

Fulfilling the Promise:
Creating a New Community College for Tennessee

By: Starr Rhee, Class of 2021

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Dr. Manja Klemenčič

Affirmation to Honor Code:

I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code.

Starr Rhee

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Starr Rhee", written in a cursive style.

Abstract

Tennessee community colleges have cracked the code on student access to higher education, but they still lag behind in completion rates, making the state's ambitious Drive to 55 goal difficult to attain. This paper investigates what it would look like for Tennessee to create a new public community college that was suited to the needs of students and employers in a post-COVID-19 world. It also investigates the logistics of such an endeavor. The paper employs a mixed-methods, primarily qualitative approach that includes interviews, investigation of successful alternative models, and a review of institutional data, state laws, and community college budgets. Ultimately, the research asserts that Tennessee's community colleges are currently coming up short of meeting the needs of the state's students and employers. Alternative, innovative models with proven track records should instead be implemented at a new two-year public institution to later be expanded throughout the Tennessee Board of Regents Community College system. Establishing such a college is both feasible and necessary to meet the state's goals and to best serve its residents.

Introduction

Tennessee has become a groundbreaker in the world of higher education through its Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect programs which provide free community college and technical school to all of the state's residents. Since 2015, the Tennessee Promise program has been functioning as a last dollar scholarship program for all Tennessee residents, regardless of income level, as they pursue an associate degree at an in-state community college or professional credentials at a technical school. Similarly, the Tennessee Reconnect program covers tuition and mandatory fees for adult learners to return to school. Both Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect are in service of the Drive to 55, a goal for the state of Tennessee to have 55% of its residents equipped with a degree or credential by 2025 (Drive to 55 Alliance, 2018). Since 2008, Tennessee's higher education attainment rate has risen 13.9%, and it now sits at 45.2% (Lumina Foundation, 2019).

Despite this tremendous growth and the bold vision for the future of Tennessee, the realities of the Tennessee Promise have been lagging behind in some respects. While students now have *access* to a free education, few end up completing their degrees. In fact, a report released by the Tennessee Comptroller in the Summer of 2020 reveals that the state is likely not on track to meet the Drive to 55 goal based on current graduation growth rates (Podesta, et al.,

2020). Data from current Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) community colleges are striking. Six-year graduation rates, for what should be a two-year degree program, stand at just 33.2%. For Black students, that number is just 14.9% (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020). This data reveals that while Tennessee has made incredible strides in improving student access to higher education, there is room for growth on student degree attainment, especially with regard to improving the services provided to marginalized students.

Even prior to the pandemic, Tennessee had a window of opportunity for improving community colleges, but the necessity to rethink higher education has become all the more essential in a post COVID-19 world. New data reveals that out of all higher education institutions, community colleges across the United States have been hit the hardest by the pandemic with enrollments dropping nearly 7.5% (Redden, 2020). Yet despite this fact, new survey data also indicates that the pandemic has caused students to rethink their values in seeking out higher education; students now value employability, affordability, and flexibility over the traditional college experience (Populace, 2020). A report from SCORE, an education reform organization in Tennessee, found that postsecondary degrees improved job security significantly in the state of Tennessee during times of economic downturn (SCORE, 2020). Now more than ever, community colleges are perfectly positioned to serve the needs of students and businesses during uncertain economic times. Yet, it is often difficult for these institutions to meet the changing demands caused by the pandemic and the shifting workforce environment. Ultimately, many community colleges remain stagnant, structured in a way that makes it difficult to innovate or respond to new student needs due to bureaucratic barriers and a lack of financial resources. Thus, my research seeks to answer the question: what would it look like to create a new public community college for the state of Tennessee that was equipped to meet the needs of students and employers in a post COVID-19 world? How would one go about organizing and funding such an institution in order to best serve the needs of the state?

Literature Review

Very little peer-reviewed, academic literature exists surrounding the question of how a new college or community college ought to be formed. Thus, my research seeks to fill a hole in the literature by systematically undertaking a question that is typically left to policymakers. Without an academically rigorous study surrounding current higher education flaws, best

practices, and pathways forward, any new community college is likely to repeat the same mistakes of past institutions.

