

An Investigation of the Factors Contributing to Tennessee Promise Use and College Choice  
Among High School Seniors At a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee.

By

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the factors contributing to Tennessee Promise use and college choice among high school seniors at a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee. The sample consisted of twelve recent high school graduates from the rural school used in this study. The participant interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to allow participants to share their personal experiences. The researcher designed interview questions to; (a) understand perceptions of the Tennessee Promise scholarship; (b) determine if the Tennessee Promise scholarship was being used upon graduation; (c) determine any barriers preventing participants from accessing the scholarship; (d) determine what factors played a role in the decision-making process of the study participants. Data were analyzed using inductive analysis process. The results yielded the following themes: a) the Tennessee Promise Scholarship is being used by recent graduates from the county school used for this study, b) the TN Promise fills a financial need amongst participants, c) the application process and program requirements can be too burdensome for some students, d) a connection between Career and Technical Education Programs and the Tennessee Promise, e) a preference of four-year institutions over two-year institutions, f) the vital role school counselor's play in preparing high school students to pursue their post-secondary goals. The results suggest that schools target students no later than the beginning of their junior year in high school regarding available post-secondary opportunities. This information process will enable the students to understand the academic, social, and cost differences between two-year and four-year institutions. Future research should use larger populations and include both rural and urban schools to determine college choice factors.

*Keywords:* last-dollar scholarship, two-year program, educational barriers

## **Dedication**

To my wife Meredith, thank you for always being there for me throughout all of my educational adventures, your sacrifices have not gone unnoticed. Lasty, I would like to thank my family and friends for all your encouragement and kind words throughout this entire process.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

The Tennessee Promise scholarship is a scholarship program designed to help more Tennessee high school graduates attend college. The Tennessee Promise was unveiled in 2014 and implemented in 2015 as part of Gov. Bill Haslam's Drive to 55 campaign (Drive to 55 Alliance, n.d.). Haslam's Drive to 55 campaign had a goal that by 2025, 55% of Tennesseans will have earned a postsecondary degree or certificate.

The Tennessee Promise is a last-dollar scholarship that allows recent high school graduates the opportunity to complete an associate's degree or certificate program free of tuition and mandatory fees at a public community college, a Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT), or a public or private university with an eligible associate's degree program (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020a). The Tennessee Promise is a last-dollar scholarship, meaning it covers in-state tuition and fees not covered by Pell Grants, Hope (lottery) scholarships, or other state-offered student assistant funds for students. Requirements for seniors to receive the Tennessee Promise are: Apply to the Tennessee Promise by the deadline, complete the FAFSA, attend one mandatory meeting coordinated by a county's partnering organization, complete eight hours of community service, and enroll in a community college or technical school the fall semester after senior year.

The federal government labels 72 percent of the nation's land area "rural," yet it is home to only 14 percent of the population, and rural schools educate just 18 percent of the nation's public-school students (Pappano, 2017). The college attainment gap between rural and urban students is widening (Crain, 2018). National Student Clearinghouse data show that 59 percent of rural high school graduates enroll in college the following fall compared to 62 percent of urban

high school graduates and 67 percent of suburban high school graduates (Crain, 2018). These margins are exacerbated by lower persistence and completion rates, with data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showing that only 29 percent of college enrollees are rural students compared to 48 percent from cities (Crain, 2018). Income and education levels play powerful roles in how different groups within the country view the earning potential derived from a four-year degree (Cann, 2018). The Tennessee-based National Rural Education Association notes that, in addition to other problems, rural areas contend with drug and mental-health issues, poverty, and a lack of high-speed access to the internet (Marcus & Krupnick, 2017). Other barriers include cost and the potential for culture shock due to a lack of familiarity by going from a small town to a university that may have 20,000 students.

A poll from NBC News and the Wall Street Journal finds that Americans are becoming more skeptical that a four-year college education is worth the cost (Cann, 2018). The national survey of social trends found that 49 percent of Americans agreed with the statement that a four-year degree “is worth the cost because people have a better chance to get a good job and earn more money over their lifetime.” But about the same share, 47 percent, said that a degree is not worth the cost “because people often graduate without specific job skills and with a large amount of debt to pay off” (Cann, 2018).

The study’s focus was Tennessee Promise and the variables that influence college choice for high school seniors at a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee. Tennessee Promise has enrolled over 88,000 students since its inception in 2015. In that time, it has helped Tennessee students cover over \$115 million in college costs (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020a).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In 2014, Randy Boyd, TN Achieves board chairman, and senior advisor on high education to Governor Bill Haslam, helped create and launch the Drive to 55 (Tennessee Achieves, n.d.). Concerning Drive to 55, the goal was to get 55 percent of Tennessee students equipped with a college degree or certificate by 2025. 39 percent of Tennessee adults currently possess a postsecondary credential, up from 32 percent in 2014 (Tennessee Achieves, n.d.). For the county school system used in this study, recent data shows that only 27.3 percent of high school graduates have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, and that 28 percent have either an associate's degree or some college (Tennessee Education Data, n.d.). The Tennessee Promise was created as part of the Drive to 55 to make higher education accessible to all Tennessee high school seniors regardless of income or zip code (Tennessee Achieves, n.d.). Therefore, it warrants us to explore the relationship between the Tennessee Promise and college choice among rural schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors contributing to Tennessee Promise use and college choice among high school seniors at a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee. This study's findings will contribute to the scholarly research related to college choice and factors that influence the college choice decision, such as knowledge of the Tennessee Promise program, parental influence, and other available scholarships. Recent high school graduates were interviewed for this study to understand their perceptions of the Tennessee Promise scholarship, and to determine if the Tennessee Promise scholarship is being used upon graduation.

### **Research Questions**

1. How was the Tennessee Promise Scholarship utilized, and what factors contributed to student usage?
2. What factors (if any) played a role in students choosing not to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship?
3. What similarities and differences exist between students who chose to use or chose not to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will seek to understand and identify potential barriers that may be discouraging students from utilizing the Tennessee Promise scholarship. This study may also be of particular interest to high school faculty, counselors, and administration to understand the role(s) they play or need to be playing to benefit students in postsecondary education opportunities. This study will hopefully lead to more answers regarding a relatively new education initiative (the Tennessee Promise), and help shed light on any potential issues that may hinder usage of the program.

### **Definition of Terms**

Last-dollar scholarship – A scholarship that pays the remaining balance of tuition and mandatory fees after all other scholarships, grants, and gift aid has been applied (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020a, p. 9).

Lottery scholarship – A statewide scholarship that is funded by state lottery ticket sales. Lottery scholarships pay a portion of student tuition and fees (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2012, 2014; Menifield, 2012).

*Two-year program* – For the purpose of this study a two-year program refers to associate’s degree programs (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Handel, 2011) or certificate awards. Students are required to enroll in a two-year program to be eligible for Tennessee Promise (Tennessee Promise, 2016).

*Parental influence* – For the purpose of this study, parental influence will refer to encouragement to attend a specific institution offered by parents based on parental college choice, geographic location, or finance (Rocca, 2013; Workman, 2015).

*Financial nexus* - The relationship between college choice and persistence based on financial aid, cost of living, and perceived affordability.

*Educational Barriers* - Any financial, systematic, or practitioner failure resulting in an impediment to the success of a student.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Due to the nature of a qualitative study, there were some limitations. Covid-19 has severely affected the interview pool for this project. Access to some students was not possible in some cases due to inability to contact them, scheduling issues, or safety concerns.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is divided into five chapters. The first chapter includes the introduction, context of the issue, problem statement, research questions, the study’s significance, limitations and delimitations, and definitions of terms. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature with a specific focus on scholarship programs such as lottery scholarships and community college initiatives. Research on factors in college choice is also reviewed. Chapter 3 includes explanations and procedures for the study such as the research questions, a detailed data collection method, analyses, ethical considerations, reliability, and validity. Chapter 4 is an

overview of the results from data analyses. Chapter 5 includes the discussion of results, implications for policy and practice, and suggestions for future research.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors contributing to Tennessee Promise use and college choice among high school seniors at a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee. This chapter begins with a look at the history of Career and Technical Education (CTE) in Tennessee, and the impact Career and Technical Education programs have had on college enrollment due to Tennessee Promise's availability. Next, this chapter provides an overview of the Tennessee Promise program, a look at prior programs from other cities within Tennessee, and similar programs from other states. This chapter will conclude by looking at the role high school Counselors play on college enrollment, and exam rival programs (Knox Promise, ETSU Promise Plus, and the University of Tennessee Promise). These programs have been implemented to compete with Tennessee Promise, and look at a new initiative (The Tennessee Reconnect) created for adults from the Tennessee Promise model.

#### **Career & Technical Education**

##### **History**

The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 was the first authorization for Federal funding of vocational education, and later transitioned to the Vocational Act of 1973. The Carl D. Perkins Act of 1984 was introduced and intended to help the US economy by increasing technical education quality. The Carl D. Perkins Act of 1984 was reauthorized into the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act in 1990. It has been reauthorized three more times, mostly recently in 2018. The Act aims to develop academic, career, and technical skills of secondary and postsecondary students who enroll in career and technical education programs.

## **Career and Technical Education in Tennessee**

In Tennessee, workforce development through high-quality career and technical education programs and training is critical to long-term success (Tennessee Dept. of Education, 2020). It is the mission of the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) to “set all students on a path to success,” and for many Tennessee students, career and technical education serves as that pathway (Tennessee Dept. of Education, 2020). Tennessee's Career & Technical Education consists of 16 nationally recognized career clusters with the ultimate goal of preparing students for success at the postsecondary level and in their chosen careers (Tennessee Dept. of Education, n.d.b.). CTE provides a pathway for students beginning in early and middle grades and progresses through secondary and postsecondary into aligned occupations.

