for high school students to participate in dual enrollment courses leading to college enrollment, by creating clearer pathways from high school to college and to careers, by

presenting college and career options to students as early as elementary and middle school, and by advocating for policy changes that make it easier and cheaper for high school graduates to make the choice to go to college.

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