While little literature exists on the formation of new community colleges, there has been extensive work done on community colleges more broadly that can guide future research. Zamani-Gallaher (2016) credits community colleges with being responsible for the massification of higher education. The original purpose of community colleges was to democratize access to higher education by providing an affordable two-year option that would focus on career education. This model was expanded massively in the 1940s by President Harry Truman's Commission Report, focusing on serving World War II veterans (Zamani-Gallaher, 2016). As community colleges have come to be known as affordable and accessible options, they have also come to serve more diverse student populations, accounting for more than half of all Native American, Black, and Latinx students enrolled in higher education (Zamani-Gallaher, 2016). While American community colleges were once seen as a radical innovation (Brint & Karabel, 1991), they are now a standard part of the higher education system, suffering from many of the same shortcomings as traditional four-year universities, as discussed below. Thus, while my research is inspired by the original innovative spirit of the community college, it also seeks to address some of the needs and shortcomings plaguing the current system.

The research is clear and consistent: higher education is in crisis, or at the very least facing a moment of reckoning. Christensen and Eyring (2011) outline some of the factors contributing to this crisis, highlighting issues including rising tuition, student debt, lack of government funding, poor employability of graduates, and disruption from technology; all of which have only worsened in the decade since publication. This idea that higher education is reaching a moment of crisis is well documented and supported by other scholars (Blumenstyk, 2014; Lucas, 1998). While different scholars point to various reasons for this crisis, whether that be stratification (Davies & Milian, 2016), marketization (Polster, 2016; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), globalization (Van Damme & Van der Wende, 2018), inequality (McDonough & Miller, 2016), or something else, there remains a general consensus that higher education faces some serious challenges in the 21st century. I argue that these challenges are only amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic; as colleges and universities switch to online education, the value of a traditional college degree is increasingly called into question. This moment of crisis highlights

the importance of my research; as the status quo falls short, it becomes necessary to imagine a new type of higher education institution.

While few scholars have written on the *logistics* of forming a new higher education institution, many scholars have highlighted the *need* for a new or innovative system, delving into the question of alternative or non-traditional higher education. Christensen and Eyring (2011) have written the book *The Innovative University*. In addition to highlighting the failings of the current system, Christensen and Eyring also call for a restructuring of the “DNA” of higher education, and they ask the question, what new and innovative models are possible to respond to this impending crisis? Staley (2019) has written extensively in his book *Alternative Universities* about the need for higher education to radically reimagine itself. He poses various bold questions for new models in higher education to encourage readers to rethink what is possible for the modern college and university. Similarly, in *DIY U*, Kamenetz (2010) critiques the world of higher education as failing its students, especially marginalized students, and saddling them with debt. She also argues that the time is now to reimagine the delivery of higher education. All of this literature points to the need for new and innovative delivery models for higher education, something that my research hopes to expand upon. Combining the literature on the purpose and potential of community colleges with the literature on the need for higher education innovation, my research provides concrete steps forward for the creation of a new type of community college that responds to 21st century needs.

Methods

For this research, I took a primarily qualitative approach, via a variety of data sources, to understand what a new community college in Tennessee should look like and the logistics of how it would operate. I have three major sub-questions that guide my research and divide it into streams. My first question is, what are the shortcomings of community colleges in Tennessee in the status quo? To answer this question, I have two major data sources. First, I conducted expert interviews with two recent community college students and two Tennessee higher education policy thinkers. My questions for the recent students focus on their experiences and the ways they were supported or lacked support throughout their time in community college (see more in Appendix 1.1). My questions for the policy thinkers focus on how TBR community colleges serve the state’s political and economic goals, and whether they view Tennessee’s community colleges as innovative or capable of adapting to new needs (see more in Appendix 1.2). Upon

completion of my interviews, all of the interview transcripts were coded according to an inductive process developed after evaluating commonly mentioned themes (see Appendix 1.4 and 1.5). In addition to conducting interviews to answer this sub-question, I also reviewed a report produced by the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury's Office that was published in summer of 2020 (Podesta, et al., 2020) as well as data from the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR Office of Policy and Strategy, 2018).

My second stream of research aims to answer the question, what are community college best practices or innovations that could make a new institution more successful? According to metrics of success including graduation rates, graduation rates for marginalized student populations, transfer rates to four-year institutions or job placement rates, and national recognition, I identified 10 successful community colleges that might be emulated in a new institution. These institutions are: Western Kentucky Community and Technical College, Indian River State College, Miami Dade College, Lake Area Technical College, Walla Walla Community College, Broward College, Santa Fe College, Santa Barbara City College, Valencia College, and Odessa College. After identifying these models of success, I then determined the structural and programmatic innovations that these institutions have in common as well as some unique features that might be worthwhile to explore in a new community college. For more details on the community colleges selected, see Appendix 3.1.