CTE classes help high school students explore career options, remain engaged in school, gain quality skills, and prepare for further study in postsecondary education (Hudson & Laird, 2009). CTE programs develop essential employability and technical skills while providing opportunities for students to demonstrate readiness. This readiness occurs by attaining industry credentials, work-based learning experiences, and/or postsecondary credit hours through early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs) (Tennessee Dept. of Education, 2020). Tennessee students can earn college credit by taking CTE dual enrollment courses in the career field of their choice like medical terminology, welding, programming, robotics, and cyber security (Northeast State, n.d.).

In April, 2020, Governor Bill Lee’s office issued the State Plan for the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, which outlines the implementation of career and technical education in Tennessee. The Strengthening Career and Technical Education

for the 21st Century Act, otherwise known as Perkins V (Act, Legislation), was signed into law by President Donald J. Trump on July 31, 2018. This bipartisan measure reauthorized the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 and provided nearly \$1.3 billion in annual federal funding to support CTE for our nation's youth and adults. Tennessee is leading the way nationwide in post-secondary education initiatives, including Governor's Investment in Vocational Education (GIVE) program, Drive to 55 initiative, and the Tennessee Promise Scholarship program.

To expand access to vocational and technical training for Tennessee high school students, Governor Lee created the Governor's Investment in Vocational Education (GIVE) initiative. The GIVE initiative invests \$25 million in competitively awarded community grants that fund regional partnerships between high schools, industry, and Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs). The purpose is to build new work-based learning/apprenticeship programs, market-driven dual-credit opportunities, and expand industry-informed career and technical education offerings (Hensly, 2021).

### **Career and Technical Education Impacts**

Career and Technical Education bridges the gap between learning in the classroom and competencies needed in the industry to ensure that students are ready to be productive members of the workforce (Cornelius, 2017). CTE programs are engaging and provide hands-on training and learning. These programs allow students to learn job-specific skills and provide direct pathways to future careers or training programs. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute wanted to know whether students who participated in CTE classes and those that concentrate (complete three or more classes in a career cluster) were achieving better outcomes than their peers. The

study reviewed data on high school students in Arkansas, and their report concluded that high school students do benefit from taking career and technical education courses (Street, 2016). According to the report, students with greater exposure to CTE courses were more likely to graduate, enroll in a two-year college, be employed, and earn higher wages (Street, 2016). The report also concluded that the more CTE courses students take, the better their education and labor market outcomes. Even students that only took one CTE course were found to have a greater chance of graduating from high school and enrolling in a post-secondary institution the next school year (Street, 2016). 81% of high school dropouts say relevant real-world learning opportunities would have kept them in school (iCEV).

Research has shown that 93 percent of high school students in CTE programs graduate on time, significantly higher than the national rate of 84.6 percent (Cornelius, 2019). In Tennessee, CTE overall returns \$2 for every \$1 invested. At the secondary level, CTE program completers account for over \$13 million in annual tax revenue (ACTE).

### **Early Post-Secondary Opportunities**

Tennessee provides students an unprecedented opportunity to pursue education and training beyond high school through the Tennessee Promise and Early Post-secondary Opportunities (EPSOs). EPSOs include a course and/or exam that give students a chance to obtain post-secondary credit while still in high school (Tennessee Dept. of Education, n.d.). Early post-secondary opportunities include dual enrollment courses, advanced placement classes, and industry certification through college, career, and technical education (Paykamian, 2020). Thanks to early post-secondary opportunities, students can get a head start on their post-secondary credits while still in high school. EPSOs allow students to become familiar with

postsecondary expectations to develop skills for success in post-secondary learning (Paykamian, 2020). Early post-secondary opportunities ensure that students are ready to take full advantage of the Tennessee Promise and succeed in education and training after high school (Tennessee Dept. of Education, n.d.).

### **Tennessee Promise**

In the fall of 2015, the state of Tennessee enrolled its first class of Tennessee Promise Scholarship recipients at 13 community colleges and 27 colleges of applied technology across the state (Milam, 2019). Tennessee Promise was designed to address two problems: Tennessee's low college graduation rates compared to surrounding states, and the lack of a skilled workforce for the changing economic environment (Bekele, 2019). Tennessee Promise was created as part of the Drive to 55 to make higher education accessible to all Tennessee high school seniors (Tennessee Achieves, n.d.). Drive to 55, the goal was to get 55 percent of Tennessee students equipped with a college degree or certificate by 2025. Drive to 55 was created to make college more affordable and accessible to Tennessee's families and enhance graduate earning potential and attract employers who need an educated workforce (Office of Governor Bill Haslam, 2015).

The Tennessee Promise provides students with last dollar funding at any eligible two-year institution (Bekele, 2019). It provides aid to cover any remaining tuition and fees after applying to all other financial aid sources a student receives (Bekele, 2019). Tennessee Promise requires students to meet with a mentor and complete 8 hours of community service per semester or job shadowing (Meehan, et al., 2019). Tennessee Promise funding is available for five semesters or two and a half years (Hightower, 2019). Over 88,000 students have been enrolled in Tennessee Promise since implementation in 2015. Almost 6,000 Tennessee Promise students have transferred to a Tennessee public university to continue their education. Tennessee Promise

2020 annual report data shows 42% of Cohort 1, 35% of Cohort 2, and 22% of Cohort 3 have earned an award as of summer 2019.

### **Tennessee Promise Funding**

Tennessee Promise awards are funded by the interest generated from the Tennessee Promise scholarship endowment fund and excess Tennessee Education Lottery funds (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020a). TCA § 4-51-111(b)(3) states that a minimum of \$100 million must remain in a reserve account to fund Tennessee Education Lottery Scholarships (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020a). As of December, 2019, the Tennessee Promise endowment fund was at 361.1 million dollars (Meehan, et al., 2019). Tennessee Promise has enrolled over 88,000 students since its inception in 2015, and helped Tennessee students cover over \$115 million in college costs (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020a).

### **Student Requirements**

For students to qualify for the Tennessee Promise, they must meet certain requirements by specific deadlines. The requirements include attending mandatory meetings during the senior year of high school and the first semester of college, meeting filing deadlines for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), meeting application deadlines to the community college or applied technology college, and complete 8 hours of approved community service (Milam, 2019). Tennessee Promise students are paired with a mentor to guide them through the post-secondary application and enrollment processes (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020a). The mentorship and community service components are coordinated by two privately funded partnering organizations across the state: tnAchieves and the Ayers Foundation (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020a).

Students must begin at a post-secondary institution in the fall directly following high school graduation and remain at an eligible institution for consecutive semesters. Other student requirements include: maintain at least 12 hours each semester, attend a post-secondary institution for consecutive semesters, complete the FAFSA annually, maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA each semester, and complete 8 hours of community service each semester. If a student misses a deadline for the Tennessee Promise, or withdraws from all classes during the semester, they are no longer eligible for the program (Milam, 2019 & Tennessee Promise, n.d.a).

### **Effects of Tennessee Promise on Affordability and Access**

Since the inception of the Higher Education Act of 1965, there has been a substantial investment to strengthen educational resources of the colleges and universities by providing access to financial aid, including subsidized grants and student loans to qualified post-secondary students to remove barriers and increase access to a more significant number of institutions (Cabrera et al., 1990). Financial aid and rising tuition cost have been a significant factor in student perception of affordability and student ability to complete college (Astin, 1975).

Research for Action has studied statewide Promise programs since 2017 with in-depth analysis in four states—Delaware, Nevada, Oregon, and Tennessee (Meehan et al., 2019). Tennessee Promise has expanded access to college for students across the entire state. High school and college students have reported that Tennessee Promise encouraged them to attend college and made it more affordable (Meehan et al., 2019). Although Tennessee Promise does not cover college's full cost, it covers enough to put college within reach. Students have also reported that Tennessee Promise provides a more affordable pathway to a four-year degree by attending a community college for two years tuition-free before transferring to a four-year college or university (Meehan et al., 2019).

Many federal, state, and institutional policy makers tout free-college programs as solutions to addressing college affordability challenges (Poutre & Voight, 2018). However, other studies have found that programs like the Tennessee Promise miss the students most in need. The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) performed an analysis of two state free-college programs, Tennessee Promise and New York's Excelsior Scholarship. The results show that to help low-income students afford college, free-college programs must be designed with equity at their core (Poutre & Voight, 2018). The State of Free College: Tennessee Promise and New York's Excelsior Scholarship report found that neither Tennessee Promise nor the Excelsior Scholarship allocate scarce state funding to the students with the greatest need. The research found that both programs do little to remove affordability barriers for low-income students, and instead allocate limited funding to middle- and, in the case of Tennessee, high-income students (Poutre & Voight, 2018).

IHEP identified opportunities to target existing programs better and recommends these programs invest in low-income students first. Next, these programs should fund non-tuition expenses for low-income students, support existing state need-based grant programs, and include four-year colleges and universities in free college programs (Poutre & Voight, 2018).

### **Effects of Tennessee Promise on Success**

Research suggests that Promise programs increase college enrollment with most of the new enrollment, eligible students concentrated at in-state, four-year institutions. Tennessee Promise provides support to all Tennessee Promise students, including those that do not qualify for Tennessee Promise (Miller-Adams & Smith, 2018). All Tennessee Promise students receive a mentor and have access to support made available within the program so long as program requirements are met.



Data from the College System of Tennessee reveals that the first Tennessee Promise cohort had a higher number of students earn a community college degree or certificate. The first cohort (fall 2015) had a graduation rate of 21.5% through five semesters compared to 13.8% of the fall of 2014 class (Locker, 2018). The number of students who earned a degree or technical certificate through five semesters increased from 1,790 in the 2014 cohort to 2,857 in the 2015 TN Promise group, a 60 percent increase (Locker, 2018). The first cohort had a 52.2% success rate compared to 49.9% of the 2014 group. The success rate is defined as students who graduated, transferred, or were still enrolled in community college through the five semesters (Locker, 2018).

However, some Promise students find the program requirements too burdensome, and have reported that some supports provided under Tennessee Promise are not worth the effort. The mentoring and 8-hour community service per semester requirement have been cited as not worth the effort to maintain the Tennessee Promise (Meehan et al., 2019). Many students have described the effectiveness and overall contribution of mentoring to be limited. Others have stated that the full-time enrollment requirement is challenging to abide by, and cannot be met in some cases. Urban and rural students have noted that transportation, or a lack of public transportation, has created a significant barrier to staying in college (Meehan et al., 2019). Debbie Cochrane, the research director at The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS) wrote in an essay that “The other costs of college, including textbooks, transportation, and living expenses, are far more substantial—and far more likely to prove a barrier to student success” (Semuels, 2015).

## **Predecessors to Tennessee Promise**

### **Knox Achieves**

The predecessor to the Tennessee Promise was Knox Achieves. Knox Achieves originated in Knox County, Tennessee with the class of 2009 (Carruthers & Fox, 2016). It was a last-dollar, residency-only promise program for students graduating from Knox County high schools to attend a community college or technical schools (Billings, et al., 2018). The program was funded by local businesses, civic leaders, and private donors (Carruthers & Fox, 2016). Eligibility was neither need-based or merit-based. To qualify for the program, students were required to complete a FAFSA, attend meetings, meet with an assigned mentor, and complete community service hours (Barber, 2018). The program's objectives were to enhance the local workforce and to boost interest in finishing high school and attending college. The first Knox Achieves program consisted of 496 applicants. More than 70% of applicants came from families making less than \$50,000 per year, and 58% were first-generation college students (Farley, 2009). Knox Achieves increased its student's overall college enrollment of its students by 3.5-4 percentage points and increased enrollment in community colleges by 3-5 percentage points (Billings, 2018).

### **TnAchieves**

The Knox Achieves program was expanded to TnAchieves (Barber, 2018). TnAchieves was privately funded, included 20 counties, and maintained the same Knox Achieves requirements (DeAlejandro, 2016). TnAchieves is a partner organization to Governor Haslam's TN Promise program (Miklaszewski, 2017). TnAchieves operates the promise program in 84 of Tennessee's 95 counties. TnAchieves focuses on all the non-financial components of the

promise program. It monitors progress, keeps up with meetings, runs the mentoring program, and tracks community service (Miklaszewski, 2017).

The TnAchieves program saw great results and helped increase enrollment for first-generation and low-income students (Pichler, 2016). Sixty-five percent of students who received the scholarship were first-generation college students, while 70 percent were low-income (Pichler, 2016). Although first-generation and low-income students often face the highest risk of dropping out, program participants were 40% more likely to succeed than the state average (Pichler, 2016). The success of TnAchieves helped pave the way for the Tennessee Promise program.

### **Educate and Grow**

In 2001, Northeast State Community College established a partnership with the City of Kingsport and Sullivan County to create the Educate and Grow Scholarship program. This program provided two years of tuition to graduating high school students from both Kingsport City Schools and Sullivan County Schools (Northeast State Community College, n.d.). The program expanded to include Carter County, Carter County, Johnson County, Unicoi County, and Washington County Schools, and provided more than \$2 million in scholarships to over 1,400 students. Educate and Grow was suspended in 2015 because Tennessee Promise's implementation resulted in a duplication of program services (Barber, 2018).

### **Other State Promise Programs**

A Promise Program is a place-based scholarship with three broad goals: increase student access to post-secondary institutions, build a college-going culture, and spur community and economic development (Miller-Adams, & Smith, 2018). Promise programs remove financial

barriers and promote both college enrollment and degree completion. Promise Programs can also be categorized as a first-dollar or last-dollar scholarship (Miller-Adams, & Smith, 2018). First-dollar programs provide scholarship money to all students, regardless of any other funding they may qualify. A last-dollar scholarship program covers the cost of any tuition and fees not covered by all other sources of financial aid.

### **Kalamazoo Promise**

The first of its kind, The Kalamazoo Promise began in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 2005 among a group of anonymous donors who recognized the hurdle that college tuition poses in determining young people's futures (The Kalamazoo Promise, n.d.a). It is a scholarship for all Kalamazoo Public School graduates that provides up to 100% tuition for post-secondary education (The Kalamazoo Promise, n.d.b.). This scholarship program provides up to 130 credits of in-state tuition and mandatory fees for post-secondary education (The Kalamazoo Promise, n.d.b.). Students must maintain full-time status, taking a minimum of 12 credit hours, and have access to the scholarship for up to ten years after graduation, unless a Bachelor degree has been completed or 130 credits have been earned. The Kalamazoo Promise is different from the Tennessee Promise because private donors fund it.

### **Oregon Promise**

Like the Tennessee Promise, the Oregon Promise is a last-dollar scholarship created in 2015 that provides funds for tuition (except a \$50 fee paid by the student per semester) for up to two years of community college (Barber, 2018). Student requirements include a high school GPA of 2.5, be an Oregon resident for 12 months, and complete a FAFSA. Students must enroll

in a community college within six months of graduation, maintain minimum enrollment requirements, and maintain satisfactory grades (Barber, 2018).

### **Delaware SEED (Student Excellence Equals Degree) Scholarship Program**

The Delaware SEED scholarship program provides tuition for eligible students enrolling full-time in an associate degree program at Delaware Technical Community College or the University of Delaware's Associate in Arts program (Delaware Scholarship Compendium, n.d.). The SEED Scholarship covers the cost of any tuition not covered by all other sources of financial aid. Fees and books are not covered as part of the SEED scholarship program. Eligible students must be enrolled in the fall semester immediately following high school graduation, and have access to the scholarship for up to three years. Students must be enrolled full-time and maintain a cumulative 2.5 GPA to remain eligible for the scholarship.

### **The Pittsburgh Promise**

The Pittsburgh Promise began in 2007, and is a last-dollar scholarship created to spur economic growth in an area that had experienced deindustrialization since the 1980s (Bozick et al., 2015). The Pittsburgh Promise scholarship is a "last dollar" scholarship, meaning The Promise pays for eligible expenses after all other grants and scholarships (Pittsburgh Promise, n.d.). For the Classes of 2018 and beyond: Every student who starts on day one of 9th grade and meets eligibility criteria will be eligible for up to \$5,000 per year (\$20,000 maximum) to be used within five years of post-secondary education (Pittsburgh Promise, n.d.). Students that enroll in Pittsburgh Public Schools after ninth grade are not eligible for the Pittsburgh Promise.

### **Roles High School Counselors Play**

For many students, school counselors may be an essential social capital source in the college application process (Bryan et al., 2011). School counselors play an integral role in preparing high school students to pursue their post-secondary goals (Paolini, (n.d.). They are responsible for the educational journey of all students. School counselors work to help students engage in college and career exploration, enroll in rigorous honors and advanced placement courses and participate in extracurricular activities so that all students are seen as competitive candidates when graduating from high school (Paolini, n.d.).

Research has shown that school counselors play an instrumental role in college exploration, college choice, and all students' career readiness, predominantly minority and low-income students (Bryan et al., 2011). School counselors can provide classroom workshops that address college exploration, the college admissions process, and career exploration to help students determine the college majors and qualifications that will enable them to pursue their future careers (Paolini, n.d.). School counselors can increase college readiness opportunities, and help develop a school-wide culture that promotes college readiness (Bryan et al., 2009). Parent involvement is crucial for student success. School counselors are encouraged to facilitate parent workshops addressing parental involvement, college and career readiness, FAFSA, helping their children prepare for the transition after high school graduation, and college planning (Paolini, n.d.). Additionally, school counselors can hold college & career fairs, invite college representatives from various schools talk with students about admissions requirements and qualifications necessary for acceptance, and put together college field trips for high school

students to take campus tours and learn more about them as prospective post-secondary institutions.

### **New Initiatives**

The popularity of the Tennessee Promise and its message of college for all has led to the creation of additional Promise programs: Knox Promise, ETSU Promise Plus, The University of Tennessee Promise, and Tennessee Reconnect. Some of these programs rival the Tennessee Promise, whereas the Tennessee Reconnect is an expansion of the Tennessee Promise to adults that have never attended a postsecondary institution.

#### **Knox Promise**

Knox Promise is a community-based, comprehensive approach to help Tennessee Promise Knox County students persist and succeed in obtaining college degrees and credentials. Thanks to a partnership between the Haslam Family Foundation, tnAchieves, the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), and several area institutions, including Pellissippi State Community College, Knox Promise launched as a pilot program for Tennessee Promise-eligible students from the 2019 and 2020 Knox County high school graduating classes (Freeland, n.d.).

Knox Promise helps students successfully navigate college by addressing additional needs, closing lingering economic and equity gaps, and expanding the tnAchieves coaching model (TnAchieves, n.d.c.). Students who meet the eligibility criteria are eligible to receive Completion Grants to offset unexpected or emergency expenses, a textbook support stipend, a dedicated tnAchieves Completion Coach, and a unique Summer Support Program in 2020-2021 for those students who need it (Freeland, n.d.). The Knox Promise program will be evaluated by

the University of Tennessee Boyd Center for Business and Economic Research to verify results and establish its impact (TnAchieves, n.d.c).

### **ETSU Promise Plus**

East Tennessee State University launched the ETSU Promise Plus Program in the fall of 2020. This program is available to first-time, full-time in-state freshmen who receive the Tennessee Education Lottery (HOPE) Scholarship and the maximum Pell Grant. The ETSU Promise Plus Program does not require a separate application; instead, all in-state applicants to ETSU are automatically considered.