My final stream of research focuses on the logistics of opening up a new community college. For this portion, I attempt to answer the question, how are community colleges established and funded? In order to answer this, I reviewed the operating budgets of three of the previously identified successful community colleges: Western Kentucky Community and Technical College (Appendix 3.2), Walla Walla Community College (Appendix 3.3), and Odessa College (Appendix 3.4). These colleges were selected because their sizes most closely resembles that of TBR community colleges and they each service small to medium sized cities that might better represent Tennessee's communities than major metropolitan areas. I also reviewed the Fiscal Year 2020-2021 Tennessee Budget (Appendix 4.2). This helped me to craft a framework on how a new community college might be financed. Additionally, I reviewed the Tennessee Code Annotated (Appendix 4.1) to determine how new public institutions must be approved and accredited in the State of Tennessee. All of my three research streams ultimately come together to detail the state of community colleges in Tennessee, offer recommendations for

a new model based upon best practices, and outline tangible steps forward in the creation of a new community college.

Limitations

It is important to recognize that there are limitations in the methodology employed in this paper that restrict the conclusions that can be drawn from the research. First and foremost, this paper employs a unique methodology in order to explore an issue that has historically been untouched in academic spaces. This methodology does not attempt to make causal claims surrounding what factors enhance or detract from the success of a community college. Rather, it seeks to use descriptive evidence to highlight potential areas for improvement within the community college system and *one* example of a potential pathway forward for creating a new community college. This research is rooted in experiential evidence in order to offer a policy recommendation.

The interviews conducted for this paper are not meant to be reflective of the experiences of all community college students or the opinions of all higher education experts in Tennessee. Only four total interviews were conducted. These interviews are meant to offer a deeper, more humanized perspective on many of the numerical assessments made on community colleges across the state. These interviews were assessed in conjunction with state-issued reports in order to ascertain the current state of community colleges in Tennessee. These interviews are just one of many data sources used in this paper, intended to put into context some of the ways in which Tennessee's community colleges might be improved in order to tangibly impact the lives of students. It is important to note that all of the interviewees highlighted in this paper came from personal contacts. Thus, it is possible that interviewees shared similar opinions to me. However, I attempted to mitigate this fact by not sharing any personal opinions with my interviewees during our interview process and drawing from several different positions and perspectives. Ultimately, I do not use interview data to draw conclusive assessments, but rather to show individual experiences and perspectives.

Statement of Positionality and Ethics

Throughout my research procedure I attempted to be aware of, and to the best of my ability mitigate, my own positionality as a researcher. It is necessary for me to note that I am a student at Harvard University, which is a highly resourced and well regarded private, four-year university. I have never been a community college student, and I am unable to fully understand

all of the unique experiences of community college students and the challenges that may afflict current community college administrators. With that said, I attempt approach my research without a sense of judgement or hierarchy. The reason I have chosen to research community colleges is because I admire their work and importance in our society. I do believe there are ways community colleges could better serve students, but I also believe there are ways that all colleges, including universities like Harvard, might better serve their students. My hope is that my research will serve as one potential model to improve existing community colleges, rather than being a mechanism to exclusively highlight flaws. It is my intention that my research be rooted in the real-life experiences of the students who I speak to and the higher education experts I interview, all of whom are better positioned to explain the needs of community college students than I.

Although my research is not regulated by the IRB, as it does not fall under the federal definition of regulated research, I have attempted to abide by research best practices throughout my process. I have taken a training course on ethical research through Harvard's Committee on the Use of Human Subjects. All of my interviewees received an interview consent form which informed them of the purpose of this research and their rights as participants (see Appendix 1.3). Interviewees were given privacy options and informed that they may at any time revoke participation in my research without negative repercussions. I have chosen to anonymize the interviews conducted with both of the community college students I interviewed in order to maintain their privacy.

Findings

Sub-Question 1: What are the shortcomings of community colleges in Tennessee in the status quo?

Data from the Tennessee Board of Regents indicates that Tennessee community colleges are struggling to get students to the finish line of graduation. In 2016, the three-year graduation rate for all Tennessee community colleges was 25.3%, meaning that 3 out of every four students enrolled in a TBR college was not on track to graduate within 150% of usual time. For some schools like Southwest Tennessee Community College, that three-year graduation rate drops to just 13.7%. Across all TBR community colleges, Black students have a three-year graduation rate of 12%, and for Black men, that number is just 9.3% (TBR Office of Policy and Strategy, 2018). In short, just 1 out of every 10 Black men that enrolls in community college will receive

or a degree or credential within 3 years. These numbers are striking. Despite community college being free in the state of Tennessee, attending college still comes with a massive opportunity cost of forgoing employment, not to mention other tangible costs such as transportation and books. Students take a financial risk in attending college, and TBR community colleges are not currently providing a strong guarantee that that investment will pay off.

A report published in Summer 2020 by the Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury reveals that though higher education attainment results would appear to be rising at an appropriate pace to achieve the Drive to 55, the annual growth rate since the first year is only “0.93 percentage points. If this level of average annual growth continues in the future, Tennessee will not reach the Drive to 55 goal by 2025” (Podesta, et al., 2020, p. 97). The only reason growth rates appeared to be on track to meet Drive to 55 goals was because certificates started to be included in attainment rate figures in 2014, but since this year, growth rates have been insufficient to meet the Drive to 55 goal. In short, unless the number of students receiving degrees and credentials each year meaningfully increases, Tennessee will not meet its higher education goals. Improving graduation and credentialing rates might require thinking through an entirely new model to support students throughout their college process.

In addition to highlighting this gap in attainment, the Comptroller’s report also highlights some other inequities and shortcomings of Tennessee Promise in the status quo. For example, though 83% of Black students in the state of Tennessee applied to Tennessee Promise, only 15% ultimately became Promise Scholars (Podesta, et al., 2020, p. 37). Similarly, students from low-income backgrounds were less likely to become Promise Scholars, and the average household income of Promise Scholars was about \$80,000 a year, far above the state’s median household income (p. 39). The report also highlights that there remains a meaningful portion of students in the state who live 30 or more minutes away from their nearest Promise-eligible institution (p. 57-62). What this data highlights is that while many marginalized students (students of color, poor students, rural students) across the state consider enrolling in higher education, many do not ultimately make the choice to enroll. If we are going to credential 55% or more of the Tennessee population, it is essential that marginalized students are recruited and then supported throughout their time in college. A new community college model might be better suited to serve the needs of marginalized students across Tennessee.

The data on the shortcomings of Tennessee's community colleges in the status quo is underscored by the data gathered in my interviews. I conducted two student interviews with recent community college students who will be referred to as student 1 and student 2 for anonymity. Student 1 attended Nashville State Community College for two non-consecutive semesters. During her first semester, she had just given birth to her baby who was in the NICU, and she was also working full time while taking night classes. Student 1 expressed frustration at the inconsistencies and inflexibility of her professors as she attempted to navigate school, work, and being a single mother. She also noted that when she attempted online classes, it was nearly impossible to receive feedback from her professors, "I would email a professor asking, like, 'Hey, is there a rubric for the class? ... Can we turn in a draft?' And like, whatever question it would have been, and it would take me two weeks of consistent tormenting of a professor, to get them to respond" (Student 1, personal communication, November 11, 2020, Appendix 2.1). Student 1 highlighted the importance of her adviser throughout her time enrolled, but she noted that experiences varied widely, and the school largely expected students to seek out their own supports, though this was difficult for many first-generation students who lacked guidance. Ultimately, student 1 ended up dropping out of school for the foreseeable future because neither in person nor online classes worked for her. She found the in-person classes inflexible and the quality of the online classes lacking. Throughout the whole process, she lacked supports from professors and opportunities for engagement with her school community.

Student 2 told me about a completely different community college situation. Student 2 was enrolled at Walters State Community College in East Tennessee. She remarked that Walters State seemed like her only option coming from a rural high school, and she never felt that she had choice throughout her college experience. Throughout her time at Walters State, student 2 had many different advisors, requiring her to constantly re-explain her situation. Advisors at Walters State were not subject specific, so they lacked expertise in her course load, "They generally knew what I had to take to graduate at Walters State. But they knew very little about other colleges or exactly what will transfer and what will not" (Student 2, personal communication, November 11, 2020, Appendix 2.2). Student 2 felt that any time she needed supports, she had to seek them out herself. However, the trouble for student 2 really began when she transferred to the University of Tennessee Knoxville after signing on to the Tennessee Transfer Pathway. Despite being guaranteed that all of her credits would transfer, she found out