This program offers qualifying first-time freshmen a last-dollar tuition scholarship and a range of pre-college, first year, and four-year benefits designed to support student success (Office of Financial Aid & Scholarships, n.d.). This comprehensive program can be used for up to four years and provides pre-college transition support, mentoring career development, and a variety of other opportunities (Office of Financial Aid & Scholarships, n.d.). It does not pay for books or other post-secondary expenses, including, but not limited to, course fees, housing, meal plan costs, late registration fees, etc.

### **University of Tennessee Promise**

The University of Tennessee (UT) Promise is an undergraduate scholarship program guaranteeing free tuition and mandatory fees for qualifying Tennessee residents attending UT's campuses in Knoxville, Chattanooga, Martin, and Memphis (Tennessee Achieves, n.d.b.). The UT Promise program provides tuition and fees to students (including HOPE scholarship recipients) from households earning less than \$50,000 attending any institution in the UT system (Meehan, et al., 2019). UT Promise is a student success-oriented scholarship program that requires students to complete volunteer service hours and meet with a volunteer mentor each



semester to ensure a successful student experience (Tennessee Achieves, n.d.b.). The application process and requirements for the UT Promise mirror those of the Tennessee Promise.

### **Tennessee Reconnect Grant**

Three years after the launch of Tennessee Promise in fall 2018, the state launched Tennessee Reconnect, which provides last-dollar scholarships for tuition and mandatory fees for adults returning to or entering college either full- or part-time (Meehan, et al., 2019). The Tennessee Reconnect is also part of Drive to 55, the state's initiative to increase the number of Tennesseans with a credential by 2025.

Tennessee needs 871,000 degrees to reach the Drive to 55 goal, but only 645,000 high school students are expected to graduate between 2014 and 2022 (Tennessee Reconnect, n.d.d.). Tennessee Reconnect Grant is an initiative to help more adults return to higher education to gain new skills, advance in the workplace, and fulfill lifelong dreams of completing a degree or credential (Tennessee Reconnect, n.d.a.). For the county used in this study, recent data shows that only 27.3 percent of high school graduates have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher, and that 28 percent have either an associate's degree or some college (Tennessee Education Data, n.d.). The Tennessee Reconnect Grant is a last-dollar grant that pays the remaining balance of tuition and mandatory fees after other state and federal financial aid have been applied (Tennessee Reconnect, n.d.c.). The Tennessee Reconnect Grant is available for eligible adults who want to pursue an associate degree, technical degree, or technical diploma at any state's 13 community colleges or 27 Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technologies (TCATs). Eligible students can also use the Tennessee Reconnect Grant towards an associate degree at Tennessee's nine public four-year universities, or 17 of Tennessee's independent, private, non-profit colleges and universities (Tennessee Reconnect, n.d.b.).

To be eligible for Tennessee Reconnect, the applicant must: not already have an associate or bachelor degree, be a Tennessee resident for at least one year preceding the date of application, complete the FAFSA, and participate in an advising program approved by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (Tennessee Reconnect, n.d.d.).

## **Chapter 3**

### **Introduction**

The Tennessee Promise scholarship is a scholarship program designed to help more Tennessee high school graduates attend college. The purpose of this study was to explore the factors contributing to Tennessee Promise use and college choice among high school seniors at a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee. This study's findings will contribute to the scholarly research related to college choice and factors that influence the college choice decision, such as knowledge of the Tennessee Promise program, parental influence, and other available scholarships.

This section is organized into the following categories: research questions, research design, site selection, school demographics, participants in the study, participant demographics, roles of the researcher, data collection methods and procedures, data management and analysis, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and transferability.

### **Research Questions**

1. How was the Tennessee Promise Scholarship utilized, and what factors contributed to student usage?
2. What barriers (if any) played a role in students choosing not to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship?
3. What similarities and differences were seen between students who chose to use or chose not to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship?

## **Research Design**

This study is a qualitative research design. Qualitative studies are personal and are not centered on variables or measures (Creswell, 2008). This study sought to identify whether or not the Tennessee Promise is being utilized by graduates of a rural high school in Northeast Tennessee and what factors (if any) play a role in students choosing to use the TN Promise scholarship. This study is a general qualitative study in design, where the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, and semi-structured interviews were conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In most forms of qualitative research, interviews are conducted to collect information. Interviews can be divided into three categories: highly structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. For this study, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data, and the data were used to identify categories and themes.

## **Site Selection**

The primary site for this study was a rural high school in Northeast Tennessee. Interviews were primarily conducted in person. The school is one of four high schools located in the county school district.

## **School Demographics**

According to Public Review (2021), the rural county school selected for this study has 533 students. Of this population, 96% are white, 2% are Hispanic, and 1% are African American. The gender make-up of the school is 49% male and 51% female. The school has a 75% free-and-reduced lunch rate. The 2020 senior class had 130 students, a 97% graduation rate, and a teacher-student ratio of 15:1, with a total of 35 teachers on staff. According to Data USA, the county where the high school is located has a population of 56,391 with median

household income of \$36,589. 23.5% of the county residents live below the poverty line (Data USA, 2021).

### **Participants in the Study**

Before this study began, permission was requested and granted by Milligan University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Permission was also requested and granted by the IRB of the county school system and the school administration of the county high school used in this study.

All participants were recent graduates from the school used in this study. Twenty recent graduates were targeted and contacted to gauge interest in participating in this study, with a goal of fifteen agreeing to participate. The participants of the study were identified using the information provided by the school counselor. Twelve agreed to participate and were interviewed for this study. Participants in this study consisted of students who attend four-year universities, 2-year community colleges, career and technical schools, and one currently military.

For participants under 18: participants were contacted by email (with parents cc'd) for consent. Once consent was given (by parents), participants were contacted by email to set up interviews. For students 18 or older: participants were contacted by email and social media for consent, and interviews were scheduled.

### **Participants Demographics**

Multiple recent graduates of a rural high school were used in this study. A sample of the student consent form is available in Appendix C. Interview guides are available in Appendices D & E. There were 15 recent graduates invited to interview for this study. Twelve were accepted and interviewed for this study.

### **Roles of the Researcher**

This study's primary researcher was an educator at the rural school used in this study and conducted all participant interviews. One-on-one interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, questioning of participants was open-ended in nature. The interview questions were designed to allow participants the opportunity to share their own experiences.

### **Data Collection Methods and Procedures**

In qualitative research, interviews are among the primary sources of qualitative data needed to understand the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recent graduate interviews were conducted to collect data for this study. Each participant was interviewed using two separate interview guides.

### **Prior to the study**

Before the study, the primary researcher created a research proposal and presented it to the Milligan University IRB, county school IRB, and county high school administration. Approval was obtained, and the study was able to begin.

### **Target School**

The county school selected for this study was in a rural community. The researcher focused on getting a representative sample of recent graduates who make up the community's population where the school is located.

### **Selection of Participants**

The participants of the study were identified using the information provided by the school counselor. The primary researcher of this study reached out to twenty recent graduates to gauge interest in participating in this study, with a goal of fifteen agreeing to participate. Twelve agreed to participate and were interviewed for this study. Once verbal consent was given,

consent forms were delivered and signed by all participants. The criteria for selecting participants were explained, and any questions they had were answered.

### **Implementation of the study**

The interviews were conducted with participants once consent forms were submitted. All interviews were coded and entered into Google docs. All participants were informed that none of their personal information would be used for this study, and all participant information and characteristics would remain confidential. All participants in the study were known to the primary researcher, many of whom were former students. All participant interviews were conducted using two separate interview guides (See Appendix D & E). Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to allow participants to share their personal experiences.

### **Data Management**

The data collected from the interviews were collected using google forms. The primary researcher printed out hard copies of the Google forms, and hand wrote all participant responses. All interview responses were kept locked in the primary researcher's personal filing cabinet at home, and uploaded to a secure password-protected computer file. The interviews were conducted privately on the school grounds or through online video conferencing (Zoom, Google Meet). Interview forms, notes, and digital files will be securely kept for five (5) years from the date of successful completion and defense of the research to make sure there is no need for an addendum. Only the primary researcher has access to transcriptions, notes, and questionnaires. All associated materials of the research will be shredded and disposed of securely and properly by the primary researcher five (5) years from the date of the research's successful defense.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis consists of making sense out of collected data, to find answers to research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The answers are categorized into codes, themes, or findings. There are two main approaches to qualitative analysis: inductive and deductive. For this study, data were collected and analyzed inductively. There are two types of inductive qualitative analysis: thematic content analysis and narrative analysis. Both methods were used in this study.

Creswell views data collection, recording, and analysis as interrelated, simultaneous procedures that are ongoing. The primary researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve participants. During each interview, field notes were taken on interview guides and later categorized into themes. The construction of categories and themes is highly inductive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The findings are discussed in detail in chapter 4.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To ensure validity and reliability, the primary researcher ethically conducted this study. Interview questions were piloted and approved by the primary researcher's dissertation chair. Also, member checks were conducted with study participants to rule out the possibility of misinterpreting their responses and ensure validity. To perform an ethical qualitative research study, all potential ethical issues that could have arisen were addressed. In order to protect the rights of the participants, the following steps were taken by the researcher.

- (1) Each participant was invited to participate by the primary researcher.
- (2) Each participant was provided a written consent agreement, with the objectives of the research clearly stated, and had the understanding that they were entering into this process voluntarily, and could have withdrawn from participation at any time.



- (3) A consent form was signed by every participant. This form can be viewed in Appendix C of this study.
- (4) Each participant of this study over the age of 18, did not require parental consent.
- (5) Each participant of this study under the age of 18 had a consent form signed by a legal parent or guardian (see Appendix C), and also could have withdrawn from the study at any time.
- (6) The security of the data collected will be of the utmost importance. It will be safeguarded by using password-protected software and retaining the interview responses for five years from the dissertation defense. Written data will be kept in a filing cabinet to which the researcher only has access. Digital data will be kept on the primary researcher's laptop or flash drive and will be password protected.

## Chapter 4

### Data Analysis and Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors contributing to Tennessee Promise use and college choice among high school seniors at a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee. Twelve recent high school graduates were interviewed for this study to understand; (a) perceptions of the Tennessee Promise scholarship; (b) determine if the Tennessee Promise scholarship was being utilized upon graduation; (c) determine any barriers preventing participants from accessing the scholarship; (d) determine what factors played a role in the decision-making process of the study participants.

As stated in Chapter 3, this study is a general qualitative study in design, where the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Participants of the study participated in semi-structured interviews conducted by the primary researcher. Table 1 identifies the demographics of the rural school used in this study.

Table 1

*Target School Demographic Information*

Target School	School Setting	Total Enrollment	Total Teachers	2020 Graduates
1	Rural	533	35	130

Twenty recent graduates were targeted and contacted to gauge interest in participating in this study, with a goal of fifteen agreeing to participate. Twelve agreed to participate and were interviewed for this study. The COVID-19 pandemic played a role in participant recruitment, and the process in which interviews were conducted. Interviews were primarily conducted in

person, while others were conducted via Zoom or Google Meet. All participants interviewed were instructed that no personal information would be used for this study.

### **Analysis of Data**

Creswell (2013) identifies six steps followed in the process of qualitative data analysis. The first step is to organize and prepare the data for analysis through transcribing interviews. The second step according to Creswell (2013) is reading or looking at all the data. The third step involves coding the data, while the fourth step uses the coding process to develop categories and themes. The fifth and sixth steps involve determining how themes will be represented, and interpreting the findings of results.

Themes were generated by reviewing all participant interview responses. The primary researcher identified patterns relating to the research questions.

Table 2

#### *Participant College/ Career Institution*

College/ Career Choice	4-year University	2-year Community College	Career & Technical School	Military
# of Participants	3	5	3	1

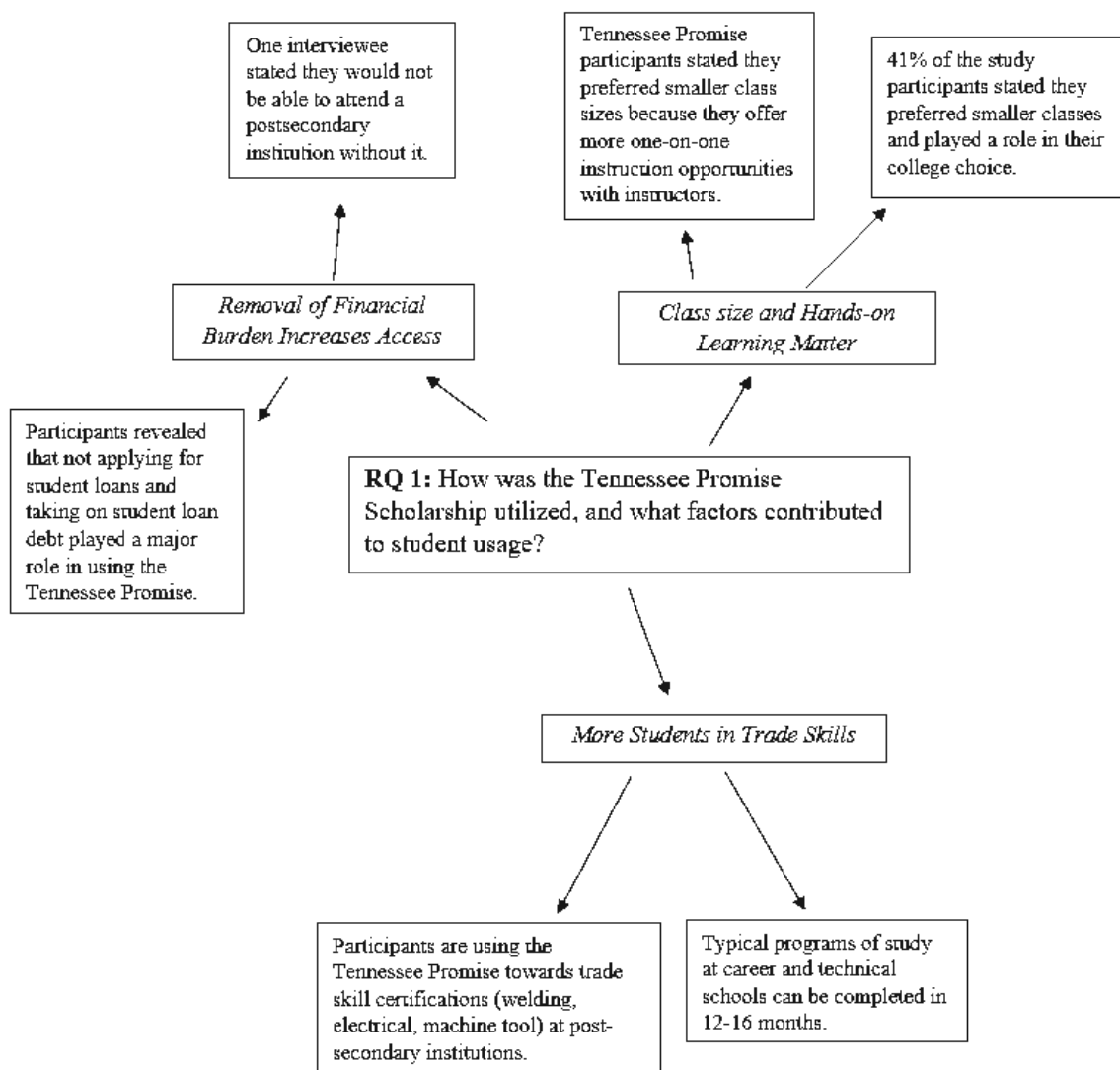
Of the twelve participants interviewed for this study, 67% were utilizing the TN Promise scholarship at either a two-year community college or a career and technical school. Of the eight utilizing the TN Promise, five were attending 2-year community colleges, the other three were attending career and technical schools. Four participants of the study chose not to utilize the TN Promise scholarship. Three were attending four-year universities, and the other joined the United States Army.

## Research Questions

1. How was the Tennessee Promise Scholarship utilized, and what factors contributed to student usage?
2. What barriers (if any) played a role in students choosing not to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship?
3. What similarities and differences were seen between students who chose to use or chose not to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship?

There are two main approaches to qualitative analysis: inductive and deductive. For this study, data were collected and analyzed inductively. There are two types of inductive qualitative analysis: thematic content analysis and narrative analysis. Both methods were used in this study.

## Research Question 1 - Figure 1 - Themes and Supporting Statements



## Research Question 1 Findings

Several themes emerged throughout the analysis of Question 1. Research Question 1 asked: How was the Tennessee Promise Scholarship utilized, and what factors contributed to student usage?

### Removal of Financial Burden Increases Access

Data collected revealed that eight of the twelve participants in this study chose to utilize the Tennessee Promise. All eight stated that the Tennessee Promise helped fill a financial need that otherwise would not have been available to them. One interviewee stated they would not be able to attend a postsecondary institution without it. Another stated it influenced them to continue to college and pushed them to focus more on their education than worrying about money all the time. Other participants revealed that not applying for student loans and taking on student loan debt played a major role in using the Tennessee Promise. One stated they were studying to be an electrician (a program that can be completed in sixteen months), and not having any debt allows them to go directly to work with zero debt. The idea of having minimal to no financial debt upon completion of an Associate's degree or certification was a consistent theme throughout several interviews.