upon arrival at UT that 8 of her credits counted for nothing. After taking the time to petition all of her credits, 4 were accepted, and she had to enroll during the summer to remain on track to graduate. “Anytime you would talk to people... they would almost shut me down immediately. Like, ‘your credit is transferred.’ Yeah, they transferred but they count for absolutely nothing... It’s sort of screwed me over in a way because I have all these credits now, and I’m losing my scholarships because I [technically] have enough credits to graduate right now” (Student 2, personal communication, November 11, 2020). Ultimately, student 2 felt that she had been the victim of bad advising and a lack of supports, both at Walters State and UT; she had to be her own advocate and always fight for things that should have been guaranteed.

Some common themes emerged in my interviews with both of the students I talked to. Both students referenced the importance of advising and the pure luck of the draw in receiving a good advisor, they both mentioned that supports had to be actively sought out, that there was pretty significant variability between professors in terms of quality and classroom policies, and that they felt their school was underfunded and under-resourced (for coded interview transcripts, see Appendix 2.1 and 2.2). One observation I made in both interviews was that the students seemed hesitant to critique their school, and they would preface some of the negative feedback they gave. Both students also seemed wary to make big structural changes when asked about what they would want to see in a new community college. I hypothesize one side effect of the Tennessee Promise is that students not feel entitled to the same quality of education or supports that they would if their college education were not free.

In addition to conducting student interviews, I also conducted two interviews with Tennessee education policy thinkers, Dr. Russ Wigginton and Drew Kim. Dr. Wigginton is the Chief Postsecondary Impact Officer for SCORE, an education advocacy and research non-profit in Tennessee. Dr. Wigginton is also the former Dean of Students and a former professor at Rhodes College in Memphis, TN. Dr. Wigginton notes that despite the tremendous accomplishments of Tennessee community colleges, especially with regards to the Tennessee Promise, many of these institutions are not designed to innovate or serve as a “true destination” for students (Russ Wigginton, personal communication, November 16, 2020). He feels that Tennessee community colleges do not have the infrastructure in place to pilot new ideas or to invest in their own version of “research and development.” When it comes to meeting employer needs in the state, Dr. Wigginton says, “we’re probably at a C plus or B minus, at best.” He feels

that higher education and the business community do not communicate, and they certainly do not communicate in the same language. When asked what his ideal community college would look like, Dr. Wigginton wants a focus on helping incoming students become independent thinkers, and he wants all students to write more. In a world of educational trade-offs, he also thinks it is important for students to have hands on experience in the workplace. Ultimately, he wants to see a community college that is truly rooted in *community*, constantly seeking feedback to meet the needs of the community it is in in order to become a true and viable destination for all students.

Drew Kim shared some similar sentiments to Dr. Wigginton on the current state of Tennessee community colleges. Kim is the former Policy Chief of Governor Phil Bredesen, he is a professor of practice at Vanderbilt University, and he is a partner and founder at P3 consulting which works on education-related goals in Tennessee. Like Wigginton, Kim remarked that higher education is not functioning well from the “consumer-client-student perspective” at any higher education institution. The model is relatively arcane and difficult to adapt (Drew Kim, personal communication, November 21, 2020). Instead, Kim wants to see a data driven higher education system that offers fewer options, but these options should be highly tailored to the local economy and offered via a more effective delivery model. Kim believes COVID-19 has given higher education the push it needs to reimagine its systems and evolve.

Altogether, my interview data brought to light some interesting thoughts and concerns about the current community college system. My student interviewees tended to focus on the material- course policies, advising, quality of courses, and access to resources. My interviews with policy thinkers tended to focus on systems and visions- that higher education institutions in Tennessee lack innovation or may not build the skills employers need, often not at the fault of the institutions themselves, but because higher education is structured in a rigid way. Though my interviews are not meant to serve as a representative sample by any means, it is of note that there was a consensus among interviewees that there is a lot that community colleges do to serve Tennessee, but there is also a lot of room for improvement. Ultimately, this section highlights the room for growth in Tennessee’s current community college system. Community colleges in this state face many difficulties including lower funding levels and serving a diverse range of students who often have high need levels. All across the state, there are amazing educators and leaders who are working in the best interests of their students. All of my interviews confirmed that there are many positives to Tennessee’s community college system. Rather than arguing that

Tennessee community colleges are in some way “failing” in the status quo, this section seeks to highlight major areas for improvement. To build a new college from the ground up that is set up with student and employer needs at the forefront, allows the state to test and develop a trusted model that other Tennessee community colleges may then adapt to fit their own community and vision, further supplementing the work already being done.

Sub- Question 2: What are community college best practices or innovations that could make a new institution more successful?

Throughout my research process, I identified 10 highly successful community colleges in order to determine common innovations and organizational structures that might inform the creation of a new community college. Detailed assessment of each of these colleges may be found in Appendix 3.1. Through the process of researching each of these schools, I identified **nine** major interventions and programs that were consistently visible across these colleges. I have divided these supports into three major categories: classroom/instruction reforms, advising/out-of-classroom reforms, and post-graduation-centered reforms, each of which will be described below. By focusing on supporting students academically, social-emotionally, and in their journey as members of society, many community colleges have successfully created student-centered models that get students to graduation and success in their lives after college.

First off, many schools had a focus on instruction and classroom-centered reforms. The three most common innovations in this regard were 1) a focus on introductory and remedial work, 2) a focus on critical thinking and literacy in *every* classroom, and 3) intensive professional development for professors. Many schools noticed that introductory classes and remedial classes were the best indicators of how students would perform throughout their time in community college and whether they dropped out. Indian River State College decided to invest heavily on “gateway” Math and English courses whose success rates are closely monitored (“Student Achievement Data”). Some colleges also used introductory classes as an opportunity to teach students life and study skills. For example, Valencia College used its mandatory Algebra class as a place to make all students develop an educational plan and learn organizational and study skills (The Aspen Institute, 2011, p. 9). In addition to a focus on introductory and remedial courses, many colleges reformed curriculum so that critical thinking and literacy were central to every class’s objectives. West Kentucky Community and Technical College, for example, placed a focus on “21st century literacy” in all of their classrooms, even their mechanical and technical

courses, so that all students could read and comprehend information critical for their intended field of work (Wyner, 2015). Similarly, Lake Area Technical Institute focuses on “critical thinking, and oral and written communication” in every single classroom (The Aspen Institute, 2017, p. 6). Finally, many colleges placed an emphasis on faculty professional development to ensure cohesion among courses, alignment with college goals, and universally implemented support structures for students. Miami Dade College and Santa Fe College implemented universal professional development programs to teach faculty how to implement classroom reforms and support marginalized students (The Aspen Institute, 2019, p. 15; The Aspen Institute, 2015, p. 6). These within-classroom supports ensure that students are having a strong academic experience that helps them develop important life and work skills.

The second major innovation bucket is centered on advising and out-of-classroom reforms. In this area, most noticeable were: 4) guided pathways and meta-majors, 5) in-depth academic and career advising systems, 6) data-driven work and data flagging systems, and 7) student resource supports. Guided pathways are ways for students to know exactly which classes they need to take in order to graduate, without any guesswork, and meta-majors divide majors into broader categories that share common classes, allowing students to change majors later in their college career without falling behind and having to take extra time in school. Nearly every college I identified had either guided pathways or meta-majors (or both), allowing their students to have easy pathways to graduation. The Aspen Institute considers guided pathways to be one of the most essential reforms to boost community college completion (“Guided Pathways,” 2018). In addition to guided pathways and meta-majors, which serve as templates to reach graduation, most successful community colleges also place an emphasis on advising. Santa Barbara City College, for example, assigns every student to an academic counselor who they are required to meet with to set a plan for their personal journey to graduation, this advising system is also deeply integrated to connect students to career counselors and mental health counselors when necessary (“Academic Counseling”). A report by the Center for Community College Student Engagement called advising, “the most important student service that colleges offer” (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018, p. 1). Right alongside advising systems, many colleges are choosing to integrate detailed data systems into their student supports. These systems keep track of student performance not only to improve teaching, but also to identify students who are struggling. Santa Fe College set up a data-alert system which kept advisors in

the loop about which of their students were struggling with things like grades and attendance to intervene with students before they fell too far behind or dropped out (The Aspen Institute, 2015, p. 8). Finally, many colleges focused on providing supports to students with external issues that can get in the way of being successful in school. Indian River State College operates a food pantry, professional clothing closet, and offers emergency micro-grants to their students (The Aspen Institute, 2019, p. 12). Childcare is another area where colleges can alleviate external stressors for students (and even faculty). Together, these supports outside of the classroom pave the pathway to graduation for students by supporting them as unique individuals throughout their journey.