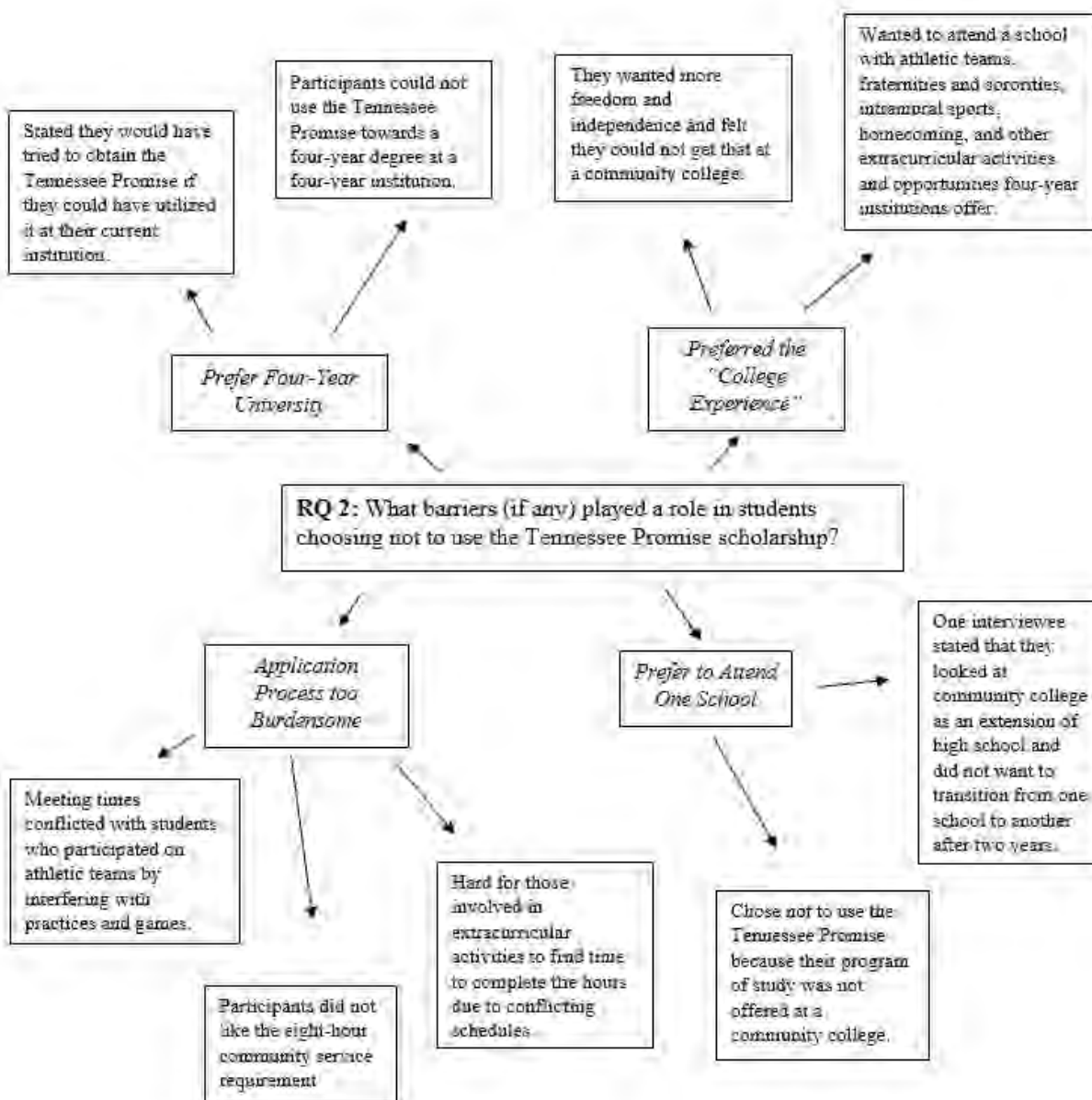
### More Students in Trade Skills

Another theme for research question 1 revealed that 75% of the participants are using the Tennessee Promise towards trade skill certifications (welding, electrical, machine tool) at post-secondary institutions. Students concentrating on trade skills compiled 75% of the participants. Twenty-five percent attend career and technical schools, while the others attend a 2-year community college. Typical programs of study at career and technical schools can be completed in 12-16 months. The other 25% that were utilizing the Tennessee Promise plan on attending a four-year university after obtaining an Associate's degree in sports management, marketing, nursing, and business.

### Class size and Hands-on Learning Matter

Class size was another theme present for Research Question 1. Around 41% of the study participants stated they preferred smaller classes and played a role in their college choice. 62% of Tennessee Promise participants stated they preferred smaller class sizes because they offer more one-on-one instruction opportunities with instructors. One interviewee stated that smaller classes allow them to connect with the teacher more and learn a lot faster. Another stated that being in smaller classes provided them with more training opportunities during their welding classes. They stated that welding is all about repetition; the more you practice, the better you get.

## Research Question 2 - Figure 2 - Themes and Supporting Statements



## Research Question 2 Findings

Several common themes emerged throughout the analysis of Question 2. Research Question 2 asked: What barriers (if any) played a role in students choosing not to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship?



### Preferred Four-Year University

Twenty-five percent of study participants chose to attend a four-year university instead of utilizing the Tennessee Promise. Data collected revealed several themes among the participants who chose not to use the Tennessee Promise Scholarship. The first theme was that participants could not use the Tennessee Promise towards a four-year degree at a four-year institution. The Tennessee Promise can be used at a four-year institution, but only towards the completion of an Associate's degree. All three study participants at four-year universities stated they would have tried to obtain the Tennessee Promise if they could have utilized it at their current institution.

### Application Process too Burdensome

Another theme was that the application process and requirements for the Tennessee Promise were too burdensome. Four study participants (three that did not use TN Promise, one that did use the TN Promise) stated they did not like the application process, that meeting times conflicted with students who participated on athletic teams by interfering with practices and games. Two participants stated they played multiple sports in high school, and that the meeting times always seemed to interfere with practices and games. Also, participants did not like the eight-hour community service requirement. One stated they played multiple games throughout the week during the basketball season and practiced every weekend during the season, so they had no free time to complete any community service hours. Another stated they barely had time to complete their school work during football and baseball season, so attending meetings and completing community service hours seemed unrealistic. It was hard for those involved in extracurricular activities to find time to complete the hours due to conflicting schedules.

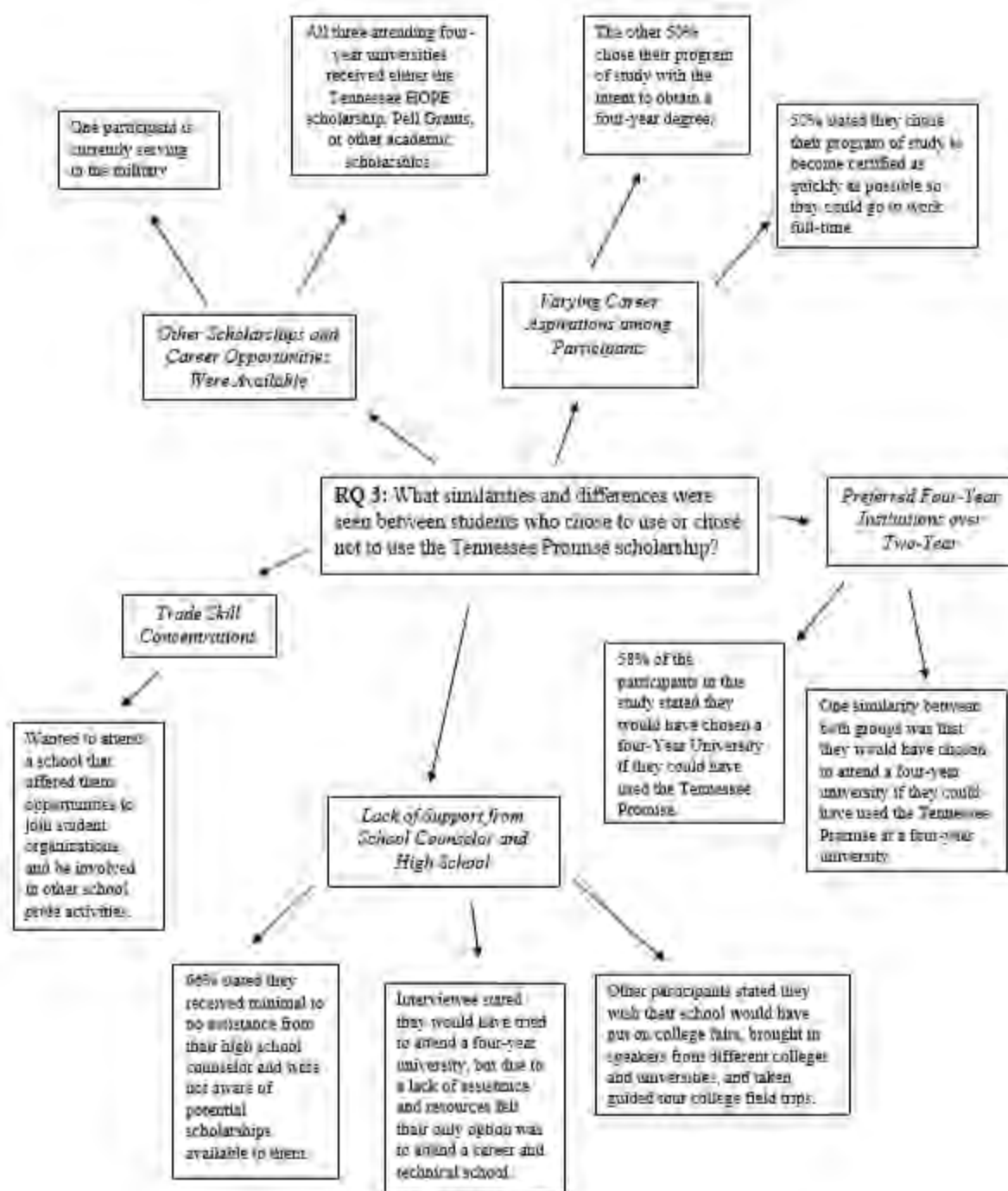
### Preferred the “College Experience”

The third theme was that participants wanted the “college experience” and all it has to offer. They stated they wanted to attend a school with athletic teams, fraternities and sororities, intramural sports, homecoming, and other extracurricular activities and opportunities four-year institutions offer. One interviewee stated they wanted to be involved in Greek life and other school organizations that four-year institutions offer. Another stated that college was their next step, a new stage in their life. They wanted more freedom and independence and felt they could not get that at a community college.

### Prefer to Attend One School

The final theme for the participants that chose not to utilize the Tennessee Promise was that they only wanted to attend one school. One interviewee stated that they looked at community college as an extension of high school and did not want to transition from one school to another after two years. Another interviewee stated they chose not to use the Tennessee Promise because their program of study was not offered at a community college.

### Research Question 3 – Figure 3 – Themes and Supporting Statements



### **Research Question 3 Findings**

Several themes related to Question 3 emerged throughout the analysis. Research Question 3 asked: What similarities and differences were seen between students who chose to use or chose not to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship?

#### Other Scholarships and Career Opportunities Were Available

Four participants chose not to utilize the Tennessee Promise. One participant is currently serving in the military, while the other three are attending four-year universities. All three attending four-year universities received either the Tennessee HOPE scholarship, Pell Grants, or other academic scholarships. The fourth participant originally planned on utilizing the Tennessee Promise but instead joined the United States Army. They stated the military would be paying for their college education courtesy of the G.I. Bill to any state college or university of their choice. They stated they felt they would have better opportunities long-term by serving in the military, rather than going to a community college or technical school.

#### Varying Career Aspirations among Participants

One interesting theme was a 50-50 split between the study participants and their career aspirations. 50% stated they chose their program of study to become certified as quickly as possible so they could go to work full-time. The career and technical programs can be completed in a twelve-to-sixteen-month period. The other 50% chose their program of study with the intent to obtain a four-year degree. One interviewee said they felt a four-year degree would provide them with more professional opportunities in their future.

#### Trade Skill Concentrations

A theme that came from the eight students in this study that chose to utilize the Tennessee Promise emphasized trade skill programs of study. 62.5% of those attending a

community college or career and technical school were involved in the following programs of study: welding, electrical, or machine tool technology. These programs can be completed in twelve to sixteen months, have high placement rates upon completion, and allow students to obtain specific certifications to go directly into the workforce. All of the participants in these programs of the study stated they preferred smaller class sizes and more hands-on learning opportunities. Another similarity between these participants were they all studied similar content areas in Career and Technical Education classes while in high school.

#### Preferred Four-Year Institutions Over Two-Year

One similarity between both groups was that they would have chosen to attend a four-year university if they could have used the Tennessee Promise at a four-year university. 58% of the participants in this study stated they would have chosen a four-year university if they could have used the Tennessee Promise. Several participants stated they would prefer to attend a school that had athletic teams. Others stated they wanted to attend a school that offered them opportunities to join student organizations, and be involved in other school pride activities. Two participants stated they wanted to be members of a fraternity or sorority, and a community college does not offer those opportunities. However, the 33% of these participants that decided to utilize the Tennessee Promise stated the financial savings were too good to pass up, so they chose to attend a community college. One interviewee stated they would have preferred going straight to a four-year university, but taking on two years' worth of student debt was more beneficial to them long-term than taking on the burden of four years' worth of student debt.

#### Lack of Support from School Counselor and High School

Another similarity between participants was they did not receive enough advice or assistance from their high school counseling department or their school as a whole. 66% stated

they received minimal to no assistance from their high school counselor and were not aware of potential scholarships available to them. One interviewee stated they entered their senior year in high school blind in regards to post-secondary education opportunities. Another interviewee stated they would have tried to attend a four-year university, but due to a lack of assistance and resources felt their only option was to attend a career and technical school. They stated they had very little knowledge about what type of options were available to them. Another interviewee stated had they known about the ETSU Promise Plus program, they would have applied there, rather than using the Tennessee Promise. They stated the ETSU program could be used for four years but were never provided information about the program or others throughout the state by their high school counselor. Other participants stated they wish their school would have put on college fairs, brought in speakers from different colleges and universities, and taken guided tour college field trips. Several participants stated they would have applied to other places had they known about their program of study options and various scholarship opportunities.

### **Summary**

This chapter described results from participant interviews about the study's research questions. Interviews showed that the top reasons for utilizing the Tennessee Promise were: the removal of financial burden increases access, more students in trade skills, class size, and hands-on learning opportunities. Barriers that played a role in students not pursuing the Tennessee Promise include: preference to attend a four-year university, the application process is too burdensome, were seeking the college experience, and only wanted to attend one school. Chapter 5 will present the findings from the researcher's lens and discuss implications of findings, research limitations, and future directions for research.

## Chapter 5

### Summary, Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors contributing to Tennessee Promise use and college choice among high school seniors at a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee. Interviews of recent high school graduates were conducted for this study to understand; (a) perceptions of the Tennessee Promise scholarship; (b) determine if the Tennessee Promise scholarship was being **used** upon graduation; (c) determine any barriers preventing participants from accessing the scholarship; (d) determine what factors played a role in the **decision-making** process of the study participants. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How was the Tennessee Promise Scholarship utilized, and what factors contributed to student usage?
2. What barriers (if any) played a role in students choosing not to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship?
3. What similarities and differences were seen between students who chose to use or chose not to use the Tennessee Promise scholarship?

This study was a general qualitative study in design, where the researcher was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data, and the data were used to identify categories and themes. Participants in this study were selected from information provided to the primary researcher from the school counselor. This study has implications for researchers, school district leadership, school administrators, and educators.

## **Summary of the Findings**

Several themes emerged concerning factors that contribute to Tennessee Promise usage. Removal of financial burden, students in trade skills, class size, and hands-on learning opportunities were the most common. Several common themes emerged about barriers that played a role in students choosing not to use the Tennessee Promise. The most commonly identified barriers were the application process was too burdensome, preference to only attend one school, preference to attend a four-year university, and a desire to have the “college experience.” Lastly, several similarities and differences were seen among the study’s participants. Similarities included a preference of four-year institutions over two-year, several participants involved in trade skills, and a lack of support from high school counselors while in high school. Differences included varying career aspirations among participants, and availability other scholarships, and other career opportunities.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Themes regarding factors that contribute to Tennessee Promise usage**

Research question 1 examined how the Tennessee Promise Scholarship was used and factors that contribute to student usage. This study indicates that the Tennessee Promise Scholarship is being utilized by several recent graduates from the school used in this study. For many of the recent graduates that participated in this study, the Tennessee Promise provides needed financial assistance, that otherwise would not have been available. Financial aid and rising tuition cost have been a primary factor in student perception of affordability and student ability to complete college (Astin, 1975). Since its inception in 2015, over 88,000 students have enrolled in the Tennessee Promise, and it has helped cover over \$115 million in college costs for Tennessee students (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2020a). Although it does not



cover college's full cost, it covers enough to put college within reach. By covering the tuition cost for two years at a community college, the Tennessee Promise provides students a more affordable pathway to a four-year degree, or training certificate.

Another factor revealed that several participants utilizing the Tennessee Promise in this study were seeking trade skill certifications. All of the participants studied similar content areas (welding and electrical) in high school Career and Technical Education classes. CTE classes help high school students explore career options, remain engaged in school, gain quality skills, and prepare for further study in postsecondary education (Hudson & Laird, 2009). The mission of the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) is to "set all students on a path to success," and for many Tennessee students, career and technical education serves as that pathway (Tennessee Dept. of Education, 2020). Career and Technical Education programs are engaging and provide hands-on training and learning.

Other factors that contributed to the Tennessee Promise usage were a smaller class size and more hands-on learning opportunities. Several participants stated they preferred smaller class sizes because they provide more hands-on learning opportunities. Other participants preferred smaller classes because they allow more one-on-one instruction opportunities with instructors.

### **Themes regarding barriers for not utilizing the Tennessee Promise**

Research question 2 examined barriers that played a role in whether or not the Tennessee Promise Scholarship was utilized. Several common themes emerged from the data.

Several study participants stated that they felt the application process for the Tennessee Promise was too burdensome. Tennessee Promise requirements include attending mandatory meetings during the senior year of high school and the first semester of college, meeting filing

deadlines for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), meeting application deadlines to the community college or applied technology college, and complete 8 hours of approved community service (Milam, 2019). Study participants that participated on athletic teams agreed that meeting times conflicted with practices and games. They also acknowledged the difficulty of trying to complete the eight-hour community service requirement.

Other barriers to the Tennessee Promise were that it could not be used at a four-year university towards a four-year degree. Students prefer only to attend one school, and want the “college experience.” Several study participants (both that used the Tennessee Promise and those that did not) mentioned they would have preferred the option to use the Tennessee Promise Scholarship at a four-year university towards a four-year degree. Many participants in this study acknowledged had they had the option; they would prefer only to attend one post-secondary institution. As one interviewee stated, they look at community college as an extension of high school, and they preferred to go through the college admissions process one time. Several study participants acknowledged they simply wanted the “college experience” and felt they could not get that at a community college. Participants that did not utilize the Tennessee Promise wanted to attend a school with athletic teams, fraternities and sororities, intramural sports, homecoming and related events, and other extracurricular activities offered at four-year universities.

### **Similarities and differences among study participants**

This study provided several similarities and differences among study participants. The first similarity from participants that did not take advantage of the Tennessee Promise, was the availability of other scholarship and career opportunities. One of the participants is currently serving in the United States Army. This participant chose to take advantage of the training and skills the military offers, as well as the availability of the G.I. Bill afforded to them for their

years of service to our country. All of the other participants that chose to go straight to a four-year university received either the Tennessee HOPE scholarship, Pell Grants, or other academic scholarships.

One of the most significant themes from this study was a 50-50 split between study participants and their career aspirations. Half of the participants are seeking trade skill certifications in welding, electrical, and machine tool technology, intending to go to work full-time as quickly as possible. Certification programs in these fields can be completed in twelve to sixteen months at a community college or career and technical school. All of these students were concentrators in Career and Technical Education classes while in high school. High school CTE programs are engaging, provide hands-on training and learning, and allow students to learn job-specific skills that offer direct pathways to future careers or training programs.

The other half of the study participants in the study chose the path towards a four-year degree. Some decided to utilize the Tennessee Promise, while others chose to enroll directly into a four-year university. The consensus among these students was that a four-year degree would provide them with more professional opportunities in their futures. Four-year institutions offer students more opportunities to connect through student organizations, fraternities and sororities, athletic teams, intramural sports, and other school pride activities.

Probably the most intriguing aspect of this study was to learn that the majority of the study participants stated they did not receive enough advice or assistance from their high school counseling department, and no other programs were provided to help. School counselors play an integral role in preparing high school students to pursue their post-secondary goals (Paolini, (n.d.)). One participant mentioned they felt “blind” going into their senior year of high school in regards to post-secondary education opportunities. That same student ended up at a career and

technical school because they felt that was the only option available to them. They stated they would have tried to attend a four-year university had they received more assistance while in high school. Other participants felt they were unaware of scholarship opportunities, and provided minimal help from their school counselors and staff about available options.

School counselors can hold college & career fairs, invite college representatives from various schools to talk with students about admissions requirements and qualifications necessary for acceptance. They can also put together college field trips for high school students to take campus tours and learn more about them as prospective post-secondary institutions.

Unfortunately, the participants in this study were seniors in high school when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. They missed out on the last two months of their senior year of high school, and were unable to attend any college and career fairs, take college field trips, or meet with college representatives.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The following limitations unfolded as the study progressed. Covid-19 affected the interview pool for this project. Twenty recent graduates were targeted and contacted to gauge interest in participating in this study, with a goal of fifteen agreeing to participate. Twelve agreed to participate and were interviewed for this study. Access to some students was not possible in some cases due to inability to contact them, scheduling issues, or safety concerns.

The study was conducted via semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to allow participants to share their personal experiences; therefore, the data collected were solely representative of the participants statements. The county school selected for this study was in a rural community, limiting the range of the conclusions. Socioeconomic status was not a criteria used in the selection process of study participants.

## Conclusions

There were five general conclusions drawn from this study. The first conclusion is that the Tennessee Promise Scholarship is being used by recent graduates from the county school used for this study and fills a financial need amongst participants. Eight of this study's twelve participants chose to utilize the Tennessee Promise. All eight stated that the Tennessee Promise helped fill a financial need that otherwise would not have been available to them. They expressed that not applying for student loans and taking on student loan debt played a major role in using the Tennessee Promise.

The second conclusion is that the application process and program requirements can be too burdensome for some students. Several participants highlighted the application process was hard to complete. Students that played sports in high school expressed that meeting times conflicted with practices and games. Also, the eight-hour community service requirement was challenging to complete due to conflicting schedules.

The third conclusion drawn from this study is a connection between Career and Technical Education Programs and the Tennessee Promise. Roughly, 50% of this study's participants were concentrators in similar programs of study while in high school. All students seeking trade skill certifications in this study expressed how their CTE classes in high school provided them with job-specific skills, and laid the foundation for their post-secondary program of study.

The fourth conclusion drawn from this study was a preference of four-year institutions over two-year institutions. Several study participants (including some attending trade schools) expressed a intention to attend a four-year institution. If the Tennessee Promise was allowed to be used towards a four-year degree at a four-year university, more participants would have chosen that pathway. Participants highlighted that four-year universities offer more

opportunities for students to participate in the areas of athletic team sporting events, fraternities and sororities, intramural sports, homecoming, student organizations, and other extracurricular activities not available at a community college.

The final conclusion drawn from this study is the vital role school counselor's play in preparing high school students to pursue their post-secondary goals. Students expressed a frustration from a lack of support and resources made available to them while in high school from their school counselor. They expressed that they were never provided opportunities to attend college and career fairs, take college field trips, or hear from college recruiters while in high school. Several participants stated had they known about the ETSU Promise Plus program, they would have sought to attend ETSU over community college from the onset. The ETSU Promise Plus offers qualifying first-time freshmen a last-dollar tuition scholarship and a range of pre-college, first year, and four-year benefits designed to support student success (Office of Financial Aid & Scholarships, n.d.). This program is also available to students for four years, so several participants were frustrated they were never made aware of the program by their school counselor.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The following are practice recommendations. First, school leaders and counselors should target students no later than the beginning of their junior year in high school regarding available post-secondary opportunities. Research has shown that school counselors play an instrumental role in college exploration, college choice, and all students' career readiness (Bryan et al., 2011). School counselors can provide classroom workshops that address college exploration, the college admissions process, and career exploration to help students determine the college majors and qualifications that will enable them to pursue their future careers (Paolini, n.d.). Counselors can

invite college admissions counselors from various institutions (four-year universities, two-year community colleges, and career and technical schools) to walk students through their respective program of study offerings, as well as available scholarships.

School counselors need to highlight new college promise programs like the ETSU Promise Plus and UT Promise so that students know they have other options available to them besides just the Tennessee Promise. High school students need to know the difference between two-year and four-year institutions to be aware of the academic, social, and cost differences. Knowledge of these differences can help students make a well-informed college decision based on their career goals and future aspirations.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for future research. This study was limited to one rural county high school; therefore, the results are not generalizable to another population. Researchers could perform a similar study at another high school in the region or state to compare results. Researchers could replicate and expand this study using a larger population or multiple school districts. They could repeat this study using both a rural and urban school to determine factors related to college choice.

One finding that was not examined in this study was the need to expand promise programs to target lower-income students. These programs should fund non-tuition expenses for low-income students, support existing state need-based grant programs, and include four-year colleges and universities in free college programs (Poutre & Voight, 2018).

Chapter 5 concludes this research study. This study's findings will contribute to the scholarly research related to college choice and factors that influence the college choice decision, such as knowledge of the Tennessee Promise program and other available scholarships.

Additional research is necessary to determine how College Promise programs impact college choice among high school seniors.



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**Appendix A**

**Milligan IRB Approval Letter**



# MILLIGAN

UNIVERSITY

Date: September 17, 2020

From: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Milligan University

Re: *Tennessee Promise: A Qualitative Study of a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee*

Submission type: Revised Submission

Dear Adam Copeland,

On behalf of the Milligan University Institutional Review Board (IRB), we are writing to inform you that your study *Tennessee Promise: A Qualitative Study of a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee* has been approved as expedited. This approval also indicates that you have fulfilled the IRB requirements for Milligan University.

All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission, meaning that you will follow the research plan you have outlined here, use approved materials, and follow university policies.

Take special note of the following important aspects of your approval:

- Any changes made to your study require approval from the IRB Committee before they can be implemented as part of your study. Contact the IRB Committee at [IRB@milligan.edu](mailto:IRB@milligan.edu) with your questions and/or proposed modifications.
- If there are any unanticipated problems or complaints from participants during your data collection, you must notify the Milligan University IRB Office within 24 hours of the data collection problem or complaint.

The Milligan University IRB Committee is pleased to congratulate you on the approval of your research proposal. Best wishes as you conduct your research! If you have any questions about your IRB Approval, please contact the IRB Office and copy your faculty advisor if appropriate on the communication.

Sincerely,

The IRB Committee



**Appendix B**

**Carter County Schools Permission to Conduct Research Letters**

**Carter County Schools Permission to Conduct Research Letter**

## PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

May 20, 2020

Dear Institutional Review Board:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that Carter County Schools give *Adam Copeland* permission to conduct the research titled *Tennessee Promise: A Qualitative Study of a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee*. This also serves as assurance that this school system complies with requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) (see back for specific requirements) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dr. Kevin Ward". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

*Kevin Ward*  
*Director of Schools, Carter County Schools*

## Happy Valley High School Permission to Conduct Research Letter

### PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

May 12, 2020

Dear Institutional Review Board:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that Happy Valley High School gives *Adam Copeland* permission to conduct the research titled *Tennessee Promise: A Qualitative Study of a Rural High School in Northeast Tennessee*. This also serves as assurance that this school system complies with requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) (see back for specific requirements) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Doug Mitchell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line under the name.

*Doug Mitchell*  
*Principal, Happy Valley High School*

**Appendix C**  
**Participation Consent Form**

## Participant Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship participation from students at Happy Valley High School. The researcher is inviting Seniors at Happy Valley High School to be in the study. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Adam Copeland who is a doctoral student at Milligan College. You may already know the researcher as a teacher/ coach at Happy Valley High School, but this study is separate from that role.

#### Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to determine if the Tennessee Promise scholarship is being utilized by seniors at Happy Valley High School. If the scholarship is not being utilized, this study seeks to determine factors related to this decision by seniors at Happy Valley High School

#### Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- \_\_\_\_\_participate in two interviews

Here are some sample questions:

- Has the availability of the TN Promise scholarship influenced their decision to attend a community college or a four-year college?
- What career path(s) are you interested in pursuing at the college level?
- What role have your parents, counselors, teachers, or friends played in your decision-making process?
- Can you identify reasons for not taking part in the TN Promise program?

#### Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at Happy Valley High School, Carter County Schools, or Milligan College will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can opt out of the study if you change your mind later. You may stop participation in this study at any time.

#### Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study will not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

The benefits of this study will help determine if the Tennessee Promise Scholarship is helping high school seniors at Happy Valley High School. This study will also determine what factors if any are causing students not to use the Tennessee Promise program. This study will allow for suggestions to be made in order to improve or expand the Tennessee Promise program.

**Payment:**

No payments will be included for participants with this study.

**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept anonymous. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by the researcher in a form not including any identifiable characteristics (name, nicknames, race, etc) of the participants. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by Milligan College.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email [adamcopeland@carterk12.net](mailto:adamcopeland@carterk12.net) or [wacopeland@my.milligan.edu](mailto:wacopeland@my.milligan.edu). If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Milligan College Institutional Review Board at [IRB@milligan.edu](mailto:IRB@milligan.edu).

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant

---

Date of consent

---

Participant's Signature & Parent Signature

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Researcher's Signature

---



**Appendix D**

**First Participant Interview Questions**

**First Participant Interview Questions**

1. How has the availability of the Tennessee Promise Scholarship influenced your decision to attend a community college or four-year college?
2. What career path(s) are you interested in pursuing at the college level?
3. What role have your parents, counselors, teachers, or friends played in your decision-making process?
4. Does class size(s) play a role in your decision-making process?
5. Why the Tennessee Promise?
6. Do you see any issues at this point with obtaining or using the Tennessee Promise?

**Appendix E**

**Second Participant Interview Questions**

## **Second Participant Interview Questions**

1. Did you use the Tennessee Promise scholarship? Why or why not?
2. Are you glad you chose to use the TN Promise scholarship dollars?
3. If you could make the same decision over again, would you do anything differently? Why or why not?
4. Did the application process and related requirements play a role in your decision to not pursue the TN Promise scholarship?
5. Would you have been more likely to pursue the TN Promise if you could use it towards a four-year degree?