Finally, most successful community colleges focus on post-graduation reforms. Namely, 8) workforce partnerships and apprenticeship programs, and 9) established transfer pathways. Workforce partnerships are mutually beneficial for community colleges and local communities, creating direct pathways to jobs for students while allowing employers to shape the direction of curriculum to meet their needs. Miami Dade College has a paid apprenticeship program that gives students designated mentors in their fields of interest (“Apprenticeships,” 2020). At Lake Area Technical Institute, local employers work with the college to assess and shape curriculum (The Aspen Institute, 2017, p. 7). And at Walla Walla Community College, the school constantly evaluates jobs available in the local community and allows that to shape the academic direction of the school (The Aspen Institute, 2013, p. 13). While providing skills for post-graduation employment is essential, many students would rather transfer to four-year universities. Thus, it is also essential to have established partnerships with four-year colleges that allow for smooth transitions for students. For example, Santa Fe College has shared majors with the University of Florida which means that credits transfer easily, and students have fulfilled all the same requirements as their peers at UF (The Aspen Institute, 2015, p. 7). Valencia College has guaranteed admission for their students at University of Central Florida who meet minimum requirements; the two schools also have joint advising and shared pathways for a smooth transition (“DirectConnect to UCF”). Ensuring that students have a smooth transition into the workforce or the four-year college of their dreams is essential to ensuring that a student’s time at community college was worthwhile.

Ultimately, the identified community colleges highlight some incredibly promising and common-sense reforms that ensure student success during and after their time in community

college. I highlight nine innovations in particular: 1) a focus on introductory and remedial work, 2) a focus on critical thinking and literacy in *every* classroom, 3) intensive professional development for faculty, 4) guided pathways and meta-majors, 5) in-depth academic and career advising systems, 6) data-driven work and data flagging systems, 7) student resource supports, 8) workforce partnerships and apprenticeship programs, and 9) established transfer pathways. Many of these reforms directly respond to some of the concerns highlighted by my interviews, and they might address gaps in graduation rates seen in Tennessee. Though each of these reforms show successful results, what they really highlight is an approach that focuses on meeting student and community needs. Having an adaptable approach that can adjust to distinct student circumstances or a changing local labor markets helps to maintain the viability and long-term success of a college. Rather than being dedicated to tradition, the school is dedicated to the specific needs of the people they serve in the current moment. That is why creating a new community college for Tennessee makes so much sense; inspired by these successful models, an innovative and student-centered culture can be established from the very beginning rather than working through existing systems.

Sub-Question 3: How are community colleges established and funded?

The final piece of the puzzle, after establishing areas for improvement in the existing community college system and identifying best practices from other successful models, is ironing out the logistics of how a new community college would come to be. After reviewing the Tennessee Code Annotated, specifically TCA 49-7, “The Higher Education Authorization Act of 2016,” (Appendix 4.1) it is under the jurisdiction of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) to authorize any new higher education institutions in the state of Tennessee. Under TCA 49-7-2005 section a), sub-section 2), THEC may, “Receive, investigate as it may deem necessary and act upon applications for authorization to operate postsecondary educational institutions and applications for agent's permits.” The Commission sets the standards for operating in the state of Tennessee, but TCA 49-7-2006 sets up minimum standards for authorization; this section essentially mandates that higher education institutions abide by the law, remain truthful, and offer “adequate” credentialing, resources to students, and facilities. TCA 49-7-2008 outlines the steps for a university to apply for authorization, primarily that institutions submit an application to THEC with all necessary materials (see Appendix 4.1 for more).

In addition to applying for authorization, any public institution must also secure public funding from the state of Tennessee, via usual budgetary processes, in order to operate. Thus, I reviewed current Tennessee allocations for higher education in order to understand the financial resources directed towards community colleges. For the fiscal year 2020-2021, the Governor's recommended budget allocated \$643,777,300 towards the state's 13 public community colleges (Lee, 2020, p. B-130). This is an \$17,828,000 increase from fiscal year 2019-2020. It is of note that this budget does not include the higher education capital maintenance, which is allocated separately, thus this budget is meant to cover operating expenses. Though I was unable to locate the operating budgets of each of the 13 TBR community colleges due to a lack of online documentation, this would roughly allocate a budget of \$49,521,330 per community college. While this budget is almost certainly not evenly divided, as each college serves a distinct number of students, this rough estimate gives an understanding of the kind of public funding that community colleges in Tennessee receive.

Understanding the budgetary allocations given to Tennessee community colleges helps to establish the financial feasibility in creating a new community college. I, thus, also investigated the budgets of three of the previously identified "successful community college models." West Kentucky Community and Technical College has an operating budget for fiscal year 2020-2021 of \$30,036,500 (Box, 2020); Walla Walla Community College has an operating budget of \$33,476,307 (Hickox, 2020); and Odessa College has an operating budget of \$51,171,749 (Clark, 2020). All of these colleges serve between 2,000 and 9,000 students, which is almost exactly the same student enrollment range that the TBR community colleges have (TBR Office of Policy and Strategy, 2018). More details about each of these budgets can be located in Appendix 3.2-3.4. However, what is of note is that these colleges operate within a budget range that is comparable to that of Tennessee's community colleges. Also of note, in each of these budgets, "Instruction" makes up the largest expenditure, "Institutional Support" is the second largest expenditure, and "Student Services" makes up the fourth largest expenditure for each. This pattern potentially highlights similar priorities between the school's budgets. Thus, we can assume that if the state of Tennessee were willing to invest proportionally in the creation of a new community college, there is potentially sufficient funding for programs like those seen at some of the most successful community college models in the country if budgeting priorities are similar to these colleges. Of course, startup costs for a new college are high, and capital

allocations are not considered in this evaluation, however, long term, this could be financially sustainable for the state, especially considering the consistent increase in higher education spending over time.

Conclusion

My research reveals three key findings in considering the establishment of a new community college for the state of Tennessee. The first finding is that Tennessee's community colleges are currently not living up to their full potential. Graduation rates, especially for marginalized students, are lagging behind. My interview data reveals that some students feel a lack of support throughout their time enrolled, which may be related to low graduation rate. And, the established model does not allow much room for colleges to innovate or transform. This reinforces what the literature has already established, the status quo of higher education is falling short; it is falling short of being the change agent that community colleges were originally intended to be. The second finding of my research is that there is a consistent pattern among successful community colleges of similar types of innovations and interventions. While I am unable to causally demonstrate the effectiveness of any of these interventions, these shared systems demonstrate a willingness to innovate and adapt to meet student and community needs. Any of these programs could be adopted in Tennessee, but the innovative spirit of these colleges may be best fostered from the ground up in a new institution that can set its own culture. Finally, my third finding is that it is logistically feasible to imagine a new community college in Tennessee. State law clearly delineates a system and authority for new higher education institutions in the state to be established and authorized. Additionally, the state budget would indicate that if funding were proportionally allocated to a new community college, similar programming to some of the country's most successful models could be attained.

COVID-19 has brought to light some of the holes in our higher education system. As the country grapples with economic recession and the realities of online education, now more than ever, people are wondering what value a college degree holds. Community colleges are unique institutions that are meant to service non-traditional student and be an accessible on-ramp to higher education more broadly. Yet many community colleges have fallen into the same patterns and experience similar difficulties to traditional four-year institutions. In what could be a moment of reckoning, Tennessee has the opportunity to take the best of innovative models around the country and adapt these processes to meet the current needs of our state. It is possible

to build a new college from the ground up that has a culture of innovative and adaptability. Coupled with a strong need to serve students and community, this institution could reshape the landscape of higher education. The time to reimagine how we deliver a college education is now.

Guide to Further Research

This paper is meant to serve as a first step in imagining a new community college for the state of Tennessee, but there is much remaining work to be done in order to make this vision a reality. First and foremost, more logistical research needs to be conducted into the exact costs, including capital investments, for establishing a new community college. Additionally, it would be worthwhile, not only for Tennessee community colleges, but for all colleges, for more causal research to be conducted on what types of programs and interventions directly lead to higher graduation rates and student success outcomes. It would also be beneficial to cast a larger net in receiving feedback from current and former Tennessee community college students to understand in a more representative sample, how people feel about their community college experience and what types of supports they would want to see in a model. These are just a few of many directions that futures researchers might explore in order to build upon this paper and work towards a community college model built to serve students and employers in the 21st century.